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# Kierkegaard and the Limits of Thought

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## Abstract

This essay offers an account of Kierkegaard's view of the limits of thought and of what makes this view distinctive. With primary reference to *Philosophical Fragments*, and its putative representation of Christianity as unthinkable, I situate Kierkegaard's engagement with the problem of the limits of thought, especially with respect to the views of Kant and Hegel. I argue that Kierkegaard builds in this regard on Hegel's critique of Kant but that, against Hegel, he develops a radical distinction between two types of thinking and inquiry: the 'aesthetic-intellectual' and the 'ethico-religious'. I clarify this distinction and show how it guides Kierkegaard's conception of a form of philosophical practice that involves drawing limits to the proper sphere of disinterested contemplation. With reference to two rival interpretations of Kierkegaard's approach to the limits of thought—which I call 'bullet-biting' and 'relativizing'—I further show how my 'disambiguating' account can better explain how, and why, his work courts a form of self-referential incoherence, in which it appears that certain limits of thought are at once affirmed and violated.

> Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we have just contradicted ourselves.
>
> (Graham Priest)

> The ultimate can be reached only as limit.
>
> (Søren Kierkegaard)

Graham Priest's *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Priest 2001) parades an eclectic line-up of thinkers to show how the history of philosophy has been shaped by the spectre of paradoxes at the limits of thought. One name that is missing from Priest's line-up is 'Søren Kierkegaard'. This omission is something of a surprise, especially given Hegel's centrality in the book and its (second-edition) inclusion of Heidegger and Derrida. Kierkegaard's writings are famous for nothing if not the way they involve such notions as 'the absurd', 'the incomprehensible' and 'the Absolute Paradox' and for their opposition to Hegelian 'mediation'. But one can appreciate why an author might hesitate to venture something pithy about Kierkegaard on the limits of thought. For one thing, there is a real question whether we are supposed to take at all seriously talk of 'the Absolute Paradox'



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and the like in his enigmatic and often playful texts. And, as we shall see, the critics are so far from consensus in this regard as to associate Kierkegaard with nearly every imaginable view.

I hope in this essay to help illuminate Kierkegaard's place in the history of thinking about the limits of thought. I shall concentrate in the first instance on his treatment of the idea that *Christianity* cannot be thought or understood. I shall begin by showing how this idea is ostensibly advanced by the pseudonymous work, *Philosophical Fragments*; and how this text positively courts the threat of self-referential incoherence in this connection. The threat is that, in advancing the view that Christianity lies beyond the limits of thought and understanding, *Fragments* relies on the very possibility it purports to rule out, viz. that Christianity can be thought and understood. Turning to the critics, I shall then consider two sorts of response to this threat and explain why I think we should be satisfied with neither. On a *bullet-biting* strategy, the putative argument of *Philosophical Fragments* is, and is intended to be, self-contradictory. On a *relativizing* strategy, by contrast, what Kierkegaard really wants to show is only that Christianity cannot be thought or understood *relative to a certain point of view*, viz. that of the outsider or unbeliever.

In the second part of the essay (§§II and III), my aim is to work towards a better response to the threat of self-stultification, both in the case of *Fragments* and more generally with respect to Kierkegaard's view of the limits of thought. In my view, he crucially relies in this connection on a distinction between two kinds of thought and thinking: the *aesthetic-intellectual* and the *ethico-religious*. I shall argue that, on the basis of this distinction, we can explain both why *Fragments* draws attention to the threat of its own self-referential incoherence and how, from the logical point of view, this threat is nonetheless benign.

It will emerge that Kierkegaard holds a distinctive view of the limits of thought, not least against the background of the views of Kant and Hegel. Like Hegel, and expressly against 'the Kantians', Kierkegaard denies the coherence of any attempt to draw limits of thought by positing a division between two ontological realms, the thinkable and the unthinkable. But he equally rejects as illusory the purported Hegelian standpoint in which thought constitutively transcends its own limits, the standpoint of 'pure thought'. Instead, Kierkegaard thinks that we need to take up the kind of thinking that he calls 'existential' or 'ethico-religious' thinking. On the interpretation I shall develop, it is constitutive of such thinking to mark the limits of the 'aesthetic-intellectual', where this rubric encompasses any object of thought that is apt to sustain an attitude of disinterested contemplation. It is constitutive of ethico-religious thinking, that is, to delimit the domain of the aesthetic-intellectual as such. We shall see that, for Kierkegaard, what lies beyond the limits of the aesthetic-intellectual is not a realm



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of unthinkables, but rather the possibilities for human agency which he associates with an individual's 'ethical actuality'.

## I. *Philosophical Fragments* and the threat of self-stultification

*Philosophical Fragments* invites us to try an experiment: whether we can construct a system of thought that truly goes 'beyond the Socratic' (*KW* VII: 111).[1] Oddly enough, Johannes Climacus, the book's fictional author, declares himself at a loss to say what first moved him to come up with this project (*KW* VII: 9). But it does not take an aficionado of Danish Hegelianism circa 1843 to discern something of the polemical context here. For Climacus evidently finds among the intellectuals of his milieu a dubious readiness to take themselves to have indeed gone 'beyond the Socratic', by having finally brought to fulfilment not only the hitherto frustrated desires of philosophers in want of answers to Socratic questions, but also the insights dimly sensed in the religious beliefs and practices of ordinary folk, not least Christianity. Against this, Climacus seems to want to show that if anything can be truly said to go 'beyond the Socratic' it is Christianity; but that this is so only because Christianity stands in radical opposition to the very idea that human beings are capable of understanding the essential truth about themselves. The idea, so it seems, is to insist in an uncompromising way on the Pauline characterization of Christianity as 'unto the Greeks foolishness' (1 Corinthians 1: 23; cf. *CUP*: 179).

How, then, is Climacus' thought-experiment supposed to show that Christianity stands opposed to the idea that human beings are capable of understanding themselves? On a natural first reading, his aim is to establish the following conditional, call it C:

> (C) If Christianity is true then essential truth lies beyond the limits of human understanding.

'Essential truth' is the term Climacus introduces in his *Postscript* to *Fragments*, by way of a gloss on his references to 'the Truth' in the earlier work.[2] In the first instance, it simply means the truth—whatever it is—about what it essentially means to be human, understood in broadly ethical terms; the truth about human excellence and flourishing. Now if C is true it is not *obviously* true. Many self-identifying Christians would perhaps be inclined to dispute it. And it scarcely sits perfectly at ease with the venerable tradition of Christian natural theology and synthesis with Greek philosophy. Unquestionably, it flies in the face of Hegel's account of the philosophical significance of Christianity; provided, that is, we do not assume some technical and restricted conception of 'human understanding'.



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So we should ask how exactly Climacus' thought-experiment is supposed to help establish this claim, C.

In Chapter One, he begins by sketching out what he has in mind by 'the Socratic', elaborating a core hypothesis which can be summarized as follows:

(A) Essential truth lies within the limits of human understanding.

Telling a familiar story about the foundations of Western philosophy, Climacus presents Hypothesis A as underwriting a broadly 'Socratic' theoretical framework. It is said to underlie the theory of knowledge as recollection, for instance, as presented by Plato as a solution to the Meno Paradox. And it is said to underlie a Socratic theory of philosophical education, as this is classically captured in Plato's image of Socrates as the intellectual midwife who undermines illusions of knowledge and understanding in others so that, if possible, they can give birth to their own understanding. Indeed, Climacus invites us to think of Hypothesis A as a kind of framework assumption of the Western philosophical tradition as a whole.

We may immediately note that, in *Postscript*, Climacus appears to place himself squarely within this 'Socratic' tradition, when he characterises his own outlook in terms of recollection.[3] But we should notice too that, as he also makes a point of flagging up in *Postscript*, Climacus has already made a significant move just by choosing to represent 'the Socratic' *in abstracto*, as hypothesis and theory, a system of thought.[4]

Having introduced Hypothesis A, Climacus is ready to frame his thought-experiment. What story, he asks, could we conceivably tell if we were to assume the antithesis of A? Namely,

(B) Essential truth lies beyond the limits of human understanding.

More precisely, we are to consider what story we could conceivably tell if we assume B and also that it is nonetheless possible for human beings to acquire knowledge of the Truth. Climacus officially has no interest in defending these suppositions. What he does purport to show is that, by applying certain procedures of negation and analogy, it turns out we can indeed imaginatively construct a system of thought that radically goes 'beyond the Socratic'. Moreover, for each element of the mirror-image of the Socratic position he constructs, Climacus attaches a label that he teasingly steals from familiar Christian theology: God, faith, sin, the saviour, and so on. In short, the story that Climacus imaginatively conjures up in this way is that, due to sin, humans have lost the capacity to grasp the essential truth and so need to be recreated by God (a.k.a. 'the unknown') in order to recover that capacity. He presents this story, more commonly known as Christianity, as flowing directly from the attempt to think up an alternative to the Socratic framework.



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According to what is ostensibly the argumentative core of *Fragments*, then, since we can as it were reinvent all the fundamental doctrines of Christianity merely by envisaging an antithetical theoretical framework to the Socratic, specified as such *via* simple operations of negation and analogy, it follows that Christianity implies B; and that is just to affirm C. What then are we to make of this argument strategy as such?

We should be clear first of all that the argument is presented as wholly independent of whether or not either Hypothesis A or B is true. As he is careful to underscore in the 'Moral' at the end, Climacus' dialectic has been purely hypothetical or subjunctive, as indeed befits a thought-experiment. At several key junctures within *Fragments*, however, he points to a difficulty that goes to the heart of his experiment and threatens to dismantle his ostensible defence of C. The question is whether the story he has told, in the guise of a radical alternative to the Socratic, is *conceivably true*; that is, whether the truth of his elaboration of Hypothesis B can be so much as *entertained*. Despite the fact that his whole argument apparently rests on this possibility, and on the idea that what fits the bill is familiar to everyone as Christianity, Climacus strongly indicates that he thinks it is not possible after all.

Thus, early on in his elaboration of Hypothesis B, he breaks off abruptly to ask whether his story is even 'thinkable' (*KW* VII: 20). Arrestingly, his answer appears to be in the negative. He says that, just as the unborn are obviously in no position to think about the transition from being unborn to being born, so, by its own lights, human beings are in no position to grasp the truth of the story he has been telling about *re*birth. The reason is not hard to find. On the one hand, Hypothesis B, if it is true, is presumably an essential truth; it purports to state something about the essentially human. On the other hand, what it says is that essential truths are beyond the reach of human understanding. Paradoxically, it seems the truth of Hypothesis B can be entertained only if it cannot be entertained—at least by any thinker who falls within the scope of 'human understanding'.

Climacus' sharpest articulation of this problem, regarding the very thinkability of his story, comes in Chapter IV, 'The Absolute Paradox: a Metaphysical Caprice'. Here, in Kantian vein, he attributes to the human understanding an internal dynamic of self-transcendence, such that, in its incessant desire to push back its own frontiers, it is ultimately driven to discover something it cannot understand—call it 'the unknown'. But Climacus is clear that any such desire ultimately stands only to be frustrated:

> Defined as the absolutely different, it [sc. 'the unknown'] would appear to be on the way to being revealed, but this is not so, because absolute difference cannot even be thought; because



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> the understanding cannot absolutely negate itself, but uses itself in order to do this …; it cannot go beyond itself absolutely and thus conceives this thing that transcends itself by means of itself. (*RPC*: 45)

In other words: it is self-defeating to try to conceive 'the unknown' even as that which radically transcends one's understanding since, after all, this is itself a form of understanding. Again, the basic predicament that Climacus is making a meal of here is already implicit in the very attempt to state and elaborate Hypothesis B. For, suppose we write it this way:

> (B') Essential truth—namely, that [….]—is beyond the reach of human understanding.

The trouble is that, as soon as we fill out the blank in B', in any way we can understand, it seems we have already falsified the hypothesis. Quite generally, whenever we find a claim of the form 'X is unthinkable (or incommunicable, unrepresentable, inconceivable etc.)' we immediately find this trouble; either, it appears, the claim is false, since it has managed to state something sensible about X after all, to represent it in an intelligible way, or the claim is nonsense, since it has not managed to say anything sensible about X nor to represent it in any intelligible way. In the gloss that Priest puts on predicaments of this sort, we have 'a totality (of all things expressible, describable etc.) and an appropriate operation that generates an object that is both within and without the totality' (Priest 2001: 3). And when Climacus makes it out to be the result of his thought-experiment that Christianity is beyond the limits of human thought and understanding, the trouble is just the same.

As we have seen, Climacus makes a point of flagging up this difficulty. And yet, so it seems, he blithely carries on with his thought-experiment, regardless. His expositors sometimes seem equally all too sanguine in this regard. It is suggested, for instance, that Kierkegaard's goal is really just to remind readers, in a teasing sort of way, of what they already know about Christianity. As we have noted, however, C is controversial; especially against a background of Hegelian influence, it would be risky indeed to assume in the reader prior commitment to the thesis that the truth of Christianity is beyond the limits of human understanding. And although critics are right to observe that Kierkegaard sometimes uses the term 'contradiction' in a way that cannot mean a formal, logical contradiction, but denotes instead something like a co-presence of incongruent elements, it is not at all clear that this observation can help us here. For the worry is that Climacus winds up in straightforward self-contradiction: affirming at once that Christianity is beyond the limits of thought and that it is not.

It therefore appears we need some way to disarm this threat of self-stultification. We need this, at least, if we are to keep in play the possibility that



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*Fragments* has any dialectical purchase against the (Hegelian) thought that, *contra* claim C, the insights implicit in Christian belief and practice can be translated into purely theoretical terms and harmonized with the philosophical tradition. This is all the more so in the light of the fact that Hegel himself famously criticized Kant's appeal to the phenomena/noumena distinction on the grounds that it is self-contradictory in just the way that Climacus' project threatens to be. Thus, Hegel:

> [I]t is the supreme inconsistency to admit, on the one hand, that the understanding is cognizant only of appearances, and to assert, on the other, that this cognition is something *absolute*—by saying: cognition *cannot* go any further, this is the *natural*, absolute *restriction* on human knowing …. Something is only known, or even felt, to be a restriction, or a defect, if one is at the same time *beyond* it. (*EL*: §60R, 105)

Given his substantial agreement with Hegel that the understanding can, as Climacus puts it, transcend itself 'only by means of itself', one may well wonder what anti-Hegelian leverage he could intelligibly hope his thought-experiment to have.

Two further points are worth noting before we proceed. First, the self-referential trouble that looms over *Fragments* is rather frequently in the offing in Kierkegaard. A representative example is already provided by the project he purports to take up in Part I of his *magister* dissertation: namely, to bring into view Socrates as a radical 'ironist', that is, as one who never appears as he really is. As Kierkegaard flags at the outset of *The Concept of Irony*, this project seems no less paradoxical than would be the attempt to 'picture the nisse with the cap that makes him invisible' (*KW* II: 12). (Virtually the same image—viz. painting Mars in the armour that makes him invisible—crops up more than once in *Postscript* (cf. *CUP*: fn. 67; 146).)

Second, it is notable how the author of *Fragments* refuses standard ways of dealing with the threat of paradox at the limits of thought in theological contexts. The idea that God is beyond human understanding is of course far from being without precedent in the tradition of natural theology. On the contrary, Anselm, Aquinas and others develop sophisticated strategies for expressing truths about God, notwithstanding His radical transcendence and alterity; not least, the so-called ways of analogy, negation and eminence. But Climacus flatly denies that the understanding can get any further at all in its effort to disclose 'the unknown' when it 'risks a sortie *via negationis* or *via eminentia*' (*KW* VII: 44). His reason, which applies no less to the way of analogy, is a simple dilemma: either these operations really do disclose the nature of something, in which case it does not radically transcend our understanding, or they disclose nothing, and we are, as Climacus says, no further.



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## II. Two interpretative strategies: *bullet-biting* and *relativizing*

Can *Fragments* be rescued from self-referential incoherence? Turning to the critics, I want briefly to assess two sorts of response to this challenge: *bullet-biting* and *relativizing*. In fact, while there has been a great deal of discussion around Kierkegaard's deployment of such terms as 'contradiction', 'the absurd' and 'the Absolute Paradox'—whether these reveal him to be an irrationalist, suprarationalist, fideist, emotivist or what—it seems to me that the focus is too rarely on the bottom line regarding *Fragments*, from a critical point of view, i.e., whether its core argument is at all cogent. Accordingly, there will be an element of artificiality in my sketch of the existing strategies on offer. My aim here, however, is heuristic: to help bring out the difficulties surrounding the threat of self-stultification in *Fragments* and the need for a way forward.

To bite the bullet in this context would be to concede that Climacus' project is self-contradictory and to try to show that this is not the disaster it looks to be. Conceivably, one variant of this line would portray Kierkegaard as denying the law of non-contradiction, in something like the way Priest associates Hegel's logic with the unorthodox doctrine that there are true contradictions at the limits of thought. To be sure, a dialetheic reading of Kierkegaard (to indulge the anachronism) hardly seems promising given his well-attested opposition to what he (like Priest) regards as Hegel's claim to have transcended the law of non-contradiction. Nonetheless, the impression that he knowingly endorses contradictions is no doubt behind Kierkegaard's notoriety as an irrationalist and might lead to the idea that he believed there are true contradictions at the limits of thought. But the impression is certainly unsound; not least because, as C. Stephen Evans observes, the sense in which Climacus applies the term 'contradiction' to Christianity—or to the human self *qua* synthesis of opposing elements or to comic juxtapositions—is plainly not univocal with his use of the term when, as sometimes he does, he dismisses something on the grounds that it instantiates the form, $p$ *and* $\sim p$ (Evans 1992: 97ff.). (Critics of Priest's take on Hegel will make parallel points about the latter's distance from a merely propositional notion of contradiction.)

But there is a more appealing way to bite the bullet. This is to argue that the real argument embodied by *Fragments* takes something like the form of the *reductio* and that this is quite intentionally reflected in the fact that Climacus' project self-destructs. This strategy is consonant with the proposal, first advanced by Henry Allison (in Allison 1967), that the real project behind Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus literature is, in James Conant's words, 'an elaborate *reductio ad absurdum* of the philosophical project of clarifying and propounding what it is to be a Christian' (Conant 1993: 207). On this approach, the underlying aim is said to be



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therapeutic: to wean the reader off any impulse he or she may feel to go in for the sorts of theorizing about Christianity that are being sent up.

The *reductio* reading has by now received a fair critical airing and this is not the place to review the arguments *pro* and *contra*.[5] However, I do want to highlight one difficulty. Some complain that the approach foists on Kierkegaard an alien theory of *nonsense*, one that betrays origins in a contentious reading of Wittgenstein: the so-called 'austere view' (roughly: nonsense admits neither of kinds nor degrees).[6] A different misgiving, however, concerns the danger of reading back into Kierkegaard an alien conception of *sense*, and correlatively, of *thought*. Apropos the contrast between 'unintelligible though apparently intelligible chatter' and 'mere gibberish', Conant wants to attribute to Kierkegaard the thesis that (as per the austere view) these two 'differ only in their *psychological* import … *Cognitively*, they are equally vacuous' (Conant 1989: 249, my emphasis). Accordingly, we are to take it that Climacus' core presentation of Christianity is intended to carry no 'cognitive' significance whatsoever, but only 'psychological import' and therapeutic effect. Now, a sharp cognition / psychology contrast of this sort is one we might more naturally associate with Frege; one thinks for instance of his characterization of logic and mathematics in terms of 'the investigation of mind; of *the* mind, not of minds' (Frege 1977 [1918]: 25). So is there anything in Kierkegaard akin to Frege's view of the autonomy of the logical vis-à-vis the psychological, along with associated oppositions between Thoughts and ideas, the semantic and the rhetorical, *the* mind and mere minds?

The evidence points, rather, to Kierkegaard's insistence on thought's situatedness in human psychology and interests. In his journals, for instance, he remarks that the trouble with 'modern theorizers' is that 'they entirely forget that the thinker himself is of course like the flautist's instrument and that it is therefore of the greatest importance to know one's instrument'—adding, parenthetically, that 'this is where psychology is situated' (*KJN* II: 233). And it is a recurring theme in his writings that thinkers' pre-reflective agency is ineliminable from even the most abstract, systematic kinds of judgement. Thus, in *Postscript*, as part of his stinging critique of Hegel's conception of 'pure thought', Climacus argues that logical systems cannot ultimately be severed from the non-discursive performances of particular human thinkers, and rounds out his discussion with the remark that 'to shed light on logic, it might be a good thing to place oneself psychologically in the state of mind of someone who thinks the logical' (*CUP*: 99).[7] I do not think any of this expresses what Frege knew as psychologism. But it does raise a question about any approach to Kierkegaard in the spirit of Frege's sharp contrasts between thoughts and ideas, the logical and the psychological. We should at any rate ask whether, in order to deal with the threat of self-stultification, we *need* so extreme a claim as that Climacus' so-called 'thought-project' is deliberately vacuous, intentionally devoid of 'cognitive' content.



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In this light, we may be tempted by a rival to bullet-biting that lies more in the mainstream of Kierkegaard studies: *relativizing*. The idea here is that, inasmuch as Climacus seems to run up against limits of thought, these limits are really to be understood as relative to a point of view, namely that of the outsider or unbeliever. Kierkegaard's aim, in other words, is to identify the *de facto* limitations of a certain perspective or form of life, not the *de jure* limits of human thought as such. On a standard variant of this line, he means to portray Climacus, *qua* Socratic thinker and humourist, as an outsider's perspective on Christianity, precisely in order to show that, *from this (albeit religious) perspective*, Christianity cannot but appear absurd and incomprehensible.

Relativizers face two challenges. First, they need to make sense of Kierkegaard's commitment to the possibility of a lucid rejection of Christianity. For, if Christianity is literally unintelligible to outsiders, such rejection surely cannot be possible. Kierkegaard, however, will dryly remark that Christianity's opponents have for a long time been 'the only ones from whom it has been possible to get any trustworthy information about what Christianity is' (*JP* III: 3337). And it is most likely to Feuerbach, in particular, that Climacus refers as one who 'attacks Christianity and at the same time expounds it so creditably that … a person who has difficulties in presenting Christianity properly and definitely is almost compelled to resort to him' (*KW* XII: 614). Secondly, friends of relativizing need to make it plausible that, despite many appearances to the contrary, Kierkegaard thinks the believer is able to transcend the perspective from which Christianity appears paradoxical and incapable of being understood.

A standard move here is to appeal to the idea that understanding admits of degrees. Whereas the outsider is in a position to understand Christianity to a very low degree, and will assign a correspondingly low probability to its being true, the believer is able to understand Christianity to a higher degree, even if not perfectly. Thus, Evans claims that the limitations on Climacus' own perspective are, in Kierkegaard's view, capable of being '*partially* overcome' by the believer (Evans 2008: 1023, my emphasis). Likewise, in his response to Conant, John Lippitt appeals to the idea that Christianity only *appears* to be (more-or-less) nonsensical to the on-looker; the believer, on the other hand, is able to make some sense out of it, even if not full sense, 'in and through' the living out of a Christian life (Lippitt and Hutto 1998: 288).

Suppose, then, that what Kierkegaard really wants to show is that Christianity can only appear highly improbable, from the perspective of the outsider. The trouble is, in that case, the core argument of *Fragments* seems spectacularly ill-suited to deliver the right conclusion, since it makes Christianity out to be the very antithesis of the supposition that the truth is within the reach of human understanding. So the dilemma for views like Evans' and Lippitt's is this: *either* the way the believer is able to 'make some sense' of Christianity entails that, after all, Christianity lies within the limits of human understanding, in which



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case we lose the contrast with the Socratic hypothesis (A) and Climacus' thought-project collapses; *or* the way in which the believer is able to 'make some sense' of Christianity is compatible with the hypothesis (B) that Christianity lies beyond the limits of human understanding, in which case the threat of self-referential incoherence remains. On either horn of this dilemma, *Fragments* does not emerge as a work that withstands much scrutiny.

None of this is to deny that there is much of value both in interpretations that emphasize the mimetic, satirical, character of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings and also in interpretations that distinguish between relating to religious concepts in a merely external and intellectual way and trying to appropriate such concepts in one's life. My aim in the rest of this essay, however, is to work towards an alternative to both the bullet-biting and relativizing responses to the threat of self-stultification. This alternative crucially relies on a distinction between two kinds of thinking, to which I now turn.

## III. Two kinds of thinking: *aesthetic-intellectual* and *ethico-religious*

A returning theme in Kierkegaard's writings, including those whose authorship he was prepared to own, can be summarized as the idea that some things resist *aesthetic-intellectual* representation. A mode of representation is 'aesthetic-intellectual', in the relevant sense, just in case it is apt to sustain an attitude of disinterested contemplation.[8] Accordingly, the category potentially encompasses things as diverse as a poem, a treatise, a table of data and a system of symbolic logic. 'Disinterestedness' is not to be confused here with emotional detachment or one's being *un*interested. The contrast, rather, is with the idea of an active, concrete interest in one's own existence as such.[9] But the significance for Kierkegaard of the idea of a category of representations that sustain disinterestedness emerges in the light of the way he presents certain things as such as to resist being so represented. Admittedly, the list of things he presents as satisfying this condition itself hardly looks homogenous. This list plausibly includes, *inter alia*: the lives of Abraham, Socrates and Christ; the phenomena of faith, freedom and sin; others *qua* moral exemplars and oneself *qua* synthesis of opposing elements; and death. But let us briefly consider the case of death.

Early on in his discourse, 'At a Graveside', Kierkegaard remarks that there is a sense in which death is 'not something actual' (*KW* X: 74). He means that if our thoughts in the vicinity of death are directed only towards the actual deaths of others around us, and the circumstances around these events, then there is a sense in which we will only seem to be thinking about death and we will miss what death essentially has to teach us. This, he argues, is because there is a sense in which you are thinking in earnest about *death* only if you are (*inter alia*) thinking



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*your own* death; but you cannot conceive your own death so long as you are thinking of death merely as an actual event since, as Epicurus observed, when it is, you are not. We shall come shortly to the general considerations behind Kierkegaard's view that thinking in earnest about death *per se* must involve thinking about one's own death in particular. But we should first be clear about the conclusion he draws, viz. that in the sense in which death is 'not something actual'—the sense in which it eludes any thinking that is only about actual events—death resists our familiar ways of trying to represent it. Specifically, Kierkegaard seeks to show how death resists being represented as a restful sleep, for example, or as a way out, or as the culmination of one's life story. The earnest thought of death, as he puts the general point, 'does not sit sunk in contemplation, does not rewrite expressions, does not think about the ingeniousness of imagery, does not discuss' (*KW* X: 82-83).

What is it about imagery, written descriptions and the like that makes these ill-suited to convey the earnest thought of death? The clue is in the phrase, just quoted, about one's being 'sunk in contemplation'. The point is: images and written expressions are typically the sorts of things that can sustain an attitude of disinterested contemplation, as exhibited, for example, in a mood of 'absent-minded preoccupation with the symbols of death' (*KW* X: 84). The earnest thought of death, by contrast, cannot. Again, we should not confuse 'absentminded preoccupation' here with emotional detachment: one's susceptibility to brood on the image of death as a way out, for example, may indeed be deeply emotionally engaged, moved by sorrow or depression, and yet, Kierkegaard insists, no less for that a failure to think in earnest about death.

Now, we may not assume that, in Kierkegaard's view, it follows from the fact that X defies aesthetic-intellectual representation that X cannot be thought or represented *simpliciter*. For he may think X can be represented in some other way. Indeed, in 'At a Graveside', he makes it clear he thinks death *can* be thought and represented, despite its 'singularity' and 'indefinability'. Indeed, he goes so far as to define earnestness about death in terms of the inwardness of *thought*, as opposed to the externality of 'mood', as the means by which 'the external is ennobled in one's consciousness' (*KW* X: 74). And the discourse makes liberal use of such locutions as 'think[ing] death', 'thinking about [one's] own death', and 'the earnest thought of death' (*KW* X: 75, 77, 85). So it would make little sense to suppose that, when he portrays death as such as to elude the grasp of any symbol that can sustain 'absent-minded preoccupation', Kierkegaard means to say that death is unthinkable, period.

Likewise, it is clear that Climacus, for his part, does not regard the aesthetic-intellectual as the only mode of representation and thought. On the contrary, in *Postscript* he argues for the need to recognize a different kind of representation and thinking. This is the thinking he now associates most of all with Socrates; and



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in a way that, as he himself indicates, stands in some tension with his original presentation of 'the Socratic' *in abstracto*, as a theoretical system.[10] Indeed, Climacus' discussion of the style of thinking he variously qualifies in *Postscript* as 'negative', 'indirect', 'existential', 'subjective', 'doubly reflected' and 'ethico-religious' notably echoes Kierkegaard's account, in his *magister* dissertation, of the distinctive way of thinking he finds exemplified by Socrates (and missing in Hegel's depiction of Socrates as a would-be systematic philosopher).[11] Climacus wants to show that 'ethico-religious' thinking, of the kind exemplified by Socrates, properly belongs to questions of essential truth, that is, to questions pertaining to what it means to be human and how one should live.

What, then, is ethico-religious thinking? And how does its mode of representation differ from the aesthetic-intellectual? The answer, I submit, is that it is constitutive of ethico-religious thinking to represent certain things precisely *as* such as to resist aesthetic-intellectual representation. It is part and parcel of such thinking to represent death, for example, as resisting any image or expression or symbol that is apt to sustain disinterested contemplation. If this answer is going to be convincing, however, we need to know why ethico-religious thinking is supposed in general to have this singular shape. After all, many philosophers evidently take it that questions about human flourishing call for nothing more quixotic than common-or-garden thinking and deliberation about the relevant topics: the nature of virtue, its relationship to happiness, whether death is a harm, whether belief in God is rational and so forth. So we might press the question: why are 'existential' issues supposed to call for anything especially out of the ordinary in the way of thinking?

*Postscript* can be seen, in fact, to offer a detailed rationale for the notion of a kind of thinking that is constitutively 'negative' or delimiting. Climacus' reasoning is based on two core premises: (i) the essentially human cannot be thought about in a merely abstract way; in this arena, one's thinking must also be concrete; and (ii) trying to think in the appropriately concrete way in this domain must involve trying to delimit the proper domain of disinterested contemplation as such. On this basis, Climacus maintains that part and parcel of what it is truly to think about the essentially human—as opposed to one's merely seeming so to be thinking—is to represent certain things as such as to resist aesthetic-intellectual representation. Let me then briefly unpack these two claims.

Firstly, Climacus insists that not all thought is abstract. On the contrary, there is a kind of thinking that is properly called 'concrete':

> What is concrete thinking? It is thought where there is also one who thinks, and a definite something (in the sense of 'particular') that is thought, where existence gives the existing thinker thought, time and space. (*CUP*: 279)



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His appeal to the distinction between abstract and concrete thinking is no doubt bound up with Climacus' attack on Hegel's 'pure thought'. But the distinction itself is straightforward enough. It is the contrast between thinking *about* a thought or proposition, as when I think about the thought that just crossed my mind, and directly thinking of or about some particular thing as thus-and-so, as when I think of a particular person as a friend or of a particular rock as resistant to my will. The contrast, as we might put it, is between reflexive, *de dicto* thought, in which propositional contents are in turn the objects of thoughts, and first-order, *de re* thought, where the expression 'thinking a thought' is a mere cognate accusative. Climacus' first premise, then, is that thinking about the essentially human must be concrete in just this sense. (The converse does not hold: not all concrete thinking is about the essentially human.) That is, ethico-religious thinking must involve, *inter alia*, thinking of or about your own individual existence *in concreto*, as one for whom the issue of what you are—or, rather, who you are becoming—is inescapable. Each must mind his or her own 'ethical actuality', as Climacus will say.

Lest we lose track of the sense in which we are still talking here about a kind of *thinking*, however, and not something in the order of a brute awareness of one's own existence, we must be clear that Climacus in no wise denies that ethico-religious thinking *also* involves reflection and abstract inquiry. On the contrary, the notion of 'double reflection'—one of his few terms of art—is plainly intended to encapsulate the idea that what we need is a kind of thinking that is *both* abstract and concrete:

> The reflection of inwardness is the subjective thinker's double-reflection. In thinking, he thinks the universal, but as existing in this thinking, as assimilating this in his inwardness, he becomes more and more subjectively isolated. (*CUP*: 62)

Again, it is first and foremost to Socrates that we are to look for a model here, in his singular ability to pursue abstract *ti esti* questions regarding the universally human, while continually 'leaping aside' to return to the concrete matter how he himself stands in relation to the questions at issue (cf. *KW* II: 166).[12]

If doubly-reflected thought and inquiry is the aim, Climacus is nonetheless alive to a danger that threatens its practical possibility. The worry is that, despite your best efforts to think through 'the universally human' as applied to your own case, you might still fail to think of or about yourself, *in propria persona* and *in concreto*. For example, it is possible to apply to oneself the thought that all humans are mortal in a way that remains wholly disinterested and abstract ('all men are mortal, D.W. is a man …'). And it is a familiar observation that one can come to know something about oneself in a purely explanatory and third-personal way, without this entering into one's reflexive self-awareness.[13] Moreover, Climacus



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evidently fears that we moderns are more than ever in danger of losing track of ourselves in this way, of becoming transfixed in the moment of 'first reflection', mesmerized by the seductive image or the striking idea. Hence, his insistence on our need for a kind of thinking that is distinctively 'negative' or delimiting; the need for the kind of reflection on the universally human that always has an eye to the limits of disinterested contemplation; the need to counteract the tendency for such contemplation to swallow up any concrete interest that may have spurred one to take up a given question in the first place.[14] To amplify the obvious echoes here of Kant's conception of transcendental philosophy: the task is to make room for one's 'ethical actuality' by delimiting the sphere of the aesthetic-intellectual.

Kant has his phenomena/noumena distinction. But the question remains how Kierkegaard, for his part, thinks the limits of the aesthetic-intellectual are to be made out. It is here, I submit, that Climacus' view of ethico-religious thinking connects up with the idea that some things defy aesthetic-intellectual representation. The idea that ethico-religious thinking is constitutively delimiting, that is, implies a certain contrast with the natural assumption that thought about the essentially human can be specified merely by reference to some set of relevant concepts: virtue, well-being, happiness and the like. In the contrasting view I think we may attribute to Kierkegaard, it belongs to thinking about the essentially human to take as its objects things that satisfy two conditions: they are (A) apt to challenge our understanding of what it essentially means to be human, in ways that (B) cannot sustain disinterested contemplation.

Plausibly, these conditions, A and B, need to be regarded as independent and complementary. One reason is that not everything that defies aesthetic-intellectual representation is also apt to challenge our self-understanding. If *Mein Kampf* thwarts the attempts of intellectual historians to represent its discursive content, for example, it does not follow that Hitler's book properly challenges us to rethink our understanding of the essentially human. This raises the issue of how we are to tell apart the things that satisfy condition A as well as B. While his works may help us to make such judgments in particular cases, I believe we will look in vain to Kierkegaard for general criteria. Every indication is that he thought no such criteria can be given. In *The Concept of Irony*, for instance, he likens Socrates' uncanny ability to hunt down the genuinely aporetic to a divining rod that 'wishes only where there is water' (*KW* II: 35n). *Contra* those who deny the possibility in principle of a contrast between objective aporiai and nonsense, however, the idea that some things do indeed satisfy both A and B is at the heart of Kierkegaard's distinctive conception of *paradox*. As he reflects in an early journal entry:

> The paradox is the authentic *pathos* of the intellectual life, and just as only great souls are susceptible to passions, so are only great thinkers susceptible to what I call paradoxes, which are



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> nothing other than grandiose thoughts, not yet fully developed. (*KJN* II: 95)

In this view, there is a world of difference between the merely incoherent and the pregnant thought that wants completion. But the ability to discern the one from the other is ultimately down to the sensitivity of the thinker's pathos and judgement.

According to Kierkegaard's idea, then, some things—death, for example—challenge us to rethink what it means to be human, but in ways that defy aesthetic-intellectual representation; and it belongs to ethico-religious thinking to represent these things as such. On the interpretation of *Fragments* I want to advance, this is just what Climacus' thought-experiment is designed to achieve vis-à-vis Christianity, i.e., to represent Christianity as challenging our understanding of what it means to be human in ways that defy aesthetic-intellectual representation. Of course, if Climacus' project is not to be consigned to self-stultification after all, we still need to ease the worry that his portrayal of Christianity itself falls under the rubric of the aesthetic-intellectual. First, however, let me draw out two key implications of his account of ethico-religious thinking vis-à-vis the limits of thought, by way of a twofold comparison with Kant.

Firstly, Kierkegaard's view does not posit any entities that lie beyond the limits of thought or understanding. This marks a contrast with Kant, on a traditional (and tenacious) 'two-worlds' reading of his appeal to the phenomena / noumena distinction. Kierkegaard's view, that is, does not imply two sorts of entities or ontic realms, the thinkable and the unthinkable. Rather, it relies on the idea of two spheres of human agency: viz. the aesthetic-intellectual and the ethico-religious. Genuine thinking about the essentially human, on this account, involves as it were keeping watch over the boundary between the two spheres; making room for the ethico-religious by delimiting the aesthetic-intellectual.[15] Kierkegaard expressly takes issue with the Kantians in this regard:

> The Kantian discussion of an *an sich* which thought cannot get hold of is a misunderstanding occasioned by bringing actuality into relationship with thought. But to conquer this misunderstanding with the help of pure thought is a chimeric victory. (*JP* II: 2235)

The chimeric victory is of course Hegel's. On Kierkegaard's diagnosis, Hegel quite rightly exposes the self-referential incoherence of the Kantians' conception of the limits of thought; but, by trying to ascend to an illusory realm of 'pure thought', Hegel signally fails to draw the right moral, viz. that, as Climacus puts it, we must resist the temptation to think in terms of a 'self-withholding *an sich* … *instead of referring actuality to the ethical*' (*CUP*: 275, my emphasis). What this means, I take it, is that we should resist any temptation to posit a realm of



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unthinkable things—McDowell's 'ineffable in itself'—but think instead in terms of a modality or 'sphere' of human comportment, the first-personal sphere of an individual's 'ethical actuality' (cf. McDowell 1998: 180).

We should also recognize, however, the way Kierkegaard positively appropriates Kant's contrast between a limitation and a limit or boundary. In the *Prolegomena*, Kant argues that, by contrast with the merely negative notion of a limitation—as in e.g., the limited capacity of a container—a *boundary* has a positive character by virtue of sharing features both with entities within the domain it bounds and also with what lies beyond. So conceived, a boundary, as opposed to a limitation, is a *limiting case*. (Kant's example: 'a point is the boundary of a line, yet is nonetheless a locus in space' (Kant 2004: 105).) Dolors Vidal rightly notes the connection here, *apropos* Kierkegaard's remark that 'human reason has boundaries; that is where the negative concepts are to be found' (*JP* I: 7):

> It is not surprising that Kierkegaard conceives of 'negative concepts' in the same way as Kant conceived of the limit, namely as boundaries, since Kierkegaardian negative concepts seem to enjoy the same dialectic of limit; in negatively demarcating their borders they also show what is beyond them. (Vidal 2005: 455)

Vidal goes on to specify 'the positive sense' of the limit, on the view Kierkegaard shares with Kant, in terms of an 'opening towards a forever unknown beyond' (idem). This formulation, however, seems only to bring us back to the metaphysics of 'the self-withholding *an sich*'. We do better justice to the way he critically appropriates Kant's sense of the positive character of a limit, I suggest, if we attribute to Kierkegaard the view that, by challenging our self-understanding in ways that cannot sustain disinterested contemplation, some things are apt not only to delimit the aesthetic-intellectual as such but further, and positively, to open us towards our own ethical actuality. For Kierkegaard, the objects of thought that can serve to play this role for us evidently include death—but also the life of Socrates, for example, or Christ.

## IV. Christianity, caricatures and the coherence of *Fragments*

With these pieces in place, let us finally return to the threat of self-stultification in *Fragments*. In outline, the predicament in which we left Climacus' thought-experiment was this:

1. It is possible, via procedures of negation and analogy, to represent a system of thought on the hypothesis that essential truth lies beyond the limits of our understanding.



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2. To represent a system of thought that radically goes 'beyond the Socratic' in this way is to represent Christianity.
3. So (C1), Christianity is suitably represented as a system of thought that, if true, lies beyond the limits of our understanding.
4. If (for some *F*) X is suitably represented as F then X lies within the limits of our understanding.
5. Christianity can be suitably represented (from C1).
6. So (C2), Christianity is not suitably represented as a system of thought that, if true, lies beyond the limits of our understanding (from 4 and 5).

Given that C1 and C2 are plainly contradictory—in a robustly logical sense—and given that Climacus is committed to Premises 1, 2 and 4, it seems we must conclude that (on anything but a dialetheic reading) *Fragments* is incoherent and self-stultifying, hopelessly embroiled in trying to tell an untellable tale.

Climacus' recognition of the force of Premise 4 is manifest in those passages in which, as we saw, he renders questionable whether the truth of his non-Socratic story can so much as be entertained. But we are now in a position to properly register the possibility of an alternative to the choice between bullet-biting and relativizing: call it *disambiguating*. Suppose then that, rather than the conjunction C1 and C2, we should instead construe the intended upshot of Climacus' thought-experiment thus:

> (C*) Christianity is suitably represented *in an ethico-religious way* as incapable of being suitably represented *in an aesthetic-intellectual way*.

The formal possibility of a disambiguating solution of this sort ought to be clear. If someone says 'X cannot be represented, *simpliciter*', we immediately have trouble: it appears their statement is either false or nonsensical. But if someone were to say, 'X cannot be represented; that is, apart from the way I have just represented it' then obviously *this* reflexive trouble would not arise. The new trouble of course is that to just plead an exception for one's own sayings about the unsayable would appear thoroughly unsatisfactory and *ad hoc*. Such special pleading would appear to undermine the whole force of the claim that something is unsayable or unthinkable in the first place. As we have seen, however, the idea of a distinct kind of thinking that is constitutively delimiting *vis-à-vis* the aesthetic-intellectual has an independent motivation in Kierkegaard's thought. For this reason, I think we should take seriously the possibility that Climacus can perfectly well make an exception for his own representation of Christianity,



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when he portrays Christianity as resisting representation, without at all blunting its force.

If *disambiguating* is to be convincing, we need to be assured on two points. First, we need to be assured that Climacus' own portrayal of Christianity, as the mirror-image of the Socratic, is not itself in the aesthetic-intellectual mode, at least according to its design. This amounts to the question whether Climacus' own mode of representation is apt to sustain disinterested contemplation. For, if it is, *disambiguating* obviously fails. Second, we need to be assured that Climacus' portrayal of Christianity does get something importantly right about its subject-matter. For, if it does not, it cannot with any plausibility be taken to show specifically how *Christianity* challenges our self-understanding in ways that cannot sustain disinterested contemplation; and again our proposed solution fails. Finally, then, let me briefly address these two points in turn.

Is *Fragments*, and the thought-experiment at its core, apt to sustain an attitude of disinterested contemplation? There is every reason to think not, at least according to its design. Consider the following commentary on the work by its author, from a footnote in *Postscript* that has been much emphasized by bullet-biters in the tradition of Allison:

> The clash of form, the experiment's teasing resistance to the content, the poetic cheek (which even invents Christianity), the only attempt made to go further, that is beyond the so-called speculative construction, the tirelessly active irony; the parody of speculation in the entire plan … [M]y distinctive procedure … lies first and foremost in the clashing form. (*CUP*: 230–31fn)

I take it that what Climacus means here by 'the clash of form' and 'the experiment's teasing resistance to the content' is just what I have been calling the threat of self-stultification: *viz.* the way that, according to its content, *Fragments* makes Christianity out to lie beyond the limits of thought while at the same time, according to its form, making Christianity out to be readily intelligible by means of simple operations of negation and analogy. Moreover, it is precisely this 'clash of form' that is evidently designed to block a disinterested reading of the book. As is evidenced by the German reviewer that Climacus complains about in the footnote from which I have just cited, there can be no guarantee that a given reader of *Fragments* will not stubbornly try to read it as though it were a straightforward treatise, or get carried away by its didactic import or dialectical prowess; but its author can hardly be blamed for that.

We can therefore see why the *threat* of self-stultification, though logically benign, is integral to the design of *Fragments*, as grounded in Climacus' aim to do all he can to obstruct any reception of his book in a spirit of disinterested



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contemplation. But in what sense, then, is *Fragments*' portrait of a radical alternative to 'the Socratic' supposed to be faithful to Christianity? A full answer would require close scrutiny of each detail of this portrait, which I shall not attempt here. But I do want to suggest the general shape of an answer. Suppose, then, we take seriously the idea that something like Christianity can be conjured up, through operations of negation and analogy, in the way Climacus does it in *Fragments*. The question is: in what sense *like*?

One of the books we know Kierkegaard read closely was Henrik Steffens' *Caricatures of the Most Holy*.[16] Steffens' title, not least, evidently struck a chord. Thus, in a journal, Kierkegaard remarks that the *dramatis personae* of his restaging of Plato's *Symposium*, 'In Vino Veritas', are each in different ways 'caricatures of the most holy' (*JP* V: 5755). My suggestion is that Climacus' thought-experiment is likewise intended to produce a caricature of Christianity, where the art of caricature is a sort of limiting case of aesthetic-intellectual representation.[17] For consider in general the art of caricature. At first blush, the trick is to distort the subject enough to achieve a comic effect but not so much as to render the content unrecognisable as a depiction of the subject, rather in do so in such a way that salient features are revealed. A caricature sets up a fruitful tension between its form (how it depicts) and its content (that and what it depicts). As Climacus himself puts it:

> Caricature is comic. How? Through the contradiction between likeness and unlikeness. The caricature must resemble a person, in fact an actual, particular person. If it does not, it is not comic but a straightforward exercise in meaningless fantasy. (*CUP*: 433n)

In similarly paradoxical vein, Stephanie Ross writes that a caricature 'effects easy identification through false description' (Ross 1974: 286).[18] Unlike realistic portraits, which are self-effacing in relation to what they depict, caricatures make play of their status *as* pictures. On the other hand, unlike mechanical distortions such as a fish-eye photograph, caricatures are purposefully distorted, as Ross puts it, 'so as to give a new insight into, a new vision of, the face' (Ross 1974: 290). Something similar, I submit, is true of the depiction of Christianity we find in *Fragments*; a depiction which, after all, is drawn by a self-styled humourist.

One might still press the question: if, as I have argued, his underlying aim is to show that Christianity challenges our self-understanding in ways that cannot sustain disinterested contemplation, why does Kierkegaard not just argue for this, clearly and explicitly? *Postscript* comes quite close to such explicitness. But the reason surely has to do with his aim, not just to state truths about the sort of challenge with which Christianity confronts us, but to make this challenge come



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alive for his readers as one that opens us to our ethical actuality. In this regard, no doubt, the work must speak for itself.[19]

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## Notes

[1] Abbreviations used:
*KW* = *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong et al., 26 volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978–2000).
*JP* = *Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, 7 volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967–78).
*KJN* = *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, trans. N. J. Cappelørn, A. Hannay, B. Kirmmse et al., 8 volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
*RPC* = Kierkegaard, Repetition *and* Philosophical Crumbs, trans. M. G. Piety (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
*CUP* = Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. A. Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
*EL* = Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).
[2] On 'essential truth' as a gloss on 'Truth' in *Fragments*, see *CUP*: vii; 168n; 172; 179.
[3] Climacus, who styles himself as a 'humourist', says of humour that it 'lies still essentially in the withdrawal out of immanence and into the eternal in recollection' (*CUP*: 244). He has in mind the way in which humour, understood as a world-view, regards the world—'immanence'—as a sphere of jests and empty folly, ultimately of vanishing significance.
[4] Thus, in his *Postscript*, Climacus highlights 'an anomaly regarding the set-up' of *Fragments*: 'To try if possible to throw a proper light on the difference between the Socratic (which was supposed to be the philosophical, the pagan-philosophical position) and the experimental category that really goes beyond the Socratic, I reduced the Socratic to the principle that all knowing is recollecting. This is how people generally see it, and only someone with a quite special interest in the Socratic, and going back constantly to the sources, will see the importance of distinguishing between Socrates and Plato on this score. The proposition does indeed belong to both; it is just that Socrates is constantly taking leave of it in order to exist. Holding Socrates to the proposition that all knowing is recollecting makes him into a speculating philosopher, instead of what he was, an existing thinker who understood the essential thing to be existing' (*CUP*: 173).



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[5] For critical discussion of the *reductio* reading, see Ferreira 1994; Hannay 2003; Lippitt and Hutto 1998; Mulhall 1999; Rudd 2000; Schönbaumsfeld 2007; Weston 1999.

[6] See, e.g., Lippitt and Hutto 1998. But see also Ferreira 1994 for reasons to think that the austere view of nonsense may not be so alien to Kierkegaard.

[7] For a discussion of Climacus' critique of Hegel on this score, see Watts 2007.

[8] Climacus often talks of 'the aesthetic' and 'the intellectual' in the same breath and he associates both with disinterestedness: 'the aesthetic and the intellectual are disinterested' (*CUP*: 266–67). While Climacus does not himself deploy the term 'aesthetic-intellectual', this term is coined in *Either/Or*, where Kierkegaard's Judge writes of the danger of letting himself be 'carried away into the aesthetic-intellectual intoxication' in which he says his young friend lives (*KW* IV: 16).

[9] Climacus defines 'disinterestedness' as 'indifference to actuality' and refers to 'the disinterestedness of the intellectual' (*CUP*: 267; 262). He further specifies the disinterested observer as one who is 'contemplatively outside himself' and remarks that disinterestedness it is 'the highest pathos' in aesthetics (*CUP*: 328).

[10] As critics often observe, Socrates takes on a very different aspect in *Postscript* as compared with *Fragments*. As Mary-Jane Rubenstein puts it, 'Socrates leaps … from Speculative Patriarch to Anti-Systematic Hero somewhere between *Fragments* and *Postscript*' (Rubenstein 2002: 350). See also n. 2 above.

[11] On Kierkegaard's early portrait of Socrates, as exemplifying a distinct kind of thinking and in dialogue with Hegel's account of Socrates, see Watts 2010.

[12] On Socrates as a model of double-reflected inquiry, see Watts 2013: 438ff.

[13] For a fine discussion of self-knowledge, in which the possibility of this sort of self-estrangement is to the fore, see Moran 2001.

[14] Recall in this connection Climacus' ironical posture in *Fragments*, as noted above, of his being at a loss to explain what moved him to come up with his thought-experiment in the first place.

[15] The motif of keeping watch over boundaries, not least between the aesthetic-intellectual idea of (the loss of) *immediacy* and the ethico-religious idea of (the loss of) *innocence*, is central to *The Concept of Anxiety* and is even built into the name of the fictional author of this text: Vigilius Haufniensis, watchman of Copenhagen. See *KW* VIII: ch. 1.

[16] See Burgess 2009: 270ff.

[17] This suggestion is anticipated by Stephen Mulhall, notwithstanding his official endorsement of what I have called the bullet-biting reading of *Fragments*. Mulhall writes: 'We must therefore ask how Climacus' intellectualized caricature of the god might nevertheless indirectly convey the true existential challenge embodied in Christian vision and terminology – might contain at least an echo of the voice of the god as it is reflected by the offended understanding' (Mulhall 2001: 346).

[18] Compare also Robert Hopkins' discussion of a caricature of Tony Blair: 'if we are to see in the caricature Blair with an enormous mouth, it seems we must do two irreconcilable things. We must see Blair in it, so we must see it as resembling him in outline shape. But we must also see an enormous-mouthed thing in it, and to see it as resembling *that* in outline shape. Unfortunately these two things differ considerably in outline shape' (Hopkins 1998: 96).



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