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# Kierkegaardian Meditations on First Philosophy: A Reading of *Johannes Climacus*

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I have, alas, studied philosophy,  
Jurisprudence and medicine, too,  
And, worst of all, theology  
With keen endeavor, through and through—  
And here I am, for all my lore,  
The wretched fool I was before.  
Called Master of Arts, and Doctor to boot,  
For ten years almost I confute  
And up and down, wherever it goes,  
I drag my students by the nose—  
And see for all our science and art  
We can know nothing. It burns my heart.  
Goethe, *Faust*<sup>1</sup>

The possibility of doubt is essential to existence, is the secret of human existence.  
Søren Kierkegaard<sup>2</sup>

THE GENERAL AIM of this paper is twofold: first, to provide a careful reading of one of Kierkegaard's less familiar early writings, *Johannes Climacus, Or, De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*; second, to determine what significance this text has for a comprehensive interpretation of Kierkegaard's total life-view (*Livsanskuelse*).

The characterization of the life-view sought after by Kierkegaard in his

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, bilingual edition, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961), 93.

<sup>2</sup> *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer* (hereafter abbreviated as P), ed. A. B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg, and H. O. Lange (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1909–48), IV B 10:11.

writings may be more closely determined through the consideration of a life-view gone wrong. For, as Kierkegaard reasons: "In order to see one light determinately, we always need another light. For if we imagined ourselves in total darkness and then a single spot of light appeared, we would be unable to determine the position of this light without a relation to another."<sup>3</sup> Through the difference doubt presents to irony, readers may gain a deeper insight into the conditions which make for a valid or authentic life-view. As *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*<sup>4</sup> discloses, irony ultimately entails consequences that would provide the foundations for one to be led beyond the clouds to the only genuine human life. No matter what criticisms Kierkegaard makes of his beloved Socrates, it is clear that both thinkers are united in the pursuit of a similar goal. This is expressed in Kierkegaard's fifteenth thesis in *The Concept of Irony*: "As philosophy begins with doubt, so also that life which may be called worthy of a human being begins with irony." This thesis constitutes the original analogy between the concepts of irony and doubt and, what is more, appears to be Kierkegaard's unmistakable appropriation and rewriting of the famous Socratic maxim, "the unexamined life is not worth living."<sup>5</sup> Thus, one may argue that, although irony invokes dialectical ramifications, insofar as it is mastered it conditions the production of positive fruits in the individual.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, doubt, which looks deceptively like irony,<sup>7</sup> operates in the

<sup>3</sup> *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* (hereafter abbreviated JP), trans. Howard and Edna Hong (slightly modified) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967- ), no. 2240; P I A 1.

<sup>4</sup> Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); hereafter referred to as KW II with corresponding reference to SV (*Samlede Vaerker*) XIII (1st ed.).

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Apology*, in *Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Scribner's, 1871), 38A.

<sup>6</sup> Certainly this argument may appear problematic when one considers that since Kierkegaard actually rejects doubt as the beginning of philosophy, it would then be likely for him to reject irony as the beginning of a worthy human life. In this case his fifteenth thesis and the concluding section of *The Concept of Irony*, "Irony as a Controlled Element, the Truth of Irony" could themselves be interpreted as ironic.

To sort out this complexity one would first have to explain how Kierkegaard uses the term "irony" dialectically, and then how his conception of irony, which cannot be separated from his conception of Socrates, undergoes profound changes throughout his development as a writer. For Kierkegaard, irony marks the beginning of subjectivity, but insofar as he did not perceive the "fullness" of Socrates' subjectivity in his dissertation, it is fair to read the passages alluded to above as ironic. However, Kierkegaard embraces Socrates (and irony) much more warmly in his later works, and his view culminates in the certainty that Socrates has become a Christian. These matters are discussed in more detail in my article "How Did Socrates Become a Christian? Irony and a Postmodern Christian (Non)-Ethic," *Philosophy Today* 36 (Fall 1992): 256-65.

<sup>7</sup> It is (perhaps) surprising that Louis Mackey, a usually very perceptive reader of Kierkegaard, gets confused about the relationship between irony and doubt. In *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986) he writes: "It is true at the very least, if it is true at all, that philosophy in the modern age begins with (Descartes') doubt. But the

conceptual realm of “scholarship,” and, unlike irony, holds no practical or personal consequences for an individual. Kierkegaard explains this clearly in his magisterial dissertation:

If we consider irony as it turns against all existence, here again it maintains the contradiction between essence and phenomenon, between the internal and the external. It might seem now that as the absolute negativity it would be identical with doubt. But one must bear two things in mind—first, that doubt is a conceptual qualification, and irony is subjectivity’s being-for-itself; second, that irony is essentially practical, that it is theoretical only in order to become practical again—in other words, it has to do with the irony of itself and not with the irony of the situation. (KW II 257; SV XIII 331)

The absolute negativity of doubt is purely theoretical. Being the cunning dialectician that he is, however, Kierkegaard allows himself a way around this position, for strictly speaking he deals with doubt insofar as it is appropriated and understood by the modern “philosophizers”<sup>8</sup> of his day. With the exception of his few references to the Greeks, when Kierkegaard writes “doubt” he intends the specific designation of “modernist, systematic, or objective doubt.”

Early on in his writing Kierkegaard devotes considerable attention to the study of doubt’s importance for “scholarship.” He even goes so far as to project a work on this alternative beginning from the beginning, the modern beginning with doubt, and sketches out a substantial portion of it. For apparently unknown reasons, however, these meditations are never fully developed, and thus Kierkegaard does not finish or publish the philosophical narrative entitled *Johannes Climacus, Or, De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*. This work has not been granted the attention that it warrants. I hope to remedy this lack by providing a critical, philosophical reading of an important, strictly philosophical text.

In addition to delineating the difference involved in the life-view begun with doubt, the question concerning the reasons behind *Johannes Climacus’s* incompleteness is of more than a passing interest to readers, who can be sure that Kierkegaard had both the time and the ability needed to finish it. This is a work which might very well have been the most philosophically detailed of his writings, had he followed the design he had sketched; as it stands it is a work

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modern age also begins with irony. Therefore (perhaps) doubt equals irony and irony equals doubt. On top of that, the only life worthy to be called human begins with irony, that is, with doubt. The beginning of philosophy is the beginning of modernity is the beginning of humanity equals irony equals doubt. The beginning begins with Socrates as well as with Descartes—and perhaps with the eternal” (3). Mackey’s own uncertainty resounds loudly in this passage. While irony and doubt are analogous, they are not equal (identical). One might say that their similarity consists in dissimilarity, as they mark different beginnings which engender different outcomes.

<sup>8</sup> For the distinction between “philosophizers” and “philosophers” see page 633 below.

whose unfinished totality may make it that much easier for readers to focus their attention primarily on the reading of this writing, which is not so much a finished book as it is a propaedeutic text.

As concerns the publication of *Johannes Climacus, Or, De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* in recent times, my sympathies lie with the French editors and translators, who include it alongside *Le Concept d'ironie constamment rapporté à Socrate* in Tome II of *Oeuvres Complètes de Søren Kierkegaard*.<sup>9</sup> Let me begin by explaining in more detail why I find the French organization to be both fortunate and beneficial.

With regard to the strict chronology of Kierkegaard's writings it is perhaps only fitting that the dates of the composition of *Johannes Climacus* remain in doubt. The general consensus of 1842–43 is arrived at by the early editors of Kierkegaard's collected works (Heiberg and Kuhr), Niels Thulstrup, and the English translators Howard and Edna Hong. The usual evidence for this dating, more precisely given as November 1842 to early 1843, is a passage from Kierkegaard's journal of 1844, in which he writes: "A year and a half ago I began a little essay, *De omnibus dubitandum*, in which I made my first attempt at a little speculative development."<sup>10</sup> No one, of course, can pinpoint exactly when this entry was written, and even if one could, its possible deceptiveness—or, if you prefer, idiosyncrasy—could then be interrogated. The Danish scrivener Henning Fenger, who has argued in the first chapter of his *Kierkegaard-Myter og Kierkegaard-Kilder* (Kierkegaard Myths and Kierkegaard Sources) that Kierkegaard was guilty of falsifying history (as are we all),<sup>11</sup> raises his own critical doubts concerning the "traditional" dating of *Johannes Climacus*. For Fenger, the passage from Kierkegaard's journal quite simply does not prove a thing.<sup>12</sup> He raises the question of when Kierkegaard would have had time to start *Johannes Climacus* while the monstrous *Either/Or* was in the works up until its publication on 18 February 1843. In other words, to pose the question more directly: Was *Johannes Climacus* written before or after *Either/Or*?

<sup>9</sup> Trans. Paul-Henri Tisseau and Else-Marie Jacquet Tisseau (Paris: Éditions de L'Orante, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> P V A 98; JP III 3300. The following sentence reads: "The motivating concept I used was error. Aristotle does the same." This reflection is puzzling and casts a rather dubious shadow on Kierkegaard's reference to *Johannes Climacus* in general, since not once in the text does he mention "error." The relation between error, particularly Descartes's explanation of it, and doubt is not made explicit, but I gather that what Kierkegaard has in mind was that both error and doubt are products of the will.

<sup>11</sup> That Kierkegaard would agree with this position is, I think, indicated by his understanding of the contradictory nature of consciousness, which will be explained below.

<sup>12</sup> *Kierkegaard-Myter og Kierkegaard-Kilder* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1976), 117. Although my references will be to the original, this work has been translated into English. See *Kierkegaard, The Myths and Their Origins*, trans. George C. Schoolfield (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

While the answer to this last question cannot be definitely determined, since portions of *Johannes Climacus* were in all likelihood written both before and after the composition of *Either/Or*, there is more important evidence that weighs in favor of the view that *Johannes Climacus* should be read in connection with the early academic writings, i.e., with *From the Papers of One Still Living*, *The Battle between the Old and the New Soap-Cellars*, and *The Concept of Irony*, not with the pseudonymous works after and including *Either/Or*.

Furthermore, that *Johannes Climacus* should be placed after *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) in the definitive English translation<sup>13</sup> may give rise to certain misconceptions which stem from the understandable, but unfortunately mistaken way of reading the former as if it were written by Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The fact of the matter is that the manuscript title page of *Johannes Climacus* (reproduced in KW VII 228–29) does not include any designation of an author. This third person narrative is, strictly speaking, not pseudonymous, and I consider it highly unlikely that Kierkegaard would have made the Caesarian move of signing “Johannes Climacus” to a work entitled *Johannes Climacus*. He would have either created some other “Simon Stylita,” or—if the philosophical details of this writing had been worked out to the extent that they were in *The Concept of Irony*—he would have signed his own name.

In their “Historical Introduction,” the Hongs write that “although *Philosophical Fragments* is also by Johannes Climacus and was written after *De omnibus dubitandum est*, it is not in direct continuity in substance, tone, and form” (KW VII xv–xvi). Assuming that Kierkegaard took great care in his choice of pseudonyms, this sound impression should have alerted them to the possibility that *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* was not written by Johannes Climacus.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus, Or, De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Hereafter referred to parenthetically as KW VII with the corresponding reference to the Danish *Papirer*. This edition follows the earlier German translation of Kierkegaard's collected works. See *Gesammelte Werke*, Abt. 10, *Philosophische Brocken und De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, trans. Emanuel Hirsch (Düsseldorf: Diederichs, 1952).

This arrangement at least yields the benefit of locating *Johannes Climacus* in the collected writings, unlike the original Danish which assigns it to the *Papirer*, which could be taken as assigning it a somewhat inferior status. Additionally, the Hongs' translation of *Johannes Climacus* obviously improves on the first English one by T. H. Croxall (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), which would seem to insult the intelligence of readers by appending a religious writing, *A Sermon*, to the philosophical one for the purpose of “clarification.”

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the Hongs could have argued for the more natural possibility that *Johannes Climacus* is a philosophical narrative about the student who would become the author of *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. This could account for the discontinuity in “substance, tone, and form.” Still, there is little evidence to support this, except perhaps that Johannes Climacus, the writer, says he is from Copenhagen and Johannes Climacus, the young thinker, is presumably also from Copenhagen (H . . . , i.e., Hafnia, the Latin name for Copenha-

While they search for the differentiae in drafts of *Philosophical Fragments* rather than in the content of *Johannes Climacus*, it is easier to see that the latter work's continuity lies with the early academic writings and Kierkegaard's timely meditations on the need to find a life-view or philosophy of life.

That *Johannes Climacus* has firm roots in Kierkegaard's early philosophical ruminations and in Copenhagen University's academic climate in the 1830s can be textually demonstrated. While Fenger casually remarks without supporting evidence that "there is an unmistakable sign of solidarity between the book on Andersen and the unfinished, philosophical novel *Johannes Climacus, Or, De omnibus dubitandum est*,"<sup>15</sup> I find the relatedness to be more conspicuous between *Johannes Climacus* and Kierkegaard's unfinished play, *The Battle between the Old and the New Soap-Cellars*.<sup>16</sup> There is a certain affinity between the young Willibald, who "had not found himself much edified or satisfied by von Jumping-Jack's philosophical lectures" (KW I 119; P II B 19 301), and the young Johannes Climacus, who, "if he encountered a recent philosophical work, he of course did not lay it aside before he had read it, but when he had read it, he often felt dissatisfied and discouraged" (KW VII 129; P IV B I 112). As these two quotes indicate, both young men find that a consideration of the claims of the (modern speculative) philosophizers fills their consciousness with unhappiness. Who were the philosophizers that vexed these poor young men?

Without wandering outside of the primary source material, the answer may be found in the final paragraph of *The Concept of Irony*, although there it is given an ironic twist, as Kierkegaard commends where he would also condemn. He refers readers who would like "food for afterthought" to Professor Martensen's review of Heiberg's *New Poems* (1841).<sup>17</sup> Careful readers, however, would hardly suspect this food to be high in nutritional value.<sup>18</sup> (Readers might even also suppose that if a man filled his mouth so full with this food, he

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gen). That two men with the same unusual name were contemporary Copenhageners seems very unlikely indeed.

<sup>15</sup> Fenger, *Kierkegaard-Myter og Kierkegaard-Kilder*, 116.

<sup>16</sup> Trans. Julia Watkin in *Early Polemical Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). Throughout this paper I shall refer to this work as *The Soap-Cellars* and parenthetical references will be given to KW I.

The actual date of this work is also unknown. At least three possibilities have been advanced, ranging from 1838 to 1840. See Thulstrup's *Kierkegaards Forhold til Hegel* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1967), 156–71; *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*, trans. George L. Stengren (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 180–200, for a detailed discussion of the dating of this play.

<sup>17</sup> These included four poems: "Divine Service," "A Soul After Death," "The Newly-Weds," and "Protestantism in Nature."

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Lee M. Capel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 342. Capel provides a detailed explanation of Kierkegaard's irony in the last paragraph of note 15, pp. 426–29.

would thereby be prevented from eating and likely to starve, with the consequence that someone would be needed to remove some of the food.<sup>19</sup>) Kierkegaard thus refers ironically to those who are only indirectly implicated in *The Soap-Cellars* and *Johannes Climacus*, i.e., the Danish Hegelians Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791–1860) and Hans Lassen Martensen (1808–1884).

In Kierkegaard's day Heiberg was a cultural leader in Copenhagen, his wife was the prima donna of the theater, and his mother was a recognized author whom Kierkegaard would review in *A Literary Review*. Heiberg was convinced of the truth of Hegel's speculative philosophy, and he had personally gotten to know the philosophical master in Berlin. Although Kierkegaard would protest against Heiberg's views, he held more than a modicum of respect for the man. This cannot be said about Martensen, who is the thinker Kierkegaard continually alluded to with the words "Privatdocent" and "Professor."<sup>20</sup>

Fenger explains the academic/cultural situation as follows:

At any rate, *De omnibus dubitandum est* has roots back in the 1830s, or, more closely designated, in the intellectual situation in Copenhagen in 1838 after Martensen's Hegelian lectures and the ensuing commotion in the academic duck pond. These lectures, which with support from Hegel sketched the contemporary age's philosophical development from Descartes (in Kierkegaard always *Cartesius*) to Hegel threw Kierkegaard into a fit, or rather a fury. The two expressions that he bit into and sucked the blood out of like a leech were Martensen's phrase on the necessity of "going beyond Hegel" and the one borrowed from Hegel on *De omnibus dubitandum est*. This is found in Kierkegaard's account of Martensen's lecture of 29 November 1837, but in general it goes back to Martensen's review of Heiberg's *Logic Course* in the December 1836 issue of the *Monthly Journal*.<sup>21</sup>

As Fenger vividly expresses it in this passage, Kierkegaard is very polemical towards the academic situation at the University of Copenhagen, and his play is a fine example of his polemic. He is not without humor, however. Consider his description of the *World-Historical College*, the academic institution founded by the prytaneum:

This, however, was not yet completed, and only the atrium could be used, but this was so large that four professors lectured there simultaneously without disturbing one another. Indeed, it was so large that the audience could not even hear what the lecturers were expounding, although these were incessantly wiping the sweat from brows softened by their efforts. Two of these four professors were saying the same thing verbatim, and when finished they turned round with an air as if no one in the world could say anything like it. (KW I 119–20; P II B 19 301)

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (KW XII), trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 1: 275 n.; SV VII 234.

<sup>20</sup> Søren Holm, *Filosofien i Norden før 1900* (Philosophy in the Nordic Countries before 1900) (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1967), 81–89.

<sup>21</sup> Fenger, *Kierkegaard-Myter og Kierkegaard-Kilder*, 117.



One can be sure that at least two of the professors were lecturing on the modern movement in philosophy: from Descartes, “who said *cogito ergo sum* and *de omnibus dubitandum est*,” to Spinoza, who “carried through this standpoint purely objectively, so that all existence became undulations of the absolute,” to Kant, who “carried through this skepticism only to a certain extent,” to Fichte, who looked “this Medusa in the face in the night of criticism and abstraction,” to, finally, Hegel, “who speculatively drew together the previous systems” (KW I 118–19; P II B 19 299–300).

Through the narration of the life of Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard attempted to remedy the misguided Danish philosophy of his day by taking it back through the movements of modern philosophy, so that the errors of its ways would clearly come to light. This theme was projected for “Pars tertia” of *Johannes Climacus*, where the heading would have read: “Johannes philosophizes with the help of traditional philosophical studies.” Kierkegaard intended to begin with Danish philosophy and the traditional concepts, and then to move backwards towards the source of modern philosophy. He outlined this development as follows:

Para. 1. Hegel

Para. 2. Kant

Para. 3. Spinoza

Para. 4. Cartesius (P IV B 13:16; cf. P IV B 2:18; KW VII 238, 264).

Unfortunately, what might have become Kierkegaard’s most focused writing on (modern) philosophy—which, it is interesting to note, did not contain the slightest trace of or reference to Anglo-Saxon ideas—remained unwritten.

The parallel between *The Soap-Cellars*<sup>22</sup> and *Johannes Climacus* can be made explicit by considering two passages which find their origin in Kierkegaard’s notes to Martensen’s lecture of 29 November 1837, although Martensen’s first mention of the thesis that “philosophy begins with doubt” is found in his review of Heiberg’s *Indledningsforedrag til det i November 1834 begyndte logiske Cursus paa den kongelige militaire Høiskole* (Introductory Lecture for the Logic

<sup>22</sup> In addition, if Carl Roos is correct in his study, *Kierkegaard og Goethe* (Kobenhavn: G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1955), that the “satirical, quasi-Aristophanic comedy” *The Soap-Cellars* was intended as a parody of *Faust*, then this work would share an even closer affinity with *Johannes Climacus*, since the deep subject matter of each work would be the problem of doubt.

From the mid-1830s onward, Kierkegaard was preoccupied with the idea of Faust, which he viewed as “personified doubt.” It permeated his consciousness as he felt a troubling uncertainty concerning his life’s vocation. In a letter from Kierkegaard’s journal dated 1 June 1835, he writes: “It is this Faustian element which in part asserts itself more or less in every intellectual development, which is why it has always seemed to me that one ought to allow the idea of Faust world-significance” (P I A 72). For a well-nigh exhaustive discussion, see Roos’s section “Kierkegaard og Faust,” 56–157.

Course Begun in November 1834 at the Royal Military High School).<sup>25</sup> According to Kierkegaard's notes, Martensen professed that by *de omnibus dubitandum est* Descartes "denoted a doubt not about this or that but about everything" (P II C 18 328; cf. KW VII 324, n. 13). As in the final paragraphs of *The Concept of Irony*, where Kierkegaard plays with another one of Martensen's reviews, he rewords part of the review under discussion and puts it into the mouth of von Jumping-Jack: "Yes, that's all very fine with the people, but my doubt is by no means popular; it is not a doubt about this, that, or the other, about this thing or that thing; no, it is an infinite doubt" (KW I 114; P II B 16 296). The same view is also cited in *Johannes Climacus*, where Johannes hears one of the philosophizers express it: "To doubt everything is no easy matter; it is, namely, not doubt about one thing or another, about this or that, about something and something else, but is a speculative doubt about everything, which is by no means an easy matter" (KW VII 165; P IV B 1 144). There can be no doubt, then, that *Johannes Climacus* essentially belongs to Kierkegaard's early academic writings, which are characterized by an inquiry into the ways of philosophy and a meditation on the search for a philosophical method.

As I now turn to the Faustian problem that became the sum and substance of Johannes Climacus's life, as narrated by Søren Kierkegaard, it is clear that from the start the author intends this work as an attack on modern speculative philosophy. The method of attack is given in the narrative form through which Kierkegaard will show that a life-view founded on doubt must ultimately lead one to despair and emptiness. Doubt, in contrast to practical irony, cannot present the way towards a full life, because it is strictly contemplative. Kierkegaard impresses upon his readers that doubt, "real doubt existing in the mind," is "anti-life," for, with regard to Johannes, "life has not acquired any meaning for him, and all this is the fault of philosophy" (KW VII 235; P IV B 16).

Thus, Kierkegaard wants to counteract this (modern) philosophy which, unlike ancient philosophy, preaches ideas that it does not itself deem worthy of practice. Johannes has heard *de omnibus dubitandum est* uttered repeatedly. Indeed it is cited as the all-important beginning for philosophy. He therefore chooses to make it the object of his thinking, "even though it were to cost him his life" (KW VII 131; P IV B 1 115).

The structure of *Johannes Climacus* is marked by two divisions: "Pars prima" and "Pars secunda." The first part presents a close scrutiny of the three main theses that were asserted by the prominent philosophizers of the day: "(1) philosophy begins with doubt; (2) one must have doubted in order to philosophize; (3) modern philosophy begins with doubt" (KW VII 132; P IV B

<sup>25</sup> Martensen's review appeared in *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, XVI (1836): 518–19.

115–16). This first part forms the bulk of Kierkegaard's closely argued polemic against modern philosophy, whereas in the second part the examination takes a more profound, quasi-metaphysical turn, as the author inquires into the ontological and existential conditions that make doubt possible. As is usual with Kierkegaard, the reader finds a juxtaposition of destructive polemic and constructive "philosophy"—although even this latter term may be understood in an ultimately negative sense—both of which are important for charting the edifying and ironic polemics of Kierkegaard's life-view.

He begins his narration of the meta-philosophical meditations of Johannes Climacus with a strictly grammatical look at the thesis: modern philosophy begins with doubt. Initially, he focuses on the adjective "modern," which when applied to the subject "philosophy" implies that all previous philosophy originated in some other way. The question that follows asks whether the same adjective might be applied to the same substantive if this philosophy had not begun with doubt. If not, would this modern philosophy in turn "have a retroactive power, so that the extent to which that older philosophy can be called philosophy would become dubious" (KW VII 134; P IV B 1 117)? If this were the case, then it would imply that doubt is more than a historical beginning for modern philosophy, it would be the essential beginning for philosophy proper. And if *this* were the case, then essential (modern) philosophy would incur the same annoying difficulty that it finds in Christianity, i.e., a beginning which is both historical and eternal.

Climacus then proceeds to take note of the eternal present tense involved in the thesis "modern philosophy begins with doubt." "It does not use a historical tense or a present in the historical style such as one uses in saying 'Descartes begins with doubt' " (KW VII 135; P IV B 1 118). This latter thesis does not present Johannes with any problems, for it is something quite different to refer to a particular philosopher, and I suspect that Johannes is a true admirer of Descartes, like his contemporary Johannes de Silentio, who in *Fear and Trembling* writes that Descartes was "a venerable, humble, honest thinker, whose writings no one can read without being profoundly affected—he did what he said and said what he did. Alas! Alas! Alas! That is a great rarity in our day."<sup>24</sup>

So much for the modern philosophizers of Kierkegaard's day, who apparently did not do what they said and said what they did not do. Despite this attack on modern philosophizers, however, the impression one gets from many a Kierkegaardian text is that the author holds a great respect for unique, individual thinkers of rank, of which the Danes had none at all (P X

<sup>24</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition* (KW VI), trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 5; SV III 57.

19). While he does not, of course, hesitate to offer his corrections to their views, he is thankful for their insights—and this is even true for the mighty Hegel. So, in general, it is a common misperception that Kierkegaard attacked “philosophers” per se. It was rather the “philosophizers” he loathed, and thereby one draws an important distinction between unique, honest thinkers and the unoriginal ones who merely jump on the bandwagon and form schools, fashions, and movements which provoke wholesale excitement for crowds of people, but leave reflective individuals troubled and empty.<sup>25</sup>

Johannes’s reflections on the grammar of the third thesis continue to weave a carefully woven snare for world-historical thinkers. Since modern philosophy is understood in the present tense, it must be considered as being in a process of becoming, and if it is not yet complete, how can it be judged to provide the essential beginning for philosophy? If it is finished in its entirety and does provide the essential beginning, then the adjective “modern” is obscure and unnecessary, and this thesis reduces to the first thesis, i.e.; “philosophy begins with doubt.”

When Johannes considers the first thesis he finds that, like the third thesis, it is neither as straightforward nor as precise as the utterances of the philosophizers make it seem. Whereas an analysis of the third thesis yielded its transformation from a historical to an essential thesis, an examination of the first thesis produces the exact opposite result. To say that philosophy begins with a negative principle such as doubt presupposes an antecedent, because this negative principle “implies a polemic against not only this or that which lies outside of philosophy but also against a principle in philosophy” (KW VII 144; P IV B 1 127). If there were not a principle prior to doubt, it would hardly make sense as a beginning. Moreover, it is the nature of doubt that for it to occur a dichotomy must present itself to the mind. Kierkegaard writes in a sketch that “doubt arises when I become a relation between two (objects),” and he is well aware of the conspicuous etymological connection between the words “doubt” and “two” in several languages: in Latin, *dubito* (*duo*); in German, *zweifeln* (*zwei*); in Danish, *tvivle* (*to*) (P IV B 10:2 and 13:2; KW VII 258). The thesis that claims that essential philosophy begins with doubt thus “admits

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<sup>25</sup> To offer another example of an original philosopher who Kierkegaard esteemed, I cite the elder Fichte. It has often intrigued me how Fichte’s name appears in important contexts, and always without the slightest trace of criticism.

While Kierkegaard esteems Descartes, he points out in his journal that “Descartes’ philosophy has a birthmark,” and he subsequently accepts the elder Fichte’s criticism of *cogito ergo sum* without further ado: “. . . I act *ergo sum*, for this *cogito* is something derived or it is identical with ‘I act’; either it is the consciousness of freedom in the action, and then it should not read *cogito ergo sum*, or it is the subsequent consciousness” (P IV C 11; JP III 2338). The Fichtean position that Kierkegaard embraces is that freedom, not thought, is absolute.

an antecedent philosophical principle," which transforms it into a properly historical proposition.

Such a difficulty would not be encountered if the thesis were to state that philosophy begins with a positive principle, such as wonder, which is what the Greeks had taught.

For wonder is an immediate determination and does not reflect upon itself. Doubt, on the other hand, is a determination of reflection [*Reflexions-Bestemmelse*]. When a later philosopher said: Philosophy begins with wonder—he was straightway in continuity with the Greeks. They had wondered, he had wondered too; they had perhaps wondered about one thing, while he wondered about something else. But every time a later philosopher repeats or says these words: Philosophy begins with doubt—the continuity is broken, for doubt is precisely a polemic against the foregoing. (KW VII 145; P IV B 1 127)

In order to flush out the deepest ramifications of doubt it will be necessary to develop it as a determination of reflection and "search out *doubt's ideal possibility in consciousness*," which is what Kierkegaard aims to do in "Pars secunda." Before this, however, he sustains his polemic through a consideration of the single individual in relation to the thesis "philosophy begins with doubt."

The humble Johannes is a shy and careful thinker who wonders about the possibility of doubting doubt.

He was well able to comprehend that an individual could take it into his head to doubt, but he could not understand how it could occur to him to say this to another person, least of all as advice (it would be another matter if it were said to deter), for if the other person was not too slow, he might very well say, "Thank you, but please forgive me for also doubting the correctness of that statement." (KW VII 146; P IV B 1 128)

Johannes could have raised many more critical questions about this thesis, but he was far more interested in the existential aspect of successfully relating himself to it. His goal was nothing less than embracing philosophy, so that perhaps he too could become a philosopher.

Johannes hears from one of the philosophizers, who has assuredly found support in Hegel, that the beginning of philosophy is threefold.<sup>26</sup> This observation sits well with Johannes, for he was always delighted with a clear thought from which he could derive the consequences, "to climb step by step to a higher one, because to his coherent thinking [*Consequentsen*] was a *scala paradisi*

<sup>26</sup> The Danish editors of the *Papirer* and the English translators cite two textual sources for this observation: Johan Ludvig Heiberg, *Perseus* 1 (1837), and Peter Michael Stilling, *Philosophiske Betragtninger over den spekulative Logiks Betydning for Videnskaben* (Philosophical Observations on Speculative Logic's Significance for Science), 1842.

[ladder of paradise]" (KW VII 118; P B 1 105).<sup>27</sup> To think in this way fills Johannes with an indescribable pleasure and happiness, that is, insofar as he can draw the simple thought through all of its logical consequences in order to conclude with the same simple thought, although now with the slight addition of the majestic expression *quod erat demonstrandum*.

This Climacian method shares much with the thinking of Hegel, and one could derive a lot from the fact that it is Hegel whom Kierkegaard calls a Johannes Climacus in his first written reference to the philosopher on 20 January 1839: "Hegel is a Johannes *Climacus* who does not storm the heavens as do the giants—by setting mountain upon mountain—but *climbs up* to them by means of his syllogisms" (JP II 1575; P II A 335). Since both thinkers seem to hold that there is reality in thought, one ought not be too hasty in wanting to oppose Hegel to Climacus.

On the other hand, when Climacus is unable to reach his beloved Q.E.D., he becomes sad and melancholic, verging on the suicidal. This state befalls him all too frequently when he reflects on the claims of the philosophizers, who paid little attention to their logical consequences. Johannes cannot understand how the threefold nature of the beginning of philosophy—defined as the absolute, the objective, and the subjective beginning—can help to elucidate the thesis that philosophy begins with doubt. Yet the philosophizers proposed that this was the case, so Johannes assumes that this thesis is included under the subjective beginning, which is defined as "the work of consciousness by which this (i.e., consciousness) elevates [*opløfter*] itself to the thought or to positing the abstraction." This leads Kierkegaard to canvass the "uplifting" nature of the subjective beginning, and he proceeds to play on the alternative meanings of the Danish verb *opløfte*. He writes that Johannes finds the subjective beginning to be very beautiful, "particularly very uplifting [*opløftende*], but his consciousness still was not lifted up [*løftet op*] by it" (KW VII 150; P V B 132).

The "lifting up" of consciousness involves a positive principle in contrast to the negative doubt. Still, it is possible that these two methods might lead one to the same place, but the movements would be different, and the movement is what matters to the climber, Johannes. It is readily apparent that to uplift oneself and to doubt are not identical. The former presents continuity whereas the latter does not. And, "does not the negative specifically lack continuity, without which no communication and no reception is conceivable?"<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard got the name "Johannes Climacus" from a sixth- and/or seventh-century monk who wrote a work entitled *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

<sup>28</sup> This question serves to highlight the intrinsically contradictory nature of ironic (i.e., negative) communication.

Johannes finds it impossible to relate himself to the thesis that "philosophy begins with doubt," for he perceives that it breaks off all continuity with past philosophy and cannot seriously be considered to offer the way into philosophy or the way to becoming a philosopher. The bottom line, then, of Johannes's meditations on this thesis is that such a beginning keeps one outside of philosophy (KW VII 156; P IV B 1 138), which is surely an original and valid criticism of modern philosophy. Doubt must be viewed as providing a false beginning for philosophy, for insofar as I suspend judgment on something, I cannot philosophize about it. If this is the case, Johannes must now be prepared for the possibility that doubt, which he has determined lies outside of philosophy, serves not as philosophy's beginning but as a preparation for this beginning.

Johannes's thoughts lead him in this direction, as he turns to the third thesis, that "in order to philosophize, one must have doubted." Johannes considers that perhaps his earlier investigations were not a complete waste since they may serve as background to his later becoming a philosopher. This investigation is unusually brief. The reader is reminded that the proposition *de omnibus dubitandum est* was the original object of Johannes's meditations, and it is this thesis which he intends to devote himself to in "Pars secunda."

With the end of "Pars prima" Johannes gravely decides to take leave of the deceitful philosophizers forever. He chooses—rather like Descartes—to follow the method of making "everything as simple as possible." The seven pages that follow, however, are not so few by virtue of the simplicity of the subject matter, for Kierkegaard abandons this onerous project—perhaps for other more pliant ones—just as it was getting really good.

It is generally agreed that the understanding of human existence as a synthesis is one of Kierkegaard's central aims. This synthesis is expressed in various ways in the Kierkegaardian corpus, however. One can argue that it is the driving thought behind Kierkegaard's philosophical search, which—as I have suggested above—essentially follows the call of the Socratic maxims "Know thyself!" and "The unexamined life is not worth living." Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates* is his first full-scale attempt to come to terms with this synthesis of thought (or language) and being, and here the synthesis is decidedly described *sub specie ironiae*, an inherently contradictory concept. The contradictory nature of this synthesis is not lost in *Johannes Climacus*, however, and the latter work marks Kierkegaard's second philosophical attempt to bridge the gap between reflection and immediacy, the two "terms" that are contradicted in the nonsimple synthesis of human existence.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Pat Bigelow's challenging study, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Writing* (Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, 1987), 56. Bigelow presents an interesting elucidation of the term "reflection" in Kierkegaard's writings. It bears quoting: "Reflection, as Kierkegaard's principal

Thus, in turning to the chapter entitled “What Is It to Doubt?” readers should be alerted to the fact that it exhibits perhaps the densest philosophical exposition of Kierkegaard’s root problem. While it is frequently recognized that Kierkegaard’s philosophical ideas are based on the rupture between language and the world, the concrete textual ground for this common assumption is seldom identified. My argument is that Kierkegaard’s early writings, primarily *The Concept of Irony* and *Johannes Climacus*, fulfill the conditions for his “indirect communication,” whose methodology is thereby largely worked out prior to the use of the pseudonyms and the discussions of absurdity and the paradox—but more on this shortly.

In order to begin at the heart of the problem of this chapter, Kierkegaard poses the pointed, existential question: “How must existence be constituted for it to be possible to doubt?” He is well aware of the shortcomings of the empirical method, so he has Johannes proceed in a phenomenological manner by isolating consciousness “as it is in itself, as that which explains every specific consciousness, yet without being itself a specific consciousness” (KW VII 167–68; P IV B 1 145). Thus, with the exception of the small child, when Kierkegaard explains the contradiction of consciousness, this contradiction holds for every human being.

In a draft of *Johannes Climacus* Kierkegaard concisely states what he more gradually develops in the text.

Immediately, then, everything is true; but can consciousness not remain in this immediacy? If this immediacy and that of animals were identical, then the question of consciousness would be canceled; but the consequence of that would be that a human being was an animal or that a human being was inarticulate. That which therefore cancels immediacy is language; if a person could not speak, he or she would remain in immediacy.

This, he thought, could be expressed thusly: immediacy is reality, language is ideality, as I speak I produce the contradiction. Thus when I want to express sense perception, the contradiction is there, for what I say is something rather different than what I want to say. I cannot express reality in language, since to characterize it I use ideality, which is a contradiction, an untruth.

The possibility of doubt, then, lies in the duplicity of consciousness. (KW VII 255; JP III 2320; P IV B 14:6)

Here Kierkegaard broaches the problem of language, and his analysis may be interpreted as providing grounds for the rejection of a purely phenomenological language. “Consciousness is contradiction” (KW VII 168; P IV B 1 146).

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category, has all the ambiguity of human existence, for he invokes multiple uses. Sometimes reflection means the reflected image and effect of the age in private, domestic and private life (the Danish *Reflex*), sometimes deliberation (the Danish *Reflexion*, meaning *Besindelse*, akin to Heidegger’s *Besinnung*). Kierkegaard’s category of reflection, then, designates the unwitting conflation of peculiarity with speculation—the source problem for Husserl.”



The word, i.e., mediacy, does not stand in mere opposition to the world, i.e., immediacy, but rather in contradiction to it. Contradiction is thus more than mere opposition; it is the third needed to posit oppositions, i.e., consciousness. As Kierkegaard had read Hegel on the nature of consciousness and contradiction, it is not irrelevant to quote the latter here:

This contradiction and the removal of it will become more definite if, to begin with, we call to mind the abstract determinations of knowledge and of truth as they are found in consciousness. Consciousness, we find, distinguishes from itself something, to which at the same time it relates itself; or, to use the current expression, there is something for consciousness; and the determinate form of this process of relating, or of there being something for a consciousness, is knowledge. But from this being for another we distinguish being in itself or per se; what is related to knowledge is likewise distinguished from it, and posited as also existing outside this relation; the aspect of being per se or in itself is called Truth.<sup>30</sup>

For Kierkegaard, however, the notion that “contradiction resolves itself”<sup>31</sup> is impenetrable. Therefore, although he is obviously indebted to Hegel for his exposition of consciousness in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, he quite emphatically opposes the identification of thought (or language) and being found in this work and others. In addition, in a note to *Johannes Climacus*, Kierkegaard alludes to *The Phenomenology of Mind* and rightly criticizes Hegel for not explaining the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness and from self-consciousness to reason: “when the transition consists merely of a heading, it is easy enough” (KW VII 169; P IV B 1 148).

Kierkegaard therefore concludes early in his development—before his so-called “proper” production begins—that there can be no solution to the problem of language. This provides the necessary philosophical background to understanding why Kierkegaard embarked onto the sea of “indirect communication.” When one reads Kierkegaard’s early writings closely, one finds that the pseudonymous writings were born out of Kierkegaard’s reflections on the problem of language, and not out of a need to rid himself of inauthentic perspectives. Thus Kierkegaard’s early philosophical period yields methodological insight into his whole *corpus*; for the later writings—veronymous, i.e., written under a true or real name, and pseudonymous alike—presuppose the philosophical reflections of *The Concept of Irony* and *Johannes Climacus*.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Harper, 1967), 139.

<sup>31</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), 433.

<sup>32</sup> Thus I can agree with Lars Bejerholm, who writes: “The Kierkegaardian statements concerning his pseudonymity have been used as a justification for methodological principles in the study of Kierkegaard by certain researchers. In this investigation, however, it will be maintained that these remarks by Kierkegaard can be given a plausible interpretation if one considers the

Consequently, readers will not be surprised to find that there is an intrinsic tension in all Kierkegaard's writings based on the nature of the contradiction, and this cannot be removed by naïve ontologies of language. In this tension, in the "dialectical knot"<sup>33</sup> of Kierkegaard's writings, in the thoughts of Johannes Climacus, readers familiar with the difference of otherness may recognize a certain kinship to what Derrida or de Man has to say on the subject. Christopher Norris explains the point of contact between deconstruction and Kierkegaard:

Deconstruction sets out to demonstrate that meaning can never coincide with its object in a moment of pure, unimpeded union; that language always intervenes to deflect, defer or differentially complicate the relation between manifest sense and expressive intent. . . . Mediation—or "reflection" in Kierkegaard's terminology—is the inescapable predicament of language, whatever those pretences to the contrary maintained by poets, philosophers or the normal run of commonplace metaphysicians.<sup>34</sup>

Norris goes wrong, however, in writing that "Kierkegaard, of course, entertains this outlook under cover of a pseudonym ('Johannes Climacus'), intended to mark it as a strictly 'aesthetic' and hence inauthentic standpoint." It is now apparent that this view is mistaken for two reasons. First, Kierkegaard never found the time to append a signature to *Johannes Climacus*, so, strictly speaking, it cannot be read as pseudonymous. Second, if I am correct in arguing that Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms grew out of his ruminations on the problem of language, then the mere pseudonymity of a given work does not make it inauthentic, just as the sheer fact of its veronymity would not make it authentic. The question of authenticity/inauthenticity refers to the life-view portrayed—though, be it noted, as lived, not as written—and not to the text itself. For example, in consideration of *Johannes Climacus*, one may argue that the life-view of speculative doubt is inauthentic, but this by no means means that the text is inauthentic or null and void.

For Kierkegaard, then, the only way to get readers to focus on their own individual life-views is to communicate with them indirectly, because direct communication<sup>35</sup> ignores the contradiction of consciousness and the problem

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age's literary conventions, and that therefore Kierkegaard's own remarks on his pseudonymity do not give Kierkegaardian research methodological principles." *"Meddelelsens Dialektik": Studier i Søren Kierkegaards teorier om språk, kommunikation och pseudonymitet* ("The Dialectic of Communication": Studies in Søren Kierkegaard's Theories of Language, Communication and Pseudonymity) (Lund: Håkan Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1962), 24. However, I find my own reasons in Kierkegaard's earliest texts.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Practice in Christianity* (KW XX), trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 133.

<sup>34</sup> *The Deconstructive Turn: Essays in the Rhetoric of Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1983), 102.

<sup>35</sup> Thus I have coined the term "veronymous," so that I could distinguish between "direct communication" and Kierkegaard's veronymous works, for it is arguable that all Kierkegaard's writings are indirect, even the ones to which he signed his own name, e.g., *From the Papers of One*

of language, which is certainly more than just one problem among others; it forgets the lost origin of the word and proceeds in the manner of a modern, systematic philosophizer. If one admits that Kierkegaard maintained the eternal discrepancy between language and immediacy throughout his short life, then one would by the same token be obliged to admit that any attempted direct communication would be an ironic incognito calculated to draw attention elsewhere.

The next point of interest is Johannes's definition of "reflection," which is given lucid philosophical expression by Kierkegaard. "Reflection is the *possibility of the relation*; consciousness is *the relation, the first form of which is contradiction* . . . reflection's categories are always *dichotomous*" (KW VII 169; P IV B 1 147). In reflection, in ideality, ideas are always dichotomous (KW VII 252; P IV B 10a; JP V 5620). This only introduces the possibility of doubt, however; it does not establish doubt's existence. Despite its etymology, doubt requires a third to come into existence. Without this third there would be nothing but sheer oppositions without relation.

For example, ideality and reality, soul and body, to know the true, to will the good, to love the beautiful, God and the world, etc. are categories of reflection. In reflection, they touch each other in such a way that a relation becomes possible. The categories of consciousness, however, are *trichotomous*, as language also demonstrates, for when I say, *I am conscious of this sensory impression*, I am expressing a triad. Consciousness is mind,<sup>36</sup> and it is remarkable that when one is divided in the world of mind, there are three, never two. Consciousness, therefore, presupposes reflection. (KW VII 169; P IV B 1 147-48)

Consciousness is the third that establishes the relation between ideality and reality, or thinking and being. This relation has the form of contradiction, for to maintain that thinking and being are held in opposition by consciousness is to state the philosophically contradictory. Ideality and reality collide in consciousness and have nothing to say to each other.

To rewrite the Cartesian maxim in a Kierkegaardian fashion: "I think, therefore I do not exist."<sup>37</sup> In other words, thought cannot prove existence, and consciousness is such that it presupposes itself (KW VII 255; P IV B

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*Still Living, The Concept of Irony, Edifying Discourses, Works of Love*, etc. That the specifically religious writings face the contradiction and that Christian discourse takes the problem of language seriously is recognized by Kierkegaard, who wrote that "everything Christian is ambiguous, redoubling" (P XI 2 A 65).

<sup>36</sup> Here the Danish is *Aand*, which—like its German equivalent *Geist*—signifies both "mind" and "spirit."

<sup>37</sup> Adi Shmuëli, *Kierkegaard and Consciousness*, trans. Naomi Handelman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 12. This follows from the opposition Kierkegaard posits between thought (reflection, ideality) and existence (action, immediacy). For Kierkegaard one can neither think existence nor "exist" in thought.

10:14). This often forgotten presupposition insinuates itself between each and every dichotomy. Kierkegaard, then, shares in the tripartite understanding of the creation of meaning based on his further characterizations of reflection and consciousness as disinterested and interested respectively.<sup>38</sup> Consciousness is interest, which expresses both the literal meaning of “being between” (*inter-esse*) as well as the general meaning of “concern.” What the philosophizers lack is interest, and therefore they have misunderstood doubt. “[A]ll disinterested knowledge (mathematics, aesthetics, metaphysics) is only the presupposition of doubt. As soon as the interest is canceled, doubt is not conquered but is neutralized, and all such knowledge is simply a retrogression. Thus it would be a misunderstanding for someone to think that doubt can be overcome by so-called objective thinking” (KW VII 170; P IV B 1 149). For this reason, the doubt spoken about by the modernist philosophizers is very dangerous, if not suicidal, for they have attempted to rid themselves of doubt through the systematic destruction of their own personal interests and wills. Kierkegaard notes elsewhere that doubting involves an act of the will, for otherwise it “would become identical with being uncertain” (KW VII 259; P IV B 5:8). Doubt can never be stopped through reflection or knowledge.

Such folly would never have happened in ancient Greece, where the genuine skeptics “considered that the trick was to preserve doubt despite all the inveiglements of thinking” (KW VII 259; P IV B 5:15). Thus, insofar as true doubt involves interest and invokes an act of the will, it begins what Kierkegaard calls “the highest form of existence, because it can have everything else as its presupposition” (KW VII 170; P IV B 1 149). This is a recognizably different form of doubt, which would have perhaps allowed Kierkegaard the possibility of discussing “Mastered Doubt. The Truth of Doubt.” Shortly after this point Kierkegaard mentions “the question of a repetition in consciousness,” and with that his narration breaks off.

Kierkegaard does not explain why he never finished *Johannes Climacus*, which was intended to “strike a blow at modern philosophy” through the conscious use of form. The conclusion that may be drawn is that, in effect, the incomplete form achieves Kierkegaard’s purpose, in that the life-doubt of Johannes Climacus cannot be concluded; it cannot be stopped through thinking or knowledge. The only way to halt forever the mind’s wheels of contemplation would be for the thinker to take his or her own life.<sup>39</sup> Another Johannes

<sup>38</sup> This point should play a significant role in any focused discussion of Kierkegaard and postmodernism.

<sup>39</sup> This is also evidence that freedom, i.e., free action, is absolute, and not thought. Similarly, the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre will embrace this conclusion based on the possibility of suicide.

Climacus—the writer, in contrast to the pure thinker—explicitly unfolds the suicidal nature of pure thought.

If philosophical reflection had not in our time become something queer, highly artificial, and capable of being learned by rote, thinkers would make quite a different impression upon people, as was the case in Greece, where a thinker was an existing individual stimulated by his reflection to a passionate enthusiasm; and as was also once the case in Christendom, when the thinker was a believer who strove enthusiastically to understand himself in the existence of faith. If anything of this sort held true of the thinkers of our own age, the enterprise of pure thought would have led to one suicide after the other. For suicide is the only tolerable existential consequence of pure thought, when this type of abstraction is not conceived as something merely partial in relation to being human, willing to strike an agreement with an ethical and religious form of personal existence, but assumes to be all and highest. This is not to praise the suicide, but to respect the passion. Nowadays a thinker is a curious creature who during certain hours of the day exhibits a very remarkable ingenuity, but has otherwise nothing in common with a human being.<sup>40</sup>

Again, one must not forget that the point of this attack is the speculative philosophizer par excellence, and that Kierkegaard begins this passage conditionally in order to leave himself open for the possibility of original philosophical reflection, such as was found among the ancients.

The philosophy that would take itself seriously as beginning with infinite, speculative doubt—as *Johannes Climacus, Or, De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* arguably shows—could never begin a philosophy, let alone a life worth living. Besides, as everyone knows, Descartes's doubt was hyperbolic, and he concealed more than one faith-induced presupposition in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*.<sup>41</sup>

In this metaphilosophical text, then, Kierkegaard shows by way of an indirect narration that the claims of modern philosophy are contradictory, and that the term itself, when taken as signifying more than mere historical differences, is a misnomer. He accordingly finds that modern philosophy has little to offer in terms of substance and life; it simply keeps the wheels of thought and knowledge spinning without any possibility of closure.

But what is more important with regard to a comprehensive interpretation

<sup>40</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 273; KW XII 1 308; SV VII 264.

<sup>41</sup> While teaching "modern philosophy" I got the distinct impression that things might have gone otherwise for Descartes, who had, after all, admired Horace's line: "Who has hidden himself well has lived well" (quoted by Berel Lang in *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990], 27). Had "the father of modern philosophy" continued in the spirit of his *Discours de la Méthode* (1637)—a work written in French to counteract the scholasticism of his day, and one that reads quite differently from the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641), which was written in a conciliatory Latin—the landscape of modern philosophy might have been irrevocably changed.

of Kierkegaard's writings is this: readers find that the problem of language lies coiled and tense at the heart of Kierkegaard's writing. It forms a dialectical knot, which cannot be unraveled. Thus, the general conclusion that emerges from this essay is that the nature of consciousness and the determinations of language make up the philosophical grounds behind Kierkegaard's method of indirect communication, and that this method structures the ensuing authorship, both pseudonymous and veronymous writings included.

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