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The modal gap: the objective problem of Lessing's ditch(es) and Kierkegaard's subjective reply

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Abstract: **This essay expands upon the suggestion that Lessing's infamous 'ditch' is actually three ditches: temporal, metaphysical, and existential gaps. It examines the complex problems these ditches raise, and then proposes that Kierkegaard's *Fragments* and *Postscript* exhibit a similar triadic organizational structure, which may signal a deliberate attempt to engage and respond to Lessing's three gaps. Viewing the Climacean project in this way offers an enhanced understanding of the intricacies of Lessing's rationalist approach to both religion and historical truth, and illuminates Climacus's subjective response to Lessing.**

That, then, is the ugly, broad ditch which I cannot get across, however earnestly I have tried to make the leap. If anyone can help me over it, let him do it, I beg him, I adjure him. He will deserve a divine reward from me.

G. E. Lessing[1]

Introduction

In the vast literature on Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, much is made of the anti-Hegelian posture and the subjective approach to truth. These topics have garnered most of the attention, and with good reason, since they do figure prominently in the writings of Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Johannes Climacus. Yet comparatively little has been written[2] on the rejoinders aimed at G. E. Lessing (1729–1781) in the *Fragments* and *Postscript*, which attempt to deal with Lessing's infamous 'ugly, broad ditch' and the associated difficulties posed by historical, philosophical, and religious conceptions of truth.[3] Kierkegaard's response to Lessing in the works of Climacus centres on themes that would generate much protracted theological debate in the modern period: the intersection of reason, history, and revelation, the

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relation of reason and faith, and the suitability of historical evidence for situating theology.

The purpose of this essay is to evaluate such issues pertaining to Lessing in the *Fragments* and the early part of the *Postscript*, bringing to the forefront these background concerns which inform Climacus's writings. I aim to show, first, that Lessing's texts provide a crucial window into the structure and overall approach of Climacus's work, and second, that a reading of Climacus without Lessing in mind results in an impoverished interpretation of the project, since I will suggest that a sustained argument in response to Lessing underlies *Fragments* and *Postscript*.[4] I will begin with a brief assessment of Lessing's 'On the proof of the spirit and of power', and, following Gordon Michalson, identify the three discernible ditches in Lessing's presentation.[5] I will propose further development of this thesis by highlighting their significant nuances, and suggest a triadic structural arrangement. I then analyse Kierkegaard's reply, which contrasts the objective and subjective issues of Christianity, and also exhibits a corresponding triadic structure, through which he deals with each ditch. This analysis will reveal the core of their disagreement and note the important ways in which Kierkegaard reframes the problems in support of his answers.

Lessing's ditch(es): the temporal gap

In 'On the proof and the spirit and of power', Lessing begins by laying out the epistemological division between reports of supernatural phenomenon such as miracles and fulfilled prophecy, and their actual occurrence. The temporal distance between himself and the time of Christ is problematic, since the proof which was enjoyed in the first centuries of Christianity, the 'proof of the spirit and of power no longer has any spirit or power, but *has sunk to the level of human testimonies* of spirit and power'.[6] Thus, 'reports of fulfilled prophecies are not fulfilled prophecies; that reports of miracles are not miracles', and finally, that such testimonies are 'a medium which takes away all their force'.[7]

One detects an empiricism here similar to that of David Hume, who argues that 'no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle' when weighed against 'the ultimate standard' of our 'experience and observation' that such miracles never occur.[8] The empiricist principle of analogy takes over for the person removed from the scene. It seems unfair then that others were provided with actual experience of supernatural evidence in support of Christian truth-claims, yet Lessing is not: 'How is it to be expected of me that the same inconceivable truths which sixteen to eighteen hundred years ago people believed on the strongest inducement, should be believed by me to be equally valid on an infinitely lesser inducement?'.[9] Thus, Lessing's complaint is really twofold. First, he protests that

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with regard to the events of revelation he is a non-contemporary, one 'untimely born'. Second, he raises a factual concern regarding whether reported historical events actually happened; this is the empiricist epistemological objection which imposes an exceptionally high epistemic standard for justification of such knowledge claims. This is Lessing's temporal gap.

The metaphysical gap

The temporal gap is initially presented by Lessing to be the chief issue. But as many scholars have observed,[10] Lessing shifts abruptly from the problem of temporal distance to that of relating historical truths to metaphysical/religious truths, invoking a 'metaphysical gap',[11] signaled by his famous declaration that the '*accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason*'.[12] Lessing introduces the modal categories of contingency and necessity, and with this shift he effectively points up the distinction between historical statements about what happened (which he now grants for the sake of argument) and conclusions of religious truth derived from them, which on his view will be necessary truths: he asks, 'If on historical grounds I have no objection to the statement that this Christ himself rose from the dead, must I therefore accept it as true that this risen Christ was the Son of God?'[13] More directly, 'What is the connection between my inability to raise any significant objection to the evidence of the former and my obligation to believe something against which my reason rebels?'[14]

Lessing's point is that there is no connection, for these are two separate classes of truths, which cannot entail one another:

> But to jump with that historical truth [Christ's resurrection] to a quite different class of truths, and to demand of me that I should form all my metaphysical and moral ideas accordingly; to expect me to alter all my fundamental ideas of the nature of the Godhead because I cannot set any credible testimony against the resurrection of Christ: if that is not a μεταβασις εις αλλο γενος, then I do not know what Aristotle meant by this phrase.[15]

Thus he articulates the metaphysical gap between accidental, contingent, a posteriori truths on the one hand, and necessary, a priori truths on the other. Lurking in the background here is Lessing's dependence on Leibniz's theory of knowledge, which maintains that truths of reason are discoverable by reason and thus *ipso facto* necessary, whereas contingent truths are learned through the senses.[16] Leibniz writes in the *Monadology*, 'There are also two kinds of *truths* – those of *reasoning* and those of *fact*. Truths of reasoning are necessary, and their opposite is quite impossible; those of fact are contingent, and their opposite is possible'.[17] This epistemology then presupposes two features: first, the distinction can be understood in terms of *how we acquire* such knowledge, and second, the two truths can be cast in terms of their *modal status*, i.e.

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contingent or necessary. This might be called the *modal* aspect of the metaphysical ditch, namely, the contingent–necessary distinction, which surfaces quite clearly in Lessing's language.

Yet it is important to notice the multifaceted nature of the problem which the metaphysical ditch represents, namely, that there are two further aspects besides the modal aspect.[18] Just as Leibniz's theory of knowledge posed the distinction in terms of how truths are known (a priori or a posteriori), there is the related concern regarding whether contingent events in history can be viewed as revelatory of religious truth, since the underlying Enlightenment premise holds that religious truths are known by reason and thus are necessary. Enlightenment thinkers were uneasy with the notion of 'historical revelation', since for them it combined opposed concepts: that which is historical is by its nature unique and particular, occurring at a certain time and place; whereas religious truths, being universal in scope and domain, must be universally accessible, and since only necessary truths are universally accessible to rational reason, religious truths must also be necessary.[19] Let us call this second aspect the *rationalist* aspect of the metaphysical ditch.

Finally, there is still a third aspect of the metaphysical ditch which seems identical to the modal aspect yet notes the *theological* manoeuvre involved in the transition from historical truths to Christological claims. Such transitions seem to land one halfway between contingent truths and necessary truths, since Christological claims 'are not necessary truths' in the Leibnizian sense, yet they are 'radically different from normal historical assertions'.[20] Lessing's difficulty here may come from his equation of all religious (and thus theological) truths with necessary truths, but it seems appropriate to distinguish them in a way Lessing does not. Let us term this the *dogmatic* aspect of the metaphysical ditch.

The existential gap

The third ditch is the existential ditch, which involves the 'problem of religious appropriation'. This ditch concerns the 'conditions necessary for an individual's successfully apprehending, accepting, and perhaps even understanding the religious message', which may seem 'dubious, strange, or fantastic'.[21] Also important to the existential ditch as Lessing presents it is his use of the image of 'binding', foreshadowing the Enlightenment concern of autonomy.[22] Notice Lessing's unease in this regard:

> But since the truth of these miracles has completely ceased to be demonstrable by miracles still happening now, since they are no more than reports of miracles (even though they be narratives which have not been, and cannot be, impugned), I deny that they can and should bind me to the very least faith in the other teachings of Christ. What then does bind me? Nothing but these teachings themselves.[23]

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Here Lessing exploits the problem of temporal distance to highlight the issue of the place of authority, and particularly, *where* authority may be said to reside. Though Lessing himself does not fill this in, he directs us toward the answer which the Enlightenment bequeathed to us, wherein the individual self gains unprecedented import as the 'criterion for what can be considered truly revelatory'.[24] If the temporal gap can be (crudely) summarized as questioning the 'what' and 'when' of historical revelation, and the metaphysical gap as questioning the 'how' of relating the historical to the religious, then this final existential gap can be represented as questioning the 'why': *Why* should I accept and appropriate this strange religious message? Why should I consider it to be binding upon me? Clearly, this gap embodies the most personal element and is related to one's reasons for feeling the desire or need to choose this personal appropriation.

The triadic structure of the gaps

Let me sum up and arrange the framework of the three ditches and the metaphysical ditch's three aspects to offer some clarity.[25] I propose that we view these three ditches in a kind of succession, with the three aspects of the metaphysical ditch arranged such that the rationalist and dogmatic aspects form a point of overlap or contact between the ditches:

Temporal — Metaphysical — Existential
rationalist — modal — dogmatic

These contact points serve as 'transitional' stages or intermediary points which highlight the shared concerns of each ditch.[26] The rationalist aspect involves the uneasy conjunction of the particularity of contingent, historical truth as revelation with seemingly universal, necessary, religious truth, and is thus related on the one side to the temporal ditch's problem of historical particularity, and on the other, to the metaphysical ditch's modal aspect in its embrace of the applicability of necessary truths. Similarly, the dogmatic aspect stems from the difficulty of existentially appropriating heteronomous theological dogmas, which seem contrary to the definition of natural religion's necessary truths; it is related both to the necessary truths of the modal aspect on the one side, as well as the existential ditch's problem of the autonomous self's appropriation of a heteronomous message. This structure demonstrates the (literal) centrality of the contingent–necessary distinction for Lessing, and hence it becomes apparent how much of the structure hinges on it; thus his infamous ditch is mainly a 'modal gap'.

The remainder of this essay will focus on Kierkegaard's response to Lessing's ditches in the writings of his pseudonym Climacus. I suggest that the triadic organizational structure of Kierkegaard's response signals his awareness of the

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threefold nature of the problem; especially relevant will be the extent to which Kierkegaard's own emphases are detectable within this organization, by which he seeks to reframe and adjust the problems.

Climacus's response to Lessing

In the foregoing I have referred to both Kierkegaard and Climacus, but in what follows I will refer only to Climacus, heeding Kierkegaard's request in the *Postscript's* 'first and last explanation': 'Therefore, if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author's name, not mine'.[27] This will mitigate the difficulties present in interpreting Kierkegaard's pseudonymous work in our current context. The case can be made that Climacus speaks for Kierkegaard in these works,[28] but I will not take a stand on this issue here.

First off, it must be recognized that *Fragments* and *Postscript* are organized into sections which seem to deal mainly with each of Lessing's three ditches. Climacus divides the problem of the truth of Christianity into *objective* and *subjective* problems, as is clear from the division in the *Postscript* between parts 1 and 2, on the objective issue and subjective issue, respectively.[29] Under the objective problem, he further distinguishes between *historical* and *philosophical* truth: 'objectively understood, truth can signify: (1) historical truth, (2) philosophical truth'.[30] Thus with parts 1 and 2, and the further divisions within the objective problem of part 1, we already have the makings of the triadic structure of Climacus's organization. *Fragments*, in introducing the question as a highly abstract 'thought-project', primarily considers the objective–historical problem; the first part of *Postscript* treats the objective–philosophical problem; and the second (and largest) part of the *Postscript* deals with the subjective problem.[31]

Yet even this is too simplistic, since *Fragments* does treat the philosophical problem, just as the first part of *Postscript* considers issues of temporal distance. Still, one can roughly characterize Climacus's acknowledgement of Lessing's ditches in the following way:

Temporal	Metaphysical	Existential
↓	↓	↓
(objective)		(subjective)
historical	philosophical	subjectivity/religious appropriation
Fragments	*Postscript*, pt 1	*Postscript*, pt 2

Climacus's organization seems to identify, if only implicitly, the challenge Lessing has presented. However, Climacus's actual placement of section 1 on Lessing in *Postscript* under 'Part 2 – The Subjective Issue' would seem to belie

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the above categorization: it might be better placed under part 1's objective issue, since Climacus is there still dealing with Lessing's temporal and metaphysical problems, both of which are 'objective' by his own demarcation.[32] Yet it will become clear that this is indicative of Climacus's overall approach to subsume the objective problem into the subjective problem, and thus, in view of his strategy, it may yet be appropriate as it is.

It will also become clear that although Climacus adopts Lessing's triadic structure, he disagrees sharply with Lessing over where the primary emphasis in the structure should be placed. While he agrees with Lessing about historical certainty and the incommensurability between contingency and necessity, Climacus thinks that too much weight given to objective problems detracts from the essence of what it is to be (and become) a Christian subjectively. In this way Lessing becomes a respected dialogue-partner, yet also a disoriented thinker who provides an illustration, and signpost, for the path one should *not* take in contrast to the route Climacus wants to travel.[33]

An apt starting point for noticing these differences is to consider the significant questions on Climacus's title page to *Fragments*: '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?'[34] These signal Climacus's intention to address Lessing's problems, insofar as they seem to parallel Lessing's well-known distinction, adverted to earlier, between the 'accidental truths of history' and the 'necessary truths of reason'. But notice the change Climacus has made in the wording: 'eternal' has been substituted for 'necessary'. This modification is highly significant, since it represents Climacus's way of seeing the problems differently from Lessing, and locates the fundamental disagreement between them. By moving from 'necessary' to 'eternal', Climacus abandons the modal distinction which Lessing viewed to be so relevant, and effectively shifts the ground on which the argument plays out, moving away from the very point on which Lessing's view turns.[35] This shift should be borne in mind as we proceed through Climacus's own thoughts on each of the three ditches.

Contemporaneity and the temporal gap

Climacus's 'thought-project' in *Fragments* is to consider the question of how the truth can be learned.[36] He puts forth the Socratic picture which posits that truth is intrinsic to and resides within the learner, and the teacher merely helps the student in recollection. But Climacus wants to go beyond Socrates, and develops an alternative model: the truth comes from a transcendent God, who gives to the finite human learner God's incarnated self from whom to learn, as well as the condition requisite for comprehending this truth. Thus

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Climacus writes, 'if the learner is to obtain the truth, the teacher must bring it to him, but not only that. Along with it, he must provide him with the condition for understanding it'.[37] In this sense, the God of which Climacus writes is both 'teacher and saviour'.[38]

The two sticking points for Lessing in this regard would be that God becomes incarnate *in time* (historical-temporal problem), and that *God* becomes incarnate in time (metaphysical problem). Climacus handles the first, and in particular Lessing's concern of temporal distance, by considering the issue of contemporaneity.[39] Climacus, as Lessing, speaks of the difference between the contemporary to the teacher and the non-contemporary, or 'the follower at second hand'. Recall that this was Lessing's first objection, namely, the empiricist complaint that being temporally removed from some important historical claim of supernatural acts means that such a 'fact' cannot be verified, and one must be content to rely upon 'reports' of supernatural phenomena. Climacus essentially agrees with Lessing regarding this view of history:

> If that fact is regarded as a simple historical fact, then being contemporary counts for something, and it is an advantage to be contemporary, or to be as close as possible, or to be able to assure oneself of the reliability of the contemporaries, etc. Every historical fact is only a relative fact, and therefore it is entirely appropriate for the relative power, time, to decide the relative fates of people with respect to contemporaneity.[40]

In *Postscript*, Climacus again claims that 'with regard to the historical the greatest certainty is only an *approximation*', and that even 'if all the angels united, they would still be able to produce only an approximation, because in historical knowledge an approximation is the only certainty'.[41]

But Climacus is approaching the issue differently: whereas for Lessing, historical claims of supernatural-religious significance require more certainty, which cannot be attained, Climacus thinks there is an 'essential misrelation' between approximations of mere historical knowledge 'and a personal, infinite interestedness in one's own eternal happiness',[42] such that it is no longer a question of *mere* historical judgement. Rather, with faith there is a passionate, infinite interest, and so, in contrast to Lessing, Climacus insists that historical 'certainty and passion do not hitch up as a team'.[43]

Thus, Climacus has already distinguished his approach from Lessing's in two ways. First, he emphasizes that there is a condition given by the incarnate God which creates in the learner the possibility of understanding the historical event, regardless of temporal location. The role of the reception of this condition from God can be seen in the following passage:

> Just as the historical becomes the occasion for the contemporary to become a follower – by receiving the condition, please note, from the god himself … – so the report of the contemporaries becomes the occasion for everyone coming later to become a follower – by receiving the condition, please note, from the god himself.[44]

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In this sense, the contemporary eyewitness is no better off than the person at second hand, because either one must receive the condition of understanding in order to become a *follower* of the teacher. Climacus notes that 'it is easy for the contemporary learner to become a historical eyewitness, but the trouble is that knowing a historical fact … by no means makes the eyewitness a follower, which is understandable, because such knowledge means nothing more to him than the historical'.[45] The follower is characterized not by her visual ability to see and observe the teacher at first hand, but by seeing with the 'eyes of faith': the follower as believer 'is a contemporary in the *autopsy* of faith. But in this autopsy, every non-contemporary (in the sense of immediacy) is in turn a contemporary'.[46] 'Autopsy' in this literal, etymological sense is the personal act of seeing,[47] which is part of the faith given in the condition. Hence there 'is no follower at second hand', for the 'first and last generation are essentially alike'[48] in that they both require reception of the condition: God 'gave the follower the condition to see it and opened for him the eyes of faith'.[49]

Second, Climacus emphasizes that, since everything hinges on this given condition, critical enquiry into the historical facts takes on only secondary importance; this is the essential misrelation between faith and (historical) certainty. One does not believe on the basis of any reliability, but on the basis of the condition:

> Only the person who personally receives the condition from the god, … only that person believes. If he believes (that is, fancies that he believes) because many good, honest people here on the hill have believed … then he is a fool … . If the trustworthiness of the contemporary is to have any interest for him, … his interest must be in regard to something historical. … If the fact of which we speak were a simple historical fact, the historiographer's scrupulous accuracy would be of great importance. This is not the case here, for faith cannot be distilled from even the finest detail.[50]

For Climacus, faith has no direct need for critical reconstruction of historical facts, for this faith simply posits that God became human in time, which historical study cannot itself verify anyway; it is 'here that the historical in the more concrete sense is inconsequential'.[51] Against Lessing, Climacus affirms that 'faith is not a knowledge', but the 'follower, however, is in faith related to that teacher in such a way that he is eternally occupied with his historical existence'.[52] This mention of the eternal leads us into the next section.

Eternity and the metaphysical gap

So much for the temporal gap. Climacus's reconfiguration of the issues places faith at the centre, which brings all followers into contemporaneity with Christ, and this faith conceives the infinite interest in the eternal truth on which eternal happiness is built. Yet this eternal truth occurs within time; so Climacus

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must deal with Lessing's invocation of the contingent–necessary distinction which disjunctively relates historical events and religious truth.

As Michalson points out, Lessing's rationalist view of religion dictates that historical events, if they have religious significance, have such significance due not to their character of theological eventfulness, but as expressive of the deeper, necessary religious truths to which they point: history acts as the 'primer' or 'clothing and style' of abstract necessary truths previously unknown.[53] Climacus, perhaps in playful allusion to this picture of history as attire, cites his project in the *Postscript* as addressing the question of Christianity by clothing it 'in historical costume'.[54] (Note that Kierkegaard, in a draft of the final paragraph of *Fragments*, writes that he intends in the *Postscript* 'to name the child by its right name and give the question its historical costume'.[55]) Here it is evident that the temporal-historical issue is not one of mere distance (although this was present in *Fragments*), but for Climacus it serves to ground the metaphysical-religious claim of eternal happiness.

Climacus does not dispute Lessing's identification of historical moments as accidental, contingent events. Instead, Climacus embraces the contingency of history as a step in his overall response to Lessing, since for Climacus history is not decisively inferior to the truth which faith sees; indeed, history is the vehicle by which theological truth is communicated. In the Interlude in *Fragments*, Climacus takes up these questions of contingency and historical events as 'coming into existence'.

It is important to see the Interlude as representing the temporal distance to which Lessing pointed: in the structure of *Fragments*, it separates 'the situation of the contemporary follower' (Chapter 4), from 'the follower at second hand' (Chapter 5), and thus it symbolizes the 1,800 years between the contemporary disciple of Christ and Climacus's reader.[56] As it relates to our purposes, the thrust of the Interlude is to consider the metaphysical distinction between necessity and contingency, which forms the backbone of Lessing's objection.[57] Climacus points out that the character of the historical is contingency: the crucial historical predicate is that it has 'come into existence'.[58] And since 'the change of coming into existence is the transition from possibility to actuality',[59] then these are the only appropriate modal categories to apply to the historical. In other words, Climacus is implying that necessity is inherently unfit as regards the historical. Necessity as Lessing invokes it smacks of the 'epistemological certainty' of logic, but 'the world of logic leaves everything as it is; authentic ''change'' occurs only in the historical realm'.[60] Coming into existence cannot involve necessity but only possibility, and as such the possibilities involve freedom.

Now what can all this mean? It would seem that Climacus, in suggesting a deep incommensurability between contingency and necessity has given the game to Lessing. But not quite yet. Although Climacus is conceding the

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uncertainty that results from a 'permanent corrigibility'[61] of historical knowledge, he is also gaining a leg-up on Lessing: it enables Climacus to introduce the category of 'belief'. Belief, says Climacus, is 'the organ for the historical', which 'must have within itself the corresponding something by which in its certitude it continually annuls the incertitude that corresponds to the uncertainty of coming into existence … . This precisely is the nature of belief … belief believes what it does not see'.[62] Climacus maintains that 'belief is not a knowledge but an act of freedom, an expression of the will': 'It believes the ''thus and so'' of that which has come into existence and has annulled in itself the possible ''how'' of that which has come into existence'.[63] The believer accepts the 'what' of the theologically-laden historical event, without doubting its 'how'.

On Climacus's view, belief collaborates with faith, and it is here that the seeds of an answer to the metaphysical ditch are to be found. For Climacus, it will not do to treat the issue as an objective problem of reconciling two separate genres of contingency and necessity as categories of truth-knowledge; this is to dwell too heavily on the modal aspect of the metaphysical gap, and it does not permit the most important category of knowledge, namely, the truth which resonates with one inwardly and subjectively, on which eternal happiness is built. We need not locate necessity in the historical, as Hegel would have it, but can instead insist that 'a human being is a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal', since we are infinitely, passionately interested in our personal eternal happiness.[64] Incredibly, in the Incarnation 'the paradox specifically unites the contradictories, [and] is the eternalizing of the historical and the historicizing of the eternal',[65] but a preoccupation with the objective how-it-can-be-so is to miss the point:

> The trouble … is that in its paradoxical form the truth of Christianity has something in common with the nettle: the solid, sensible subject only stings himself when he wants to grasp it summarily in this way, or rather … he does not grasp it at all; he grasps its objective truth so objectively that he himself remains outside.[66]

Climacus also employs an apt metaphor of sawing wood to illustrate the speculative philosophical thinker's tendency toward the objective answers:

> In sawing wood, one should not press down too hard on the saw; the lighter the touch of the sawer, the better the saw functions. If one presses down on the saw with all one's might, one will never manage to saw at all. Similarly, the speculative thinker should make himself objectively light, but whoever is impassionedly, infinitely interested in his eternal happiness makes himself as subjectively heavy as possible.[67]

Thus, Climacus rejects Lessing's appeal to objective verifiability and philosophical necessity: he denies Lessing's identification of religious truth with the necessary truths of reason, and he considers Lessing's approach too objective

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in that it seeks a proof or demonstration before the assent of belief or faith. Climacus acknowledges with Lessing that such demonstrations are not forthcoming, but denies their relevance for the individual's faith, replacing objective concerns of necessity with subjective concerns of eternity. One might say that while Lessing focuses on the modal aspect of the metaphysical gap, Climacus's strategy is to see the problem as more of a piece with the dogmatic aspect, which in turn is quite related to the existential gap itself, where Climacus's true focus lies.

Subjectivity and the existential gap

For Climacus, the existential gap represents that which is most crucial about a religion whose theology is nonetheless based on a transcendent God revealed through historical events and attested to by historical documents. We have seen that Climacus embraces 'a particular historical moment – the incarnation – as theologically determinative', yet 'draws on the unique character of faith's object as a way of neutralizing the effects of temporal distance … simultaneously demonstrating the indispensability of a historical moment for faith *and* the irrelevance of empirical enquiry into that historical moment'.[68] He can make such moves because of the momentous weight he gives to the subjective role of religious appropriation.

The role of the chapter on possible/actual theses by Lessing in part 2 of the *Postscript* seems to be to introduce the relevance of the subjectively existing thinker and the duplexity of its corresponding notions of thought-existence and the double-reflection of communication. It is here that Climacus begins his long deliberation on the theme that 'truth is inwardness; objectively there is no truth, but the appropriation is the truth'.[69] This appropriation hinges on the subject's *decision*, which for Climacus becomes the paradigmatic language[70] of crossing the existential ditch. As Climacus puts it, 'when the issue becomes objective, there is no question of eternal happiness, because this lies precisely in subjectivity and in decision'.[71] This decision Climacus sometimes calls the 'moment', the point at which the individual subjectively appropriates the paradoxical religious message.[72]

For Lessing, this problem of decision for faith surfaced as the religious appropriation of a modal distinction he could not swallow. Above all, Lessing seemed to want the religion to sit well with his intellect, which is why he focused on the objective issues. Climacus acknowledges with sympathy such a desire, and accounts for it when he portrays faith as the 'happy passion' which 'occurs when the understanding and the paradox happily encounter each other in the moment, when understanding steps aside and the paradox gives itself'.[73] This then was Lessing's problem: he could not let his understanding step aside. And though Lessing stated he could not accept that

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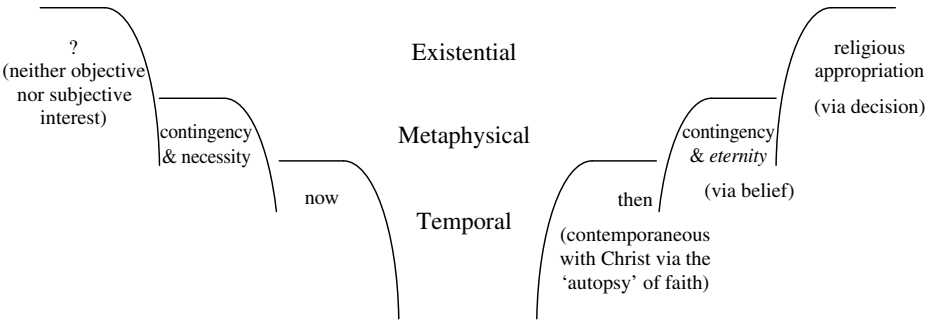
against which his reason rebels, Climacus also understands this, and integrates it into the entire process: the offence of reason, which is the 'unhappy relation' to the paradox,[74] must be embraced rather than rejected. The paradox 'requires faith *against the understanding*', for 'the narrow gate to the hard way of faith is offence'.[75]

In one sense, Climacus brings us back full-circle to the contemporaneity solution when he relates one's own decision for faith, and the transition into it, to one's becoming contemporary to 'Christianity's entry into the world': it requires 'the most terrible of all decisions in a person's life', and this 'corresponds to the transitional situation contemporary with Christianity coming into the world'.[76] This decision is 'most terrible' due to its intensely personal nature as subjective and existential, and because the stakes are those of eternal happiness. While the objective problem centres on historical approximation and philosophical deliberation, the subjective issue requires appropriation: 'The decision rests in the subject: the appropriation is the paradoxical inwardness that is specifically different from all other inwardness. Being a Christian is not defined by the ''what'' of Christianity but by the ''how'' of the Christian. This ''how'' can only fit one thing, the absolute paradox.'[77] Note here the important distinction between the 'what' of Christian*ity* and the 'how' of the Christ*ian*; this highlights Climacus's concern for the subjective individual's relation to, in, and with the Christian faith.

But the existential gap was also posited as a hiatus created by the 'why' question, in particular, why such a religious message would be binding upon the individual. As far as I can tell, Climacus does not directly take up this concern.[78] But perhaps Climacus's subjective answer follows from the ways in which he has already dealt with the temporal and metaphysical gaps: he has made room for the decisive historical revelation of the transcendent God's incarnation and teaching. If this is accepted, it may be of little dispute that such revelation is authoritative for the individual, to whom God calls for appropriation in the decision of faith.

This is not the place to explore in detail Climacus's view of subjectivity, which would take us beyond the scope of this essay. It is sufficient to observe that Climacus, though aware of the several problems Lessing raises, approaches the issue not as Lessing conveys the ditch(es), as being one great divide, or even as three successive ditches one must traverse in turn. Rather, Climacus's solution indicates that in crossing the most important existential ditch, one leaps over them all: on the spatial metaphor of the ditch, one could say that Climacus sees the gaps more as vertically stratified, and recognizes that clearing one particular gap (the existential ditch) actually gets one to where one wants to be.

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This diagram identifies, in a rough way, the 'ground' on opposite ends of each ditch, that is, where Lessing begins the problems, and where, as we have seen, Climacus suggests the answers reside. If our initial depiction of Lessing's ditches had them side by side, with points of overlap and transition, this diagram represents Climacus's reformulation which gives primacy to the existential ditch, yet sees them all as integrally related. Here, leaping the existential ditch obviates the other two gaps without thereby avoiding them; for on Climacus's view it is not enough to cross merely the existential ditch, though in doing so one does cross the others. This diagram also portrays how Climacus's answers all comprise subjective responses, even to the 'objective' problems, which are rooted in the condition of faith, and which would seem to be the best answers one can give on a matter of this kind.

Conclusion

We have seen the multifaceted nature of the problem Lessing presents, including the distinct objections of the temporal, metaphysical, and existential gaps. I have tried to show that Climacus's organization and structure of *Fragments* and *Postscript* lends plausibility to the thesis that Climacus is responding to these gaps in kind, though he divides the problem broadly into objective and subjective sides. Climacus diverges from Lessing in his treatment of the modal aspect of the metaphysical ditch, and thus it can be seen to form the heart of the issue. The modal gap consists, on the one hand, in Lessing's emphasis upon the contingent–necessary distinction as it relates to historical vs religious truths, and on the other Climacus's refusal of these terms as an adequate depiction of Christian theological truths. Climacus maintains that Christian theology is properly grounded in contingent history, which for him demonstrates the sovereignty of a transcendent God who in grace opts for human incarnation as a means of sending the teacher for humankind to learn from (epistemological), and which also provides the condition of faith for understanding (ontological). It is precisely because Christian theology is brought home

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to the individual in existential appropriation (and *not* through assent to objective truths) that the subjective answer is Climacus's response to Lessing. In providing this subjective alternative, Climacus implies that Lessing's orientation is misguided, and that Lessing's undue preoccupation with the objective issues of historical and philosophical truths is what gets him into his worrisome position.[79]

Notes

1. Gotthold Lessing *Lessing's Theological Writings*, Henry Chadwick (ed. & tr.) (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1956), 55. I also cite the recent Cambridge edition: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing *Lessing's Philosophical and Theological Writings*, H. B. Nisbet (ed. & tr.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87. Hereafter I cite both these editions consecutively, with page references offset by a semi-colon.
2. For an important overview of the standpoints on the relationship between Lessing and Kierkegaard, and some of the pertinent (mostly German) literature, see Claus V. Bormann 'Lessing', in Niels Thulstrup and Marie Mikulová Thulstrup (eds) *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana: Kierkegaard's Teachers* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag, 1982), 135–157, as well as André Kraus *Kierkegaard und Lessing: Soren Aabye Kierkegaards Rekurs auf Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in den 'Philosophischen Brocken' und der 'Abschließenden unwissenschaftlichen Nachschrift zu den Philosophischen Brocken'* (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2003). The following also include a focus on Lessing and Kierkegaard: Erik Lunding 'Lessing und Kierkegaard', *Orbis Litterarum*, **2** (1944), 158–187; Jacques Colette 'Kierkegaard et Lessing', *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, **44** (1960), 3–39; Sven-Aage Jørgensen 'Lessing in Dänemark: Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Grundtvig und Kierkegaard', in Wilfried Barner and Albert M. Reh (eds) *Nation und Gelehrtenrepublik: Lessing im europäischen Zusammenhang* (Detroit/Munich: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 313–324; Michelle Stott *Behind the Mask: Kierkegaard's Pseudonymic Treatment of Lessing in the* Concluding Unscientific Postscript (Lewisburg PA: Bucknell University Press, 1993); Alastair Hannay 'Having Lessing on one's side', *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, **12** (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 205–226; M. Jamie Ferreira 'Faith and the Kierkegaardian leap', in Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 207–234; Jan-Olav Henriksen *The Reconstruction of Religion: Lessing, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Richard Campbell 'Lessing's problem and Kierkegaard's answer', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, **19** (1966), 35–54; James Whisenant 'Kierkegaard's use of Lessing', *Modern Theology*, **6** (1990), 259–272; Gordon E. Michalson, Jr 'Lessing, Kierkegaard, and the 'ugly ditch': a reexamination', *Journal of Religion*, **59** (1979), 324–334; *idem* 'Theology, historical knowledge, and the contingency-necessity distinction', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **14** (1983), 87–98; *idem Lessing's 'Ugly Ditch': A Study of Theology and History* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985); *idem* 'Kierkegaard's debt to Lessing: response to Whisenant', *Modern Theology*, **6** (1990), 379–384. Of these, only the latter three (Campbell, Whisenant, and Michalson) engage in sustained examination of Lessing's multifaceted ditch(es) and Kierkegaard's reply, to which this essay hopes to contribute. For an excellent work on Lessing himself, see Toshimasa Yasukata *Lessing's Philosophy of Religion and the German Enlightenment* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2002).
3. That *Fragments* (as well as *Postscript*) has to do with Lessing is clear from the fact that Kierkegaard contemplated the following subtitle to *Fragments*: 'The Apologetical Presuppositions of Christian Dogmatics, or Approximations to Faith. Para. 1 *An Expression of Gratitude to Lessing*'. See Søren Kierkegaard *Philosophical Fragments*, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), xvii, and Supplement, 217. Kierkegaard integrated this subtitle into the *Postscript*'s introduction, and the expression of gratitude to Lessing becomes the subtitle of ch. 1 of Part 2. See *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to* Philosophical Fragments, 2 vols, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 15 and 63. (Unless otherwise noted, all further citations to *Postscript* refer to vol. 1.).

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4. Note that I am not arguing that Lessing is the primary target of Climacus, nor that Lessing is at the centre of the project. I am rather presenting the strong case that Lessing is not merely peripheral.
5. Michalson *Lessing's 'Ugly Ditch'*, 3, 8–20.
6. Lessing 52; 84 (italics mine).
7. *Ibid.*, 52; 84–85.
8. David Hume *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3rd edn, L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 115–116, and 112.
9. Lessing 53; 85.
10. C. Stephen Evans noted these first two ditches, which he dubbed the epistemological and metaphysical ditches, in *Kierkegaard's 'Fragments' and 'Postscript': The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), 248f. Cf. also Campbell 'Lessing's problem', 42f., as well as Chadwick's introduction in the Stanford edition of Lessing *Theological Writings*, 31f.
11. Michalson *Lessing's 'Ugly Ditch'*, 8, 10–14.
12. Lessing 53; 85 (italics in original).
13. *Ibid.*, 54; 86.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 54; 87.
16. See Chadwick's introduction in the Stanford edition, 30.
17. Gottfried Leibnitz *Monadology*, 33; cited from Benjamin Rand (ed.) *Modern Classical Philosophers*, 2nd edn (Cambridge MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), 204 (italics in original).
18. These three aspects are delineated in Michalson *Lessing's 'Ugly Ditch'*, 10–12; the labels, however, are mine.
19. One way to relate these two dichotomous truths of history and religion was to claim that revelation is expressive of universal, necessary truths, but is not constitutive of them; Lessing conveys this in §4 of 'The education of the human race', when he writes that 'revelation gives nothing to the human race which human reason could not arrive at on its own; only it has given, and still gives to it, the most important of these things sooner'; Lessing 83; 218.
20. See Michalson *Lessing's 'Ugly Ditch'*, 11.
21. *Ibid.*, 14, 15.
22. See *ibid.*, 11, 15. I am well aware that Kant coined the term 'autonomous', but it seems plausible that this was a concept Lessing understood, especially since they were writing in Germany during the same period (1770s–1780s). On the history of moral and political philosophy relating to Kant and the notion of autonomy, see J. B. Schneewind *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. part 4. Perhaps surprisingly, Lessing is not mentioned in this massive book, save in a single footnote (501).
23. Lessing 55; 87.
24. Michalson *Lessing's 'Ugly Ditch'*, 17. Michalson considers Lessing representative of 'a stage in this development of a new view of the religious self … because of his appeal to the inner truth of authentic religion'; this 'signals the modern turn ''inward''' (16).
25. In what follows I expand upon Michalson's formulation in my development of the aspects of overlap and transition; Michalson has expressed his approbation of this approach in personal correspondence.
26. Kierkegaard readers should notice the resemblance between this triadic structure and Kierkegaard's three 'stages' or 'spheres' of existence, developed in *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way*:

Aesthetic		Ethical		Religious
	irony		humour	

This structural similarity, though remarkable, seems coincidental, and at any rate is not the focus of this paper.

27. Kierkegaard *Postscript*, [627].
28. For example, see Patrick Gardiner *Kierkegaard: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 70; and Niels Thulstrup *Commentary on Kierkegaard's* Concluding Unscientific Postscript *with a New Introduction*, Robert J. Widenmann (tr.) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 112–113.

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29. The full titles of these parts are 'Part one: The objective issue of the truth of Christianity' (*Postscript*, 19), and 'Part two: The subjective issue, the subjective individual's relation to the truth of Christianity, or becoming a Christian' (*Postscript*, 59).
30. Kierkegaard *Postscript*, 21.
31. On this, see Michalson *Lessing's 'Ugly Ditch'*, 65.
32. Moreover, it is probable that Climacus has in mind Grundtvig, rather than Lessing, as the primary concern of part one; this would also help account for Climacus's placement of section 1 on Lessing outside of part one (thanks to an anonymous referee here).
33. It is important to distinguish between the fact that Kierkegaard respects and follows Lessing on other issues, and yet largely disagrees with him regarding the issues presented here. Kierkegaard clearly considers Lessing to have great insight in other areas (e.g. on indirect communication), and seeks to emulate and ally himself with Lessing. For more, see Hannay 'Having Lessing on one's side', *passim*.
34. Kierkegaard *Fragments*, (title page).
35. For more on Climacus's readjustment of the problems Lessing posed, see Jan-Olav Henriksen *The Reconstruction of Religion*, 88–90.
36. Kierkegaard *Fragments*, 9.
37. *Ibid*., 14.
38. *Ibid*., 23–36.
39. It is worth noting that Kierkegaard cites or develops the concept of contemporaneity in several other works, most prominently in *Practice in Christianity*, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), esp. 36–53, 62–66, and 96–97, and in *The Book on Adler*, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (eds) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), esp. 38–39, 46–47, and Supplement, 261–262.
40. Kierkegaard *Fragments*, 99.
41. *Idem Postscript*, 23, 30 (italics in original).
42. *Ibid*., 24.
43. *Ibid*., 29.
44. *Idem Fragments*, 100.
45. *Ibid*., 59.
46. *Ibid*., 102, 70.
47. See *ibid*., 296, n. 39.
48. *Ibid*., 104–105. Cf. also *Postscript*, 38.
49. Kierkegaard *Fragments*, 65.
50. *Ibid*., 103.
51. *Ibid*., 59.
52. *Ibid*., 62.
53. Michalson *Lessing's 'Ugly Ditch'*, 32. These phrases of Lessing's come from his essay 'On the education of the human race' (§§47 and 48), in Lessing, 91; 229–230.
54. Kierkegaard *Fragments*, 109; *Postscript*, 10, 15, and 284.
55. Kierkegaard *Fragments* Supplement, 217.
56. See *Fragments*, 72–88.
57. I am well aware that in the Interlude Climacus also has in mind the peculiar Hegelian view of history, which insisted on the logical necessity of historical events. On this see Robert C. Roberts *Faith, Reason, and History: Rethinking Kierkegaard's* Philosophical Fragments (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 103–104, 107–108.
58. Kierkegaard *Fragments*, 75; cf. also 87.
59. *Ibid*., 74.
60. Michalson *Lessing's 'Ugly Ditch'*, 75.
61. *Ibid*., 76.
62. Kierkegaard *Fragments*, 81.
63. *Ibid*., 83. Climacus here is pointing up the volitional, rather than cognitive, character of belief. Hence, 'The conclusion of belief is no conclusion [*Slutning*] but a resolution [*Beslutning*], and thus doubt is excluded' (84).
64. Kierkegaard *Postscript*, 56.
65. *Idem Fragments*, 61.

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66. *Idem Postscript*, 47.
67. *Ibid*., 57. Similarly: 'If Christianity is essentially something objective, it behooves the observer to be objective. But if Christianity is essentially subjectivity, it is a mistake if the observer is objective' (*ibid*., 53).
68. Michalson *Lessing's 'Ugly Ditch'*, 74, 88.
69. Kierkegaard *Postscript*, 77.
70. Related is Climacus's frequent use of 'leap', which Climacus may use precisely because of Lessing's famous statement; yet in *Postscript*, Climacus says 'the leap is the category of decision' (99). Cf. Ferreira 'Faith and the Kierkegaardian leap', 207–234.
71. Kierkegaard *Postscript*, 116 (footnote).
72. See *idem Fragments*, *passim*, which centres on whether 'the moment is to have decisive significance' (esp. 20–21, 25, and 64); also *Postscript*, 573, 584.
73. Kierkegaard *Fragments*, 59. Cf. 54, 61.
74. *Ibid*., 49ff.
75. Kierkegaard *Postscript*, 585 (italics mine). Cf. *Postscript* Supplement (vol. 2), 99.
76. *Postscript*, 372–373. Cf. *idem The Book on Adler*, 38–39, 43–45.
77. *Postscript*, 610–611.
78. Though he does consider the motivation of 'eternal punishment', which would make something historical decisive for eternal un/happiness: Kierkegaard *Postscript*, 94–95.
79. I am grateful to Andrew Dole, John Hare, Gordon Michalson, Alan Wong, Peter Byrne, and an anonymous referee for this journal for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay; and to Jon Stewart, Darío González, and Jonathan Knutzen for their assistance with some of the German literature.

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