

**“Truth is Subjectivity” in Johannes Climacus’
*Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical
Fragments:***

Developing an Understanding of Kierkegaard on Truth

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Abstract

This thesis investigates what the statement “truth is subjectivity” means within the context of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, the last work written under the Søren Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes Climacus. Such a statement looks *prima facie* like a declarative claim that all truth is relative to individual interpretation. However, read in context and under the layers of indirect communication, “truth is subjectivity” instead means to remind the individual that 1) truth is only understood through the mind of a finite person, 2) truth matters because of what subjects *do* with it, and 3) truth is best understood as being grounded in faith. “Truth is subjectivity” as a statement also summarizes in three words Climacus’ perspective on how an individual is to successfully pursue ethical and religious truth.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	6
PART 1: The <i>Postscript</i>, Johannes Climacus, and Kierkegaard	
1.1 Understanding the <i>Postscript</i>	8
1.2 Johannes Climacus: A Personality Profile	14
1.3 Kierkegaard’s Spheres of Life and the “passion of inwardness”	16
1.4 Final Remarks	18
PART 2: The Chapter and Claim “Truth is Subjectivity”	
2.1 Introduction to the Statement	20
2.2 In Quest of Certainty: Beings, Existence, and “Truth is Subjectivity”	22
2.3 The Experience of Reading “Truth is Subjectivity	35
2.4 Concluding Remarks	41
PART 3: Truth in the <i>Postscript</i>: A Wider Look	
3.1 Truth and the <i>Postscript</i>	42
3.2 A Few Objections	45
Conclusion	48
Bibliography	51

“I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own.” — Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

“Life everywhere is life, life is in ourselves and not in the external. There will be people near me, and to be a human being among human beings, and to remain one forever, no matter what misfortunes befall, not to become depressed, and not to falter — this is what life is, herein lies the task.” — Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 1849 letter to Mikhail.

Preface

"Just as important as the truth, and of the two the even more important one, is the mode in which the truth is accepted, and it is of slight help if one gets millions to accept the truth if by the very mode of their acceptance they are transported into untruth." — Postscript, p 247

Søren Kierkegaard is an imposing figure to approach for the first time. Debate over whether he was more of a polemical religious writer, a psychologist, an anthropologist, a poet, or a philosopher began even in his lifetime (1813-1855), and continued to be a central question of interest well into the twentieth century. Though the dust has mostly settled around establishing Kierkegaard's identity as a thinker (with the answer "it matters less what title we give Kierkegaard and matters more what the *content* of his writings tell us"), the breadth of his writings and the interpretive difficulties that arise out of his choice of style keep him an open-ended figure to engage with.¹ It is this debate over Kierkegaard's intentions and the appropriate interpretation of him that has made him famous for the themes of suffering, despair, ethics, existence, and the self. All of this together invites the naive question "what kind of conception of truth drives such a broad and energetic commentary?" Does Kierkegaard have any interest in truth as a subject itself?

With the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, the answer appears to be "yes." In opening the Table of Contents one comes face to face with a chapter title that proclaims "Truth is Subjectivity." The claim is provocative and forceful, and begs to be further investigated. Is this statement meant to represent Kierkegaard's decisive thoughts on what truth is, or is it a contextualized observation that makes a more modest claim? One thing becomes quickly apparent when pursuing the question of what "truth is subjectivity" means, however. Residing in the largest pseudonymic work Kierkegaard ever wrote, the statement acts as a strand of an integral web where, if extracted and isolated, it becomes incomprehensible and useless. Given that an understanding of "truth is subjectivity" is not possible to develop apart from the wider context of the *Postscript*, this present investigation

¹ Piety, M. G. 2010, *Ways of Knowing: Kierkegaard's Pluralist Epistemology*. Baylor University Press, p 18-19.

is motivated by the question: “what does Kierkegaard mean for his reader to understand when she reads that ‘truth is subjectivity,’ and in what way does this reflect on truth?”

This thesis accommodates that question in three parts. First, a description and explanation of various preliminary concepts is necessary in order to understand what the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* aims to do, and why it has been such an interpretive challenge to philosophers and intellectuals. With this preparation laid as a foundation, what the meaning of the statement “truth is subjectivity” within the context of the chapter “Truth is Subjectivity” will be investigated. The thesis will then look to see how “truth is subjectivity” relates to the concept of truth from within the rest of the *Postscript*. All of this together will serve as a modest start to building an appreciation of Kierkegaard’s treatment of the issue of truth.

PART 1: The *Postscript*, Johannes Climacus, and Kierkegaard

“So there I sat and smoked my cigar until I drifted into thought. Among other thoughts, I recall these. You are getting on in years, I said to myself, and are becoming an old man without being anything and without actually undertaking anything...then suddenly this thought crossed my mind: You must do something, but since with your limited capabilities it will be impossible to make anything easier than it has become, you must, with the same humanitarian enthusiasm as the others have, take it upon yourself to make something more difficult...out of genuine interest in those who make everything easy, I comprehended that it was my task: to make difficulties everywhere. — *Postscript*, p 186-187

1.1 Understanding the *Postscript*

(i) The *Postscript*'s aim and direction:

The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* is a lengthy title, but a telling one.² In introducing what scholars agree is a “ramshackle but nevertheless coherently constructed monster of a book,” the title serves as a helpful launch pad into what kind of work the *Postscript* is.³ “Concluding” speaks to Kierkegaard’s intention to conclude his life of authorship with one final *magnum opus*.⁴ “Unscientific” functions in a layered way, being both a critical jab at contemporary scholarship’s efforts at systematic investigation as well as an ironical twist to its own contents, which are non-traditionally but nevertheless methodically organized.⁵ The final part of the title, “Postscript to *Philosophical Fragments*,” is the most straightforward, as it references the work it serves as postscript to, *Philosophical Fragments* (1844). *Fragments* deals chiefly with the question “can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal happiness?” The *Postscript* then follows this question with “how is it possible to relate to eternal happiness?” The *Postscript*'s pseudonymous author, Johannes Climacus, poses this question more fully in the work’s introduction:

² For reasons of consistency and clarity, the translation of the Danish ‘Smuler’ to ‘fragments’ is being preferred over scholarship’s more recent preference for ‘crumbs,’ as I am working out of the Hong’s translation of the *Postscript*.

³ Hannay, Alastair 2003, “Commitment and Paradox” in *Kierkegaard and Philosophy: Selected Essays*, Routledge, London, p 126.

⁴ Either by dying at the age of 33 or through retirement to a quiet pastorship in the Danish jutlands. See *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers (JP)*, VI 5999, JP VI 6003, and JP V 5873.

⁵ Hannay, Alastair 2009, “Introduction” to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Cambridge University Press. p xix-xx.

To state it as simply as possible (using myself in an imaginatively constructing way): ‘I, Johannes Climacus, born and bred in this city and now thirty years old, an ordinary human being like most folk, assume that a highest good, called an eternal happiness, awaits me just as it awaits a housemaid and a professor. I have heard that Christianity is one’s prerequisite for this good. I now ask how I may enter into relation to this doctrine.’⁶

Why Climacus is particularly interested in Christianity will be addressed momentarily, however at present the issue of eternal happiness needs to be briefly addressed.

Climacus points out explicitly that he presupposes all humans long for eternal happiness in virtue of being human, and offers his reasons by saying:

[Christianity itself] wants to make the single individual eternally happy and that precisely within this single individual it presupposes this infinite interest in his own happiness as *conditio sine qua non* [the indispensable condition]...it is not impossible that the individual who is infinitely interested in his own eternal happiness can some day become eternally happy...⁷

There are two reasons presented here. First, Christianity exists as its own separate entity, and it makes the claim of being able to fulfill a desire that all individuals supposedly have. That is, *Christianity* presupposes humans desire eternal happiness, which, Climacus thinks, is enough to warrant further investigation. Second, there are many individuals who are driven by what they call a desire for eternal happiness. This then suggests two possibilities: either those who claim they desire eternal happiness are mistaken, or those who deny such an interest are. This is a practical attitude for Climacus to take, and is an example of a deeper line of reasoning he often returns to. Climacus frequently presses on philosophers’ assumption that, by being professionals, they have a superior knowledge over that of the simple man. Yet is the philosopher justified when he looks the simple man in the face, for example, and says that he is mistaken and confused when he speaks of immortal longing or eternal satisfaction? Since the very logic from which these philosophers justify this belief

⁶ Kierkegaard, Søren 1846, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Vol. 1. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1992, p 15-16.

⁷ *Postscript*, p 16.

leaves the subject of eternity and eternal longing at an impasse, Climacus thinks philosophers are presumptive to make such authoritative claims. Given humans long to be happy, and often think of the eternal, Climacus concludes this alone is enough of a basis from which to further philosophize.

To clarify, Climacus does not mean a whimsical “happily ever after” when speaking of eternal happiness. Rather, he means a happiness that fully satisfies the ethical and religious longings a person has, where ethical and religious matters are “eternally valid” due to how they transcend cultural context. Kierkegaard in general has two uses of the concept eternal: eternity (*Evigheden*) in contrast to time (*Tiden*), and eternity (*det Evige*) in contrast to the temporal (*det Timelige*).⁸ Since moments are simultaneously slices of time and eternity, a temporally-situated individual may voluntarily use each moment to relate ethically-religiously to the eternal. “Just as time can be viewed apart from the individual yet also as existentially connected to the individual, so, too, can the concept of the eternal.”⁹ Overall, suspending judgement about the eternally-inclined individual is paramount to understanding Climacus — if this is not done from the beginning, the reader will only increase in his or her frustration with the development of the *Postscript*, as well as continue to misunderstand what Climacus means when he speaks later of truth in regards to “essential truth.”

Aside from the driving question of the *Postscript*, there is another general point to make about this work. Just as Christianity is the “historical costuming” of a historical point of departure for eternal happiness, so Hegelianism is Climacus’ historical costuming of the *Postscript*’s philosophical antagonist, systematic philosophy. As one of the longest running themes of the *Postscript*, Climacus attacks with vicious irony the abilities of systematic philosophical theories to derive absolute knowledge, often singling out Hegelianism due to its prevalence in Kierkegaard’s day. Despite its significance to the text, this historical

⁸ Watkin, Julia 2001, *Historical Dictionary of Kierkegaard’s Philosophy*, Historical Dictionaries of Religion, Philosophies, and Movements 33. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc, p 76.

⁹ Ibid.

costume is not paramount in order to understand the philosophical arguments themselves, and subsequently I will not be engaging with it. Though the work is immediately directed towards the nineteenth-century intellectual reader familiar with Hegelian thought, the *Postscript's* content transcends its own time by carrying forward a message independent from its antithesis, as good philosophy so often does.

Two of the main driving issues of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* are as follows, then: the philosophical difficulty of approximately certain facts making definite claims on an individual's happiness (i.e. furthering the *Fragments'* question), and the disunity Climacus sees between Christianity and Christian speculative thought. In this way the question of how one's own eternal happiness might be satisfied in the historical phenomena of Christianity is enjoined.¹⁰

(ii) Christianity in the *Postscript*

A reason why Christianity is of interest to Climacus has already been hinted at above. First, Christianity is the “historical costuming” of the *Postscript's* philosophical question because it finds itself as a main target of speculative philosophy, which is in the business of explaining, improving through theoretical efforts, and “going beyond” supposedly complete systems of thought.¹¹ Climacus is also interested in Christianity because of how it is unique in the way it stakes an individual's eternal happiness on what can at best be an approximately certain historical fact. Another final reason is rather straightforward: Christianity was the state religion of early nineteenth-century Denmark (and remains so today). It was commonly accepted that to be Danish was to be a Christian automatically, a belief which Kierkegaard found wrong-headed given what Christianity says of itself.¹²

¹⁰ Some scholars have argued that Christianity is not special to Climacus' argument, that any religion could replace Christianity and function the same way. Others have argued against this, and stressed the argument only works for Christianity. I side with the later view, as a deeper reading of the *Postscript* provides arguments for Christianity's uniqueness against other religions' claims. See Evans, C. Stephen 1983, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, p 115-116.

¹¹ *Postscript*, p 15-16, 213.

¹² Climacus draws this point out humorously in the *Postscript* itself, see pages 50-51.

The type of truth Climacus ascribes to Christianity and religion in general is critical in order to understand his remarks on it. For Climacus, there are different types of truths that correspond to the different spheres of life (see 1.3 for more on the spheres of existence). “Essential truth,” then, is the particular type of truth that relates to these matters, which are matters of existence (and thereby eternal longing). Put another way, essential truth is truth that “relates essentially to existence,” where essentially is understood as being requisite or crucial to existence. C. Stephen Evans describes essential truth as merely “the truth about how to live.” This distinction must be remembered if a proper understanding of Climacus’ discussions on truth relating to the *existing* individual are to be understood correctly.

(iii) The *Postscript* as an Interpretive Challenge: Indirect Communication

The *Postscript* poses an interpretive challenge, largely due to the method of its style — indirect communication, which spans most of Kierkegaard’s authorship. Indirect communication includes anything from pseudonymity, irony, humor, satire, anecdotes, discursiveness, or dialectical phrasing. Within the *Postscript* itself Climacus makes heavy use of a span of these modes, which makes the work, along with its layers of themes and argument threads, one of Kierkegaard’s most challenging to interpret. Though many reasons motivate the use of indirect communication, one of particular interest is offered by Kierkegaard himself: “It is indirect communication to place jest and earnestness together in such a way that the composite is a dialectical knot – and then to be a nobody oneself. If anyone wants to have anything to do with this kind of communication, he will have to untie the knot himself.” In other words, it is only possible for the reader to tell when something is serious and when something is humorous, or which *aspects* of a claim are serious and which are humorous, by engaging with the material and reasoning through it herself. In so doing, Kierkegaard is convinced the reader is much more likely to experience a deep and radical change in her perspective, and be challenged in the presuppositions she once was so confident in. When an individual is in “the grip of an illusion,” directly telling her about it

will be ineffectual; instead, she needs to be shown that she is confused. This explains why so many interpretations of Kierkegaard exist today, however far removed the thinking might be from Kierkegaard's own. Under Kierkegaard's pen, indirect communication works to water down the notion that all discourse is merely assertive, or that all argumentative communication is teaching and explanation.

Pseudonymity is a particularly significant method of indirect communication for Kierkegaard. The pseudonyms were created for Kierkegaard's more philosophical works (which he personally referred to as the "aesthetic works" of his authorship).¹³ This was done in order to create distance from his content rather than mask his identity, which is supported by evidence in the *Postscript's* embedded appendix "A Glance at Danish Literature." There Climacus reflects on the previous pseudonymous works "published" by Kierkegaard and directly calls the authors of those works pseudonyms. This indicates that, though apparently unconscious of his own pseudonymic nature, Climacus is fully aware of the authors' fictionality. Each of these pseudonyms as well, complete with their symbolic names, has a unique personality that shapes the works he "writes," which makes him far more than an empty shell. This all suggests interpretive difficulties, which unfortunately cannot be philosophically investigated here.¹⁴ However, Johannes Climacus' personality and role as the *Postscript's* pseudonym is important to understand, and will be covered in section 1.2.

(iv) The *Postscript* as an Interpretive Challenge: Acknowledging "A First and Last Explanation"

In the very last section of the *Postscript*, under the title "A First and Last Explanation," Kierkegaard admits that he is the author to all of the pseudonymous works he ever published, beginning with *Either/Or* (1843) and concluding with the *Postscript* (1846). However,

¹³ Stewart, Jon 2015, *Søren Kierkegaard: Subjectivity, Irony, and the Crisis of Modernity*, Oxford University Press, p 160.

¹⁴ Scholars were more divided over how important the pseudonyms were to interpreting Kierkegaard's works in the 20th century than they are today (for example, Niels Thulstrup believed they could be completely ignored without any negative side effects. See Thulstrup, Niels 1984, *Commentary on Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript with a New Introduction*, Princeton University Press, p 113).

despite his admission, he requests of the reader “a forgetful remembrance, a sign that it is of me that he reminded, because he remembers me as irrelevant to the books”; “that [the reader] will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author’s name, not mine...”¹⁵ It is clear that how one accounts for this request will subsequently shape how she interprets the content of the pseudonymous works, whether she proceeds as if the pseudonyms are superfluous, or rather follows Kierkegaard’s advice and attempts to forget about him to some greater or lesser degree. Thus, in similar vein, I must account for “A First and Last Explanation.”

Given that the pseudonymous authors are a carefully crafted and additional layer of indirect communication, and given that Kierkegaard’s request rings with “earnestness” rather than “jest,” I will, in accordance with his wishes, continue to refer to Johannes Climacus as the author of the *Postscript* throughout this thesis.

1.2 Johannes Climacus: A Personality Profile

(i) A personality profile of the *Postscript*’s author

Climacus describes himself as a young thirties philosophy student who, before the inspiration to become an author and write *Fragments* and the *Postscript*, is an individual who has read much and accomplished little. His inspiration for authorship comes during a sunny afternoon smoking at the Frederiksberg Gardens, where he concludes that in an age that strives to make everything easier for people he should strive to do the opposite: to “make difficulties everywhere,” lest difficulty completely disappear from society. A few months later in the “garden of the dead” Climacus witnesses a scene between two mourners which impassions him to discover the reason of society’s “misunderstanding” between the life of faith and the life of reason. From this moment, Climacus sees how his general goal of making things difficult may specifically begin, and eventually produces the *Postscript* — a work of fierce indirect communication that demands a reader to think for herself and question her

¹⁵ *Postscript*, p 629, 627.

suppositions about faith and reason, making becoming a Christian the most difficult thing of all.

Ironically, and despite his proclaimed project, Climacus repeatedly stresses that he himself is not a Christian.¹⁶ Instead, he calls himself a humorist and lets his methodical, witty, and satirical personality leave the reader questioning where the moments of earnestness and humor reside within the *Postscript*. His desire is neither to convert individuals to Christianity nor tout the (historical) truthfulness of Christianity itself. However, though Climacus himself does not wish to take the path of faith (being “completely preoccupied with how difficult it must be to become [a Christian]”), he says in a climactic moment of the chapter “Truth is Subjectivity” that “it is indeed just possible that Christianity is the truth.”¹⁷ This tension is a curious one that cannot be further explored here, but at the very least it means to impress on the Danish Christian and the reader alike that the truth-fully lived life is the most difficult life.

(ii) Climacus’ Revocation

Climacus’ revocation, found at the end of the *Postscript* and entitled “An Understanding with the Reader,” places further difficulties on interpretation. Here Climacus says, “[C]onsequently, the book is superfluous. Therefore, let no one bother to appeal to it, because one who appeals to it has *eo ipso* misunderstood it.”¹⁸ This declaration has led to much scholarly debate over how the *Postscript* is to be regarded. Is the revocation an instance of humour, a declaration of nonsense, or a Wittgensteinian declaration of meaninglessness?¹⁹ Or is it something else entirely? One thing is clear, whoever wishes to write on the content of the *Postscript* must contend with this section as well.

¹⁶ *Postscript*, p 617.

¹⁷ *Postscript*, p 234.

¹⁸ *Postscript*, p 618.

¹⁹ Hannay, Alastair 2010, “Johannes Climacus’ Revocation” in *Kierkegaard’s “Concluding Unscientific Postscript” -- A Critical Guide*, ed. Furtak, Rick, Cambridge University Press, p 54-55.

Though the revocation is startling at first, from my viewpoint “An Understanding with the Reader” fits in with the rest of the *Postscript’s* tendency towards surprise and the theme of subjective individuality. It can be read as an extreme furthering of Climacus’ message of subjectivity, where it stands as insurance against the reader forgetting that Climacus is not participating in writing instructions or a treatise on “how to be subjective.” In the end, only the individual can benefit (or not) from this work, as, in the end, Climacus claims no superior authority over the reader on matters of existing and living well. Climacus hint-fully says himself that “to write a book and to revoke it is not the same as refraining from writing it,” which suggests the beneficiality of an individual reader’s journey through the foray.²⁰

1.3 Kierkegaard’s Spheres of Life and the “passion of inwardness”

(i) The Spheres of Life

One of the most fundamental aspects of Kierkegaard’s writing comes from his concept of the “spheres of life,” also called “stages of life” or “existence spheres.” These spheres are conceptual tools that Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms use in every one of the written works, with the underlying belief that different contexts of human endeavor are guided by corresponding rule-systems.²¹

Significantly simplified, Kierkegaard speaks of three main spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, where the religious sphere may break farther down into an “immanent” type and a “paradoxical” type (discussed as “Religiousness A” and “Religiousness B” in the later parts of the *Postscript*). There is a hierarchical aspect to these spheres, where one progresses through the spheres through the task of “becoming subjective” or developing and maintaining the inwardness of one’s existence. The aesthetic is the sphere all humans begin from, and includes all objective intellectual reasoning in addition to the more traditional

²⁰ *Postscript*, p 621.

²¹ It is important to note, however, that Kierkegaard does not mean to present a *theory* with these spheres. He also does not dispute the possibility of there being alternative descriptions or ways of categorizing life.

attributions of creativity and the appetites. The ethical sphere describes the life led by intentional choice and an individual's conscious ability to "recognize and actualize eternal values," conforming the aesthetic sphere to greater discipline.²² The religious sphere is then lived in when the individual recognizes the inadequacy of human self-sufficiency and seeks to find a "God-relationship."²³ Something important to note is how the ethical and religious are in "constant communication" with each other, since both require an individual's passion and inwardness to be focused on prescriptions that are *independent* of herself.²⁴ Due to this, these spheres are frequently described by Climacus as the "ethically-religious." Also, Kierkegaard conceives of irony and humour as the way an individual shifts from living primarily in one sphere into another: irony bridges the aesthetic to the ethical, drawing one from aesthetic-mindedness towards being ethically-motivated, and humour bridges the ethical to the religious, leading the ethically-impassioned individual towards a more divinely-impassioned focus in the religious sphere. The *Postscript* makes frequent use of these spheres as it discusses the topics of the existing self, passion, inwardness, and truth, though it spends less direct time on the spheres as topics in themselves.²⁵

(ii) "The passion of inwardness"

Passion and inwardness are two central concepts of Kierkegaard's and Climacus' that play a vital role in understanding "truth is subjectivity." I have already mentioned how passion and inwardness are intrinsically involved with the ethical and the religious for Climacus. Put more explicitly, passion is the only thing that enables the synthesis between a finite individual with the infinite, i.e. it is the only thing that makes the fulfillment of eternal happiness a realizable event. Passion is the energy of decisiveness; it is the actualizing of interestedness after seeing or imagining the possibility of a desirable event coming to be. In

²² Evans, *Fragments and Postscript*, p 12-13.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Postscript*, p 162.

²⁵ The closest the *Postscript* gets to explicitly elucidating the spheres is in the chapter "Becoming Subjective." For other works more explicitly about the spheres of life, see *Either/Or* (1843) and *Stages on Life's Way* (1845).

other words, passion is the movement and continuity of existence. Inwardness, on the other hand, is a term used almost synonymously with subjectivity, being unique by how it particularly evokes the spiritual potential of a person.²⁶ Inwardness is something all human beings have, but it remains dormant if not consciously used; it is the active consciousness of the individual. Thus to speak of “the passion of inwardness” is to speak of the coupling of an individual’s desire and ability to make decisive action towards either valid or invalid objects of satisfaction (more will be said in Part 2.2 regarding valid objects of satisfaction).

1.4 Final Remarks

(i) Kierkegaard vs Climacus: A final note on interpretation

Most philosophers today feel comfortable in faithfully maintaining both an adherence to Kierkegaard’s wish that the pseudonyms be considered the authors of their subsequent works, as well as subscribing many of the key viewpoints the pseudonyms express as Kierkegaard’s own as well.²⁷ The chief reason for this is the corroboration Kierkegaard’s detailed journals provide on many of the arguments found in the pseudonymous authorship. Simply because Kierkegaard agreed with much of what the pseudonyms say, however, is not reason enough to ignore them, for a few simple reasons: 1) Kierkegaard intentionally orchestrated the pseudonymous works to be read mindful of the personality quirks of his individual pseudonyms, where there would be a loss if they were ignored, and 2) it is not unreasonable to consider the pseudonyms as real people, in the sense that two colleagues in a philosophy department might agree on many points of an issue and disagree on others (i.e. there is no exclusivity or “all or nothing” aspect to sharing a viewpoint). Since I am interested in Kierkegaard’s thoughts on truth, and since a majority of scholars today feel comfortable in ascribing many of the opinions of the *Postscript* to Kierkegaard himself, I will feel free to cautiously and critically do the same in the conclusion of this thesis.

²⁶ Watkin, *Historical Dictionary*, p 131.

²⁷ Evans, *Fragments and Postscript*, p 6-9; Piety, *Ways of Knowing*, p 18.

(ii) The *Postscript* and “truth is subjectivity”

It is from this complex and multifarious context that the statement “truth is subjectivity” makes its appearance. In what is now hopefully a rather apparent observation, such a statement could not be discussed apart from that context. Pseudonymity and other indirect communication tactics alone affect the statement’s presentation, and what will be seen more clearly after discussion in Part 2 is the extent to which these tactics relate to “truth is subjectivity’s” meaning, where, ironically, the statement both lends to *and* derives its meaning from the *Postscript’s* wider purpose. In this way, to write a thesis on “truth is subjectivity” is, to a certain degree, to write a thesis on the *Postscript*.

Part 2: The Chapter and Claim “Truth is Subjectivity”

"It cannot be expressed more strongly that subjectivity is truth and that objectivity only thrusts away..." — Postscript, p 213

2.1 Introduction to the Statement

Johannes Climacus' statement “truth is subjectivity” is provocative. It appears to be “an absolute denial of all dialectical powers and values” that “smacks of romanticism, of relativism, of self-assertion,” where it could not get any closer to “offend[ing] philosophical sensibility more.”²⁸ Some philosophers have even felt that there is no alternative but to treat the statement “truth is subjectivity” as an ironic example of definitions' capriciousness, as to consider the alternative of taking the statement as a serious claim would be too remarkable given its *prima facie* meaning.²⁹ However, since Climacus cannot be naive to how evocative “truth is subjectivity” sounds, his choice of phrasing suggests there is a deliberate reason behind the choice of alarming his readers. Rather than encourage a suspension of reason or a complete distrust of declarative statements, Climacus wants to encourage thoughtfulness in his reader. There is a clue that suggests this in the full title of “truth is subjectivity's” chapter: “Subjective Truth, Inwardness; Truth is Subjectivity.” The additional terms, especially “inwardness,” suggest the possibility of a more nuanced meaning. Inwardness has connotations of self-awareness and personal reflection, which, when paired with “truth is subjectivity,” suggest that the intended perspective is more reflective. Rather than looking for the reaction “this is absurd!”, Climacus is aiming for something less incredulous, perhaps “how astonishing, what could this mean?” The statement is designed to be attention-grabbing without “offending philosophical sensibility” beyond the reach of persuasion.

²⁸ Holmer, Paul 2012, *On Kierkegaard and the Truth*, ed. David Gouwens and Lee Barrett, 25. James Clarke & Co Ltd., p 109; Hannay, Alastair. 2003. “The ‘What’ in the ‘How’” in *Kierkegaard and Philosophy: Selected Essays*. London: Routledge, p 105.

²⁹ For example, see philosophers Henry E. Allison and James Conant. Courtesy of Hannay, Alastair 2003, “Climacus Among the Philosophers” in *Kierkegaard and Philosophy: Selected Essays*. London. Routledge, p 9.

The main purpose of this section will be to understand what Climacus means by this statement. It will be concluded that Climacus is doing something altogether different with “truth is subjectivity” than advancing an individual relativist interpretation of truth. The effect of the claim is threefold: 1) it facilitates critique of an approach to problem-solving many philosophers take, 2) it suggests that there are various truth types that must be treated differently from each other, and, perhaps most importantly, 3) it summarises Climacus' entire thesis of existential living in one small phrase.

“Truth is Subjectivity” is directly related to the question Climacus poses at the beginning of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, which was “how can I share in the eternal happiness that Christianity promises”?³⁰ That is, it is directed at essential truth rather than alternative truth types (such as mathematical truth).³¹ Also, to be reiterated, Climacus assumes that eternal happiness is something all people desire. He believes it is intrinsic to humans that they long for things that eternally satisfy, and furthermore believes that anyone who is honest with himself, and who sets aside his training in skepticism, will recognize this desire within himself. That is, Climacus believes no *existing* reader will deny the legitimacy of his question. This is an instance where Climacus’ predilection to assume the philosophical justification of particular issues comes out, which quite clearly goes against the articulation and justification traditional philosophers prefer of such concepts as “eternal happiness.” However, Climacus wants his reader to interact differently with his content than she is used to.

The first part of this section engages in a critical exposition of significant moments within the first 15 pages of “Truth is Subjectivity,” where Climacus builds up to, and then finally reveals, “truth is subjectivity” as a statement. This section will then be followed by remarks on how the reader’s experience of reading the chapter “Truth is Subjectivity” plays a significant role in conveying “truth is subjectivity’s” message to the individual, where it will

³⁰ *Postscript*, p 17.

³¹ *Postscript*, p 199.

be seen that “truth is subjectivity’s linguistic meaning, though important, is less convincing left apart from the reader’s personal experience of reading the chapter “Truth is Subjectivity” under Climacus’ influence of indirect communication. Without such a personal experience of Climacus’ creative and far-reaching use of indirect communication methods, “truth is subjectivity” more easily reverts into the nonsensical claim that at first appearance it seems to be. Therefore, particularly during the expositional section of this chapter, the reader is asked to suspend critical judgement of the validity of “truth is subjectivity” as a statement. Hopefully it will become clear that Climacus uses language in a more dialectical way than is typical for institutional philosophical writing. The further one investigates, the more it is seen that truth *per se* is less important to Climacus than the statement “truth is subjectivity” might suggest.

One final precursory note: this thesis does not exhaust all of the different argumentative angles Climacus elicits in order to explain “truth is subjectivity.” Themes such as the-truth-as-paradox and Socrates as the prime example of the subjective individual living out “truth is subjectivity” have had to remain almost entirely unmentioned, despite their operation throughout the chapter. The strategy here has been to prioritize the most direct passages related to “truth is subjectivity,” rather than explicate the more complex and longer-running themes that correlate “truth is subjectivity” to Christianity.

2.2 In Quest of Certainty: Beings, Existence, and “Truth is Subjectivity”

The chapter “Truth is Subjectivity” opens powerfully with a presentation of two philosophical approaches to truth:

Whether truth is defined more empirically as the agreement of thinking with being or more idealistically as the agreement of being with thinking, the point in each case is to pay scrupulous attention to what is understood by being and also to pay attention to whether the knowing human spirit might not be lured out into the indefinite and fantastically become something such as no *existing* human being has ever been or can be, a phantom with which the individual busies himself on occasion, yet without ever making it explicit to himself by means of dialectical middle terms how he gets out into this

fantastical realm, what meaning it has for him to be there, whether the entire endeavor out there might not dissolve into a tautology within a rash, fantastical venture.³²

Either truth is defined from a more empirical angle as “the agreement of thinking with being” or from more idealistic angle as “the agreement of being with thinking.” This disjunction is meant to account for all practicing philosophers, as they dependably seem to stress either the sensing person (a traditionally empirical stance) or the rational mind as the appropriate starting point from which to derive certain, or at least the probable, philosophical knowledge. Yet Climacus wonders what precisely is understood by “being”, and why does such an invocation not give the philosopher pause? Such pause is crucial for Climacus; through it, he stresses how a danger is present in either of these classical approaches. The danger is the assumption that “being” (as regards human beings, or agents in the world) is already understood well enough, and that invoking such a concept is therefore a secure enough place from which to philosophize. Such false confidence will only lead these philosophers into further error, Climacus argues, having them “lured out” into speculative problem-solving which draws “fantastical” conclusions that bear nothing on reality. Climacus does not mean to suggest these classical treatments of being are wholly without their use — there are conceivable contexts where such abstractions might be useful. However, his main objection is that their understanding of being is too intellectual and too quick to presuppose the *work* such a conception of being is able to produce. Just how this is the case Climacus is quick to elaborate. However, before continuing, there is a small objection against Climacus that needs addressing.

One might object that Climacus is being biased in his choice of focusing on the concept of being over the concept of thought, and that by so doing he falls into his own trap of philosophizing from one of these two perspectives by favoring being over thought (i.e. empiricism). This would be a justified observation, if Climacus were asking to be read in the same way as empiricists and idealists, as a philosopher attempting to solve the “problem” of relating to essential truth. However, Climacus has tried to make it clear from the very start

³² *Postscript*, p 189.

that this is precisely what he does not want to do, to philosophize towards an answer, as philosophy for Climacus is to act much more as a dialectician who describes rather than as a theorist who solves.³³ Here, then, at the beginning of the chapter “Truth is Subjectivity,” all Climacus wants to point out is that being and thought cannot be torn as cleanly apart as has been traditionally done (see the phrase “the knowing human spirit” above). To be a (human) being *is* to be a thinker, and vice versa. Furthermore, to be an existing being is to be an individual with the potential (the “possibility” in Climacus’ language) to actualize truths in the world. One way in which Climacus makes this distinct for his Danish readers is by using the two different Danish words, “*existere*” [to exist, in the sense of ethical-religious striving] and “*være til*” [to exist, in the sense of mere physical existence].³⁴ When Climacus says above that one becomes “something such as no existing human being [*existerende Menneske*] has ever been,” he uses the former term to suggest that he is after an answer that encapsulates both being *and* thought. “[T]he knowing spirit is an existing spirit, and that every human being is such a spirit existing for himself, I cannot repeat often enough, because the fantastical disregard of this has been the cause of much confusion.”³⁵ Through repetitions of this sentiment throughout not only the chapter “Truth is Subjectivity” but the entire *Postscript* as well, Climacus stresses a treatment of being that is faithful to the idea of being alive, which is to include all of the “messiness” that comes along with life.

In pointing out the shortcomings of the traditional philosophical method in ascertaining essential truth, Climacus starts with the empiricist. The issue with empirical investigation is its arrival at what Climacus terms “approximate [*Approximation*] knowledge,” where

³³ See for example *Postscript*, p 55-57.

Also note that this perspective on philosophy as a type of describing is not exclusive to Kierkegaard; there are others who philosophize from this perspective as well, such as the later phenomenologists. The main critique here is against the classical approaches to philosophy, many of which are still active today, which believe that new knowledge can be gained through theorizing.

³⁴ Watkin, *Historical Dictionary*, p 80.

³⁵ *Postscript*, p 189.

empirical methods can only, even at their best, offer an investigator approximate truths.³⁶ Climacus focuses on two reasons why empirical investigation is both inappropriate and unsatisfactory for existential inquiry: 1) that a beginning to any answer cannot be established absolutely and 2) that any beginning cannot be settled upon apart from some kind of presuppositional desire (which is a problem for empirical methodologies, as they want to be evidence driven, which requires a degree of impartiality). Reason 1) draws attention to one aspect of presuppositional posturing, where Climacus is asking “why there, instead of here” for answer-forming, whereas with reason 2) Climacus stresses how one’s presuppositions are not governed by reason alone. Climacus then turns, with even more ardor, to the idealist.

With idealism (often represented facetiously with Gottlieb Fichte’s *I-I*), the problem resides in how it abstracts away from an individual and the world, thereby drawing “fantastical” and “extraordinary” conclusions that bear no resemblance to reality. That is, by virtue of its method, idealism turns a being into an abstract concept from which to theorize, which then alienates the concept from its reality. This then creates a problem from the very start of the investigation, as the exercise becomes a tautology, with being and thinking both treated as abstract concepts. This exercise in abstraction then becomes an exercise in redundancy, as all abstraction has to say is what is already known — that the truth *is*.³⁷ In other words, with being and thinking rendered abstractly, their agreement becomes as abstract as they are. To regard truth in this way, then, is to bar the existing (non-abstract) individual from it, which is contrary to the purposes of an existing individual. Climacus scoffs at the idea of an existing individual discovering truth that is totally alienated from his nature.

With these arguments against them, then, Climacus has found traditional philosophy’s efforts at ascertaining essential truth wanting. Empiricism at best brings about approximate truth and idealism’s certitude remains an abstraction that bears no necessary resemblance to reality.

³⁶ Piety, M. G 2010, “The Epistemology of the Postscript,” in *Kierkegaard’s “Concluding Unscientific Postscript” -- A Critical Guide*, ed. Furtak, Rick, Cambridge Critical Guides. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p 191, 200.

³⁷ *Postscript*, p 190.

One need not be caught between the two poles of approximation and abstraction, however; one can address the legitimate desire for certainty another way by recognizing the simple fact that “it is an existing spirit who asks about truth, presumably because he wants to exist in it... [I]n any case the questioner is conscious of being an existing individual human being.” For Climacus, the fact that the one who questions is the one who exists, should be the guiding line for an appropriate method of inquiry. Since a real existing person is asking questions of his life *qua* existor, it follows that the mode of answering such a question should be as tied to existence or reality as he is himself. In other words, a reorientation of perspective is needed. Empiricism and idealism are both forms of objective reflection, and as such they both misjudge what a being is — an *existing* human being that is concerned with issues of infinitude and, subsequently, essential truth. Though the faculties of observation, experience, and reason are of great value and use, they will only be tools of misunderstanding if not wielded with sensitivity to a question’s object and context. There is a temptation to assume “an intellectual core to every human activity, [where] all...concepts are intrinsically cognitive” that must be resisted.³⁸ It is in light of the whole human self, in other words, that reason and objective reflection must be used, and not the other way around. It is also from this place that a subject’s certainty comes from — from the confidence she has in the consciousness her own existence. This is to be subjectively reflective, where it is acknowledged that the original question of essential truth arose from the subject’s sense of personal being.

However, this may still not move the critic. Why cannot a mediation between objectivity and subjectivity take place? Climacus considers this, but only briefly, as this objection only shows that the critic misunderstands Climacus’ meta-argument. For him, the subjective and objective *perspectives* are incompatible. That one exists remains the key in how to answer questions that stem from existence. It is a human being’s existing that “precisely [prevents] him from going both ways [objectively and subjectively] at once.” To make a proposal of mediation, then, is actually to widen the net of the objective perspective by attempting to

³⁸ Holmer, *On Truth*, p 120.

account for how an existing being relates to essential truth. To objectify the claims of the subjective perspective is not beyond the power of objective reflection, and it is precisely this that Climacus wishes to avoid.

Climacus turns his energies towards the opposing merits of objective and subjective reflection with a memorable anecdote about madness and lunacy. One of the merits objectivity claims for itself, he says, is protection against lunacy and madness. If one has well supported facts and rigorously reasoned arguments he is considered to be of sound mind. Such a belief is unfounded, however, as one can be both perfectly objective and perfectly mad. To give a vivid example, Climacus relates a story of a madman who has broken free from an asylum, anxious to preserve his freedom by proving to his friends in a nearby town that he is of sound mind. He decides the best way to do this is to state objectively true things, and as he walks along thinking about this he finds a skittle ball on the side of the road and absentmindedly puts it in his back pocket. Every step he takes following, when the ball bounces off of his behind, the roundness of the ball inspires him to say “Boom! The earth is round.”³⁹ He arrives in town, finds the house of one of his friends, and repeatedly says “Boom! The earth is round” as he tries his best to convince his fellow that he is sane. “And is the earth not round,” Climacus asks? Subsequently, madness is found wherever “an assistant professor, every time his coattail reminds him to say something, says *de omnibus dubitandum est* [everything must be doubted] and briskly writes away on a system in which there is sufficient internal evidence in every other sentence that the man has never doubted anything.” Climacus’ point is not that it is mad to make use of objective reflection. His point is that the virtue of having objective knowledge does not automatically make one sane — a common belief among those who use objective reflection to search for *any* answers, whether they be mathematical, scientific, ethical, or religious. But it is madness for an existing individual, who requires the inspiration of passion and inwardness to relate to ethical and religious matters, to expect objective reflection to divulge the right answers when asking

³⁹ An insight into this example comes, with thanks, from Piety, M. G. “Erasmus Montanus,” *Piety on Kierkegaard*, blog post, May 16, 2016.

about essential truth. Objective reflection wrongly gives the impression it is foolproof against madness, whereas subjective reflection does not purport that. However, the fears of madness in subjective reflection are legitimate, and Climacus is well aware that without any kind of checks and balances (which objective reflection is excellent at providing), nothing keeps subjectivity from being an alternative type of madness.

Climacus cites Don Quixote as a good example of what subjective madness looks like. Don Quixote has “the passion of inwardness” fixed on “a particular fixed finite idea,” and is in this way insane.⁴⁰ It is not Don Quixote’s passion nor his continual acting upon this passion that qualifies him as mad, however, but it is the *misdirection* of his passion. That is, it is the object on which one’s passion is fixated that constitutes whether or not one’s subjectivity is sane (given that existing individuals are eternally-motivated beings seeking essential truth). If one’s passion, which is what enables a finite person to relate to infinite concepts (such as God), fixates on something that is temporal and finite, this subjectivity becomes a type of madness (for Climacus), as an infinitely-motivated yet finite being is asking a finite object to fulfill an infinite desire. The right type of subjectivity, by contrast, passionately fixates on appropriate ethical or religious objects. Since questions of ethical and religious concern are issues of interest to all human beings, and since such concerns are the higher concerns passion can fixate upon, it remains that any finite object passion directs itself towards is a misappropriation for that individual. In this way, madness is present whenever there is either a lack of inwardness (objectivity) or a misdirected inwardness (subjectivity), leaving both objective and subjective reflection equal in their vulnerability to being mad.

Climacus spends little time defending how one successfully differentiates between valid and invalid objects of passion.⁴¹ Instead it seems that Climacus is satisfied such a worry is accounted for in the process of “becoming a self” (a Kierkegaardian phrase meant to encapsulate the process of learning how to live well). This suggests a kind of innate objective

⁴⁰ *Postscript*, p 195-196.

⁴¹ Pojman, Louis P. 1981, “The Logic of Subjectivity,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 19 (1), p 76-77.

standard within a person, which is guided by the questions of eternal desire, where as one grows in greater and ever-growing degrees of interestedness, one discovers what is appropriate for the passions to fixate upon (“interestedness” largely involving the choice one makes to keep the realization active that one is an existing being with the potential of possible action). C. Stephen Evans summarizes the situation well when he says that, for Climacus,

[p]assion directed to what is momentary and temporal necessarily takes on a momentary and temporal character itself. It thus fails to provide the continuity and wholeness the exister seeks. This is generally more assumed than argued for by Climacus, but he clearly accepts the thesis that existence in the true sense can only be constructed around eternal values, and is therefore ethical existence.⁴²

To further investigate the justificatory force of this assumption would require delving deeper into Climacus’ and Kierkegaard’s understanding of the life stages. However, it is a fair objection that an existing agent’s ability to tell the difference between legitimate and illegitimate objects of ethical and religious passion is left too ambiguous by Climacus.

The question is now returned to: why is subjective reflection superior to objective reflection?

The following excerpt, though dense, sheds some light on this:

Here it is not forgotten, even for a single moment, that the subject is existing, and that existing is becoming, and that truth as the identity of thought and being is therefore a chimera of abstraction and truly only a longing of creation, not because truth is not an identity, but because the knower is an existing person, and thus truth cannot be an identity for him as long as he exists. If this is not held fast, then with the aid of speculative thought we promptly enter into the fantastical *I-I* that recent speculative thought certainly has used but without explaining how a particular individual relates himself to it, and, good Lord, of course no human being is more than a particular individual.⁴³

Given that 1) subjects are finite existing beings and that 2) existing entails living forward through time, guided by one’s intentions, it follows that 3) absolute fixed truth is not something attainable in either a finite or temporal way. That is, the existing individual wants truth to be something graspable (an “identity” that he can obtain if he works hard enough

⁴² Evans, *Fragments and Postscript*, p 72.

⁴³ *Postscript*, p 196-197.

after it), but it cannot be despite his longing for it to be so. The idea of “longing” is a new articulation here, which Climacus uses in an interesting way by suggesting that it presents a fork in the road for the existing individual. Given one’s longing for essential truth and the impossibility of obtaining essential truth, how should an individual proceed? Objective reflection, in this particular excerpt, fails to satisfy due to the inability of a *particular* individual to relate to a *general* concept; if the individual pursues truth objectively as an identity anyway, then he is as “fantastical” as Fichte’s abstract *I-I*. Subjective reflection remains the only alternative. It is one’s longing for essential truth that helps the existor realize that he has been asking objective questions about essential truth and expecting justified answers of the empirical or ideal sort up to this point. Now with objectivity’s failure, there is still reason enough (given one’s longing) to reconsider the way in which he goes about inquiring after essential truth. Given that subjectivity may still make use of reason while it is also exercising inwardness and passion, subjective reflection finds itself superior to objectivity. Note that for Climacus, an existing agent’s inability to obtain certainty does not imply that truth does not exist, or that it must be an illusion. All the individual’s inability to fulfill this longing suggests is that truth cannot be an identity for *her* as long as she exists as a finite being. The “radical temporality of the human condition [remains] the barrier to absolute knowledge.”⁴⁴

Another way that Climacus argues for subjectivity’s superiority to objectivity is through the assertion that it is ‘how’ one relates to truth, rather than ‘what’ truth is: “Objectively the emphasis is on what is said; subjectively the emphasis is on how it is said.”⁴⁵ Alternative translations of the Danish text render it “the objective accent falls on what is said, the subjective on how it is said.”⁴⁶ It is important understand that Climacus does not mean a

⁴⁴ Westphal, Merold 1996, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, p 114.

⁴⁵ *Postscript* p 202, bold type original to quote.

⁴⁶ Hannay, Alastair trans. 2009, Cambridge University Press, p 170; Swenson, David & Lowrie, Walter trans. 1941, Princeton University Press, p 181.

subject's mere performance or mode of delivery when speaking of 'how.'⁴⁷ Rather, 'how' is the way in which, through inwardness, one is *related* to the content of truth claims, where that relation is what then brings an agent to act. Decisions occur when an existing being's passion launches him into action, given how he received a truth claim (i.e. given the what). Bereft of acting in the world (made possible through a decision), an individual finds himself no better or worse off, irrespective of the soundness of his truth claims. One can recite sound truth claims with glazed eyes and a dispassionate spirit all day long without taking part in decisive action, which nullifies the original purpose of discovering truth (the original purpose being to live well by truth, ethically and religiously). Truth claims alone are not adequate to realize the goal of truthful living. For Climacus, "moral experience [is] the medium in which truth is disclosed," and the claim that subjectivity cares more about 'how' than 'what' is playing an important role in putting pressure on philosophy's "tendency to identify the 'what' of a thought with a reality that is mind-independent and therefore, thought-independent..."⁴⁸

When Climacus speaks of 'how,' he is drawing a serious point about linguistic utterance and the truth claims' ability to bring forth or present meaning. Textbooks and dictionaries are, on Climacus' terms, strictly devoid of meaning. It is with conveyers that utterances are used to an end, colored by the individual's intentions, desires, and purposes. For example, reading with an objective perspective it easily sounds like "the how over the what" is recommending a full-blown relativism, where conviction and sincerity are all that are required to bring about "more truth." If meant in this way, Climacus' claim would be worthy of rejection. However reading from a subjective perspective the reader first remembers that written conveyance is bound by limitations (e.g. it is impossible to give perfect understanding of one's point to a reader with a no-fail rate), and second, that the context, purpose, and intention of the author largely shapes the meaning his claim conveys. Speaking utterances and being on the receiving end of them is an involved process for an individual, there being no such thing as a neutral human agent.

⁴⁷ *Postscript*, p 202-203.

⁴⁸ Hannay, "The 'What' in the 'How'," p 105.

Scholars have read a great variety of interpretations out of this theme of the ‘how’ over the ‘what.’ It goes without saying that doing full justice to it here is not possible. Stressing Climacus’ sensitivity to the difference between speaker and content, however, is one of the best points to draw from the ‘how’ before turning to discuss Climacus’ definition of truth, for it sets the reader up to interpret what such a definition is meant to do. “The how versus the what” serves as the final build up to “truth is subjectivity’s” first appearance as a proper statement in the chapter “Truth is Subjectivity.” The preceding dialogue finally cascades into the statement’s appearance, having the paradoxical effect of provoking simultaneous expectation and surprise.⁴⁹

The greatest turning point within the chapter “Truth is Subjectivity” occurs in one mighty crescendo, with three notable things happening within the space of a page: “truth is subjectivity” appears as a statement for the first time, Climacus presents a definition of truth, and both “truth is subjectivity” and the definition of truth are revealed to be none other than a direct paraphrase of faith. This text is worth relating in full:

When subjectivity is truth, the definition of truth must also contain in itself an expression of the antithesis to objectivity, a memento of that fork in the road, and this expression will at the same time indicate the resilience of the inwardness. Here is such a definition of truth: *An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person.* At the point where the road swings off (and where that is cannot be stated objectively, since it is precisely subjectivity), objective knowledge is suspended. Objectively he then has only uncertainty, but this is precisely what intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness, and truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite. I observe nature in order to find God, and I do indeed see omnipotence and wisdom, but I also see much that troubles and disturbs. The *summa summarum* [sum total] of this is an objective uncertainty, but the inwardness is so very great, precisely because it grasps this objective uncertainty with all the passion of the infinite...But the definition of truth stated above is a paraphrasing of faith...

⁴⁹ It should be noted, for accuracy’s sake, that “truth is subjectivity” only takes physical form in the title to Climacus’ chapter. Later when the statement appears in the content of the chapter, it is repeatedly as “subjectivity is truth.” I have persisted in using “truth is subjectivity” rather than “subjectivity is truth” because of the traditions within scholarly literature on Kierkegaard.

Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty.⁵⁰

Previously, truth was left by objective reflection as something that cannot not be grasped with certainty, being either approximate or abstract. This meant that it is not possible to reach a full certainty of truth given the finite limits of human beings. Now, after Climacus' dialogue arguing for the supremacy of subjective reflection over objectivity, truth is again directly turned to. Climacus summarizes the old discussion on truth by referring to it as "objective uncertainty." Objective uncertainty, Climacus reminds his reader, is unavoidable for any existing individual *regardless* of whether she is objectively or subjectively reflective, the difference between the two coming in what one *does* with objective uncertainty. The objective individual will accept objective uncertainty in any degree of ways (from settling with probabilistic truth claims to trying to overcome it through alternative theoretical means), whereas the subjective individual embraces objective uncertainty with passion; "truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite." This means that in spite of objective uncertainty, the individual finds reason to live with confidence by a different kind of certainty. In other words, the finite individual acknowledges the existence of certainty based on the confidence of its possibility, and not based on the individual's limited abilities to understand or explain it. This is a way of saying that life is a paradox. The individual is finitely bound, infinitely longing for eternal happiness, and at no disposal to enjoin the two together in a way that she fully understands. Such a paradox is the only certainly that exists — that the passionate and eternally longing individual lives in an objectively uncertain world. One's inwardness grasps this paradox, and lives accordingly. Such a life, ethically speaking, is a striving towards living in conformity to the prescriptive values of ethics, whereas religiously speaking it is a striving in the God-relationship (again, that Climacus is inarticulate regarding how one determines the correct ethical-religious values is acknowledged). It is in this way that "truth is subjectivity" is synonymous to faith.

⁵⁰ *Postscript*, p 203-204.

“All knowledge, for Kierkegaard, ultimately rests on faith, either implicitly or explicitly, in the truth of the presuppositions on which it is based...an appreciation of the contingency, or relativity, of all human knowledge was [fundamental to] Kierkegaard...”⁵¹ In stressing objective uncertainty so seriously, Climacus wishes to make clear that any viewpoint one takes of a truth claim will, fundamentally, be upheld by a presupposition of some kind. This is faith, to chose to act with certainty *in spite of* the inability to explain or empirically justify that certainty. That is, truth comes via the mode of faith for Climacus because 1) of the inescapability of objective uncertainty *a posteriori* and 2) because a knower always invokes a presupposition that *a priori* precedes rational engagement.

The definition of truth Climacus provides in the quote above is meant to serve as a reminder to the existing individual striving under subjectivity why objectivity must be consistently resisted. It is notable that Climacus suggests *a* definition of truth rather than *the* definition of truth, which speaks further to the purpose of presenting such a definition – it is a memory to cling to rather than a rigid maxim to follow. That is, the definition acts as “a memento of that fork in the road” for the subjectively-striving individual to remember in order to keep persisting in subjectivity. Also to note about the definition is that it covers not only what traditional philosophers are interested in with matters concerning truth (namely, certainty), but accounts for the method of engaging with truth as well. That is, the content and the mode are treated as inseparable and fundamentally related, which goes against philosophy’s foundationalist-driven, means-to-an-end perspective of the preceding 200 years of philosophy. For example, Locke and Hume, two very different philosophers, in their own separate ways *treated* essential truth with the same regard (i.e. as an objective thing), and thereby drew conclusions that emphasized both what one could and could not know given rationally accessible and acceptable evidence. For Climacus their results only provide dispassionate answers, as they do not require the individual to persist in actualizing their truths (i.e. they don’t require one be impassioned about them). This is a worry because for

⁵¹ Piety, *Ways of Knowing*, p 12.

Climacus it is this very persistence in striving for and acting upon essential truth that sees one living truth-fully and experiencing one's own existence.

So far what "truth is subjectivity" means has been addressed in a straightforward manor. Given that truth cannot be approached outside of the finite individual person, truth must accordingly be treated with conscious inwardness and directed passion (i.e. treated with subjectivity). "Truth is subjectivity," in other words, includes both how truth should be approached and how it will be encountered. Yet how is the reader to interpret "truth is subjectivity" given the *Postscript's* style of indirect communication? Such a style affects the reader's experience as he engages with Climacus' arguments, and how this might affect the interpretation and meaning of "truth is subjectivity" needs to be considered.

2.3 The Experience of Reading "Truth is Subjectivity"

The chapter "Truth is Subjectivity" presents an impressive array of Climacus' indirect communication tactics, all of which profoundly affect the reader. The serious arguments are frequently interrupted with satirically invoked cultural references (e.g. "Poor Hamann, you have been reduced to a subsection by Michelet"), memorable stories (e.g. the madman) and sheer exclamations (e.g. "What wondrous understanding!"; "But Socrates!"). Rhetorical questions are often used (e.g. "But what then?"; "Why not?"), as well as vivid jabs at Climacus' antithesis of objectivity and systematic thought (e.g. "...if philosophers nowadays had not become *pencil-pushers* serving *the trifling busyness of fantastical thinking*, it would have discerned that *suicide* is the only somewhat practical interpretation of its attempt.").⁵² All of these tactics are designed to engage the full person, having the effect of drawing the reader deeper into the narrative and getting behind her analytical guard. To add to this array is Climacus' use of the element of surprise. Just where the reader is likely to get comfortable with the direction of Climacus' argument, a surprise is intentionally placed. The first of these surprises has already been mentioned, where Climacus claims that "truth is subjectivity" is an

⁵² *Postscript*, p 197, italics added.

alternative description of what faith is. The second sits right before Climacus' recollection of "the garden of the dead" at the end of the chapter, where he claims that Christianity is "indeed just possibl[y] true," which appears to be at odds with his claim of not being a Christian. His defense against such an appearance then takes the form of a poetic recollection of his time spent in "the garden of the dead," where he, as a non-Christian, became specifically interested in the question of relating to Christianity truthfully. Climacus' recollection will serve as a good example of what reading "Truth is Subjectivity" is like, and how the reader is affected by his method of indirect communication. It involves the themes of certainty, faith, and inwardness, all of which are central importance to "truth is subjectivity's" meaning. Throughout it all it will be seen that the the "garden of the dead" recollection and the "truth is subjectivity" theme are meant to present the reader "with a choice about how to carry on his or her life. And of course a choice of the form of one's own individual life is not something to which the presentation of a general doctrine, applicable to anyone or everyone, will contribute..."⁵³

Climacus recalls how four years ago, on a Sunday evening, "contrary to my usual practice," he went to visit a place he calls "the garden of the dead," which turns out to be a graveyard. With evening's approach, he considers how the fading of the day acts like a "caring mother's instruction" to beckon one back inside, and how an equal pull to stay out in the night is like an "inexplicable beckoning, as if rest were to be found only if one remained out for a nocturnal rendezvous..."⁵⁴ This mood is important, as it suggests how settings and contexts affect meaning (a point Climacus has been driving at throughout the chapter). As Edward Mooney points out "[i]t is the setting of mobile and varying things that speak, the fluid settings, lyrically evoked, that give abstractions life, and from which dialectical formulas (at some risk) are removed... To leap immediately to dialectical formulations, and stay there, is

⁵³ Hannay, "Climacus," p 8.

⁵⁴ *Postscript*, p 235.

to risk missing the animating surround.”⁵⁵ Though wordless settings do not hold pregnant meanings by virtue of themselves (an existing human being is the critical element to every question of meaning), Mooney is right to observe that Climacus wants to show here that “rushing” straight to dialectical formulas makes one prone to presupposing that setting and context are always neutral canvases. Though it is true that, up to this point, Climacus has been presenting a logical argument for subjective reflection over objectivity, this does not involve him in contradiction. Since Climacus maintains a perspective of how different types of communication play unique roles, it is rather through pitting his argumentative presentation of “truth is subjectivity” against this present literary encounter that Climacus expects the reader to become convinced of the truthfulness of his message — the analytic *and* personal sides of an existing human being are both being addressed.

As Climacus walks alone in the misty evening and ruminates on how the dead pose a good example of what true inwardness is like, he finds a secluded bench upon which to sit and rest. From the cover of this resting place he begins to overhear an emotive conversation between two mourners that are unaware of his nearby presence and, fearing “that the noise of my leaving might disturb more than my staying there quietly,” he remains where he is and witnesses a scene that leaves him “deeply affected.” He sees through the trees a grandfather and a grandson standing before a freshly covered grave, grieving the loss of a relative: the old man’s son and the young boy’s father. It comes out that the young ten year old is now an orphan, with only his aged grandfather left to him as kin. This is a frightful thing for the grandfather, as he realizes his own time on this earth is short and that very soon, the boy will not only be alone in the world but will be without anyone to see that, as he grows up, he does not forsake his faith. “[I]n a voice the impression of which I shall never forget...,” Climacus tells us, the grandfather entreats out of desperation for the child to promise he will not grow up to search for a “certainty greater than that of faith;” that “you will hold fast to this faith in life and in death, that you will not let yourself be deceived by any phantom, no matter how

⁵⁵ Mooney, Edward 2010, “From the garden of the dead: Climacus on interpersonal inwardness,” in *Kierkegaard's 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript': A Critical Guide*, ed. Furtak, Rick, Cambridge Critical Guides. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 66-67.

the shape of the world is changed...”⁵⁶ The grandfather’s angst is evoked and compounded by his grief over the loss of his own son’s faith. “...that he, my unhappy son, should have allowed himself to be deceived! For what purpose, then, all his learning, so that he could not even make himself intelligible to me, so that I could not speak with him about his error because it was too elevated for me!”⁵⁷ Climacus knows immediately what the old man is referring to, as he had come upon this “dubious relation” between Christian speculative thought and Christian faith in his own studies — that the more one engages in speculative thought about matters of religion and faith, the more he acts as if he does not have faith himself. (This disjunction is a more specific presentation of the same divergence between objectivity and subjectivity discussed in 2.2, where “truth is subjectivity” and faith are called paraphrases of each other.) Climacus tells us, his readers, that this realization had always been a disinterested observation of his until this garden episode. The old man’s inability to understand or articulate why appealing to the latest systematic philosophy of the day hastens away one’s faith, coupled with his almost frantic demand of a promise from his grandson, is what personally moves Climacus to discover “a definite clue” as to what this “ultimate misunderstanding” is. It is from this scene that Climacus ultimately concludes that because of much knowledge “people in our day have forgotten what it means to exist, and what inwardness is.”⁵⁸

This recollection of the garden of the dead is presented by Climacus as a defense for how he could write *Fragments* and the *Postscript* as a non-Christian. At face value this is, at best, an interesting account that Climacus deemed necessary to convince the reader he is not being deceptive about his project and his own beliefs. What is *actually* happening in these final pages of “Truth is Subjectivity” to the reader himself, however, provides an even greater motive for Climacus’ inclusion of the recollection, regardless of whether the reader recognizes this or not. Two points will be stressed here: 1) by presenting such an emotive

⁵⁶ *Postscript*, p 238.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Postscript*, p 249.

personal experience Climacus is drawing the reader in as a unique individual, and 2) the way Climacus uses indirect communication immediately following the events of the garden of the dead speak to the reader in one of the most intimate moments of the entire chapter, which heightens the chances of successfully engaging the reader's own inwardness. Both of these aspects enhance the reader's experience of reading "Truth is Subjectivity."

In speaking of cool beckoning nights and seeking out benches on which to sit out of fatigue, Climacus is invoking individual experiences and memories. Through such personal reflections, the reader is invited to imagine himself in the scene as well, and, with such an invitation, the reader is softened and beguiled. The entry of the grandfather and the grandson to the scene only intensifies this involvement — who has not been in that peculiar and awkward situation himself, where he is caught in a position that allows him to accidentally overhear a private conversation? With the reader's imagination fully engaged as the story unfolds, she finds, whatever her opinions on *what* has been said, that she can sympathize with the grandfather's perspective, the grandson's overwhelmed response, and with Climacus's response of being deeply impressed by the matter. All of this invites the reader's own inwardness to engage, which is a critical element needed for an individual to accept "truth is subjectivity's" message for herself. That is, with the inwardness of the reader stimulated, she is in a position to recognize that essential truth is something that can only matter to someone personally involved with it; personal inwardness allows for the acceptance of "truth is subjectivity."

An additional way Climacus uses indirect communication to convince his reader is by relating the garden of the dead scene in such a way as to make the reader feel she is in special confidence with Climacus. For example, as Climacus continues to unfold how his thoughts on "the misunderstanding" developed after the garden of the dead experience, he speaks of "people" in general. "My main thought was that, because of the copiousness of knowledge, people in our day have forgotten what it means *to exist*, and what *inwardness* is, and that the misunderstanding between speculative thought and Christianity could be explained by

that.”⁵⁹ Yet in speaking about “people” Climacus is directly speaking of the *existing* individual reader, where it is up to the reader’s own self to realize this connection. This may be the most powerful part of the entire chapter, with the reader being gripped the tightest while Climacus speaks behind the thinnest of veils as he continues his recounting of how his project developed. In this way, the reader almost does not have the chance to realize that Climacus goes from talking expressly about himself to talking about the reader as well.

An additional example of Climacus’ thoughts on misunderstanding show this even further:

Only the person who has an idea of a misunderstanding’s tenacity in assimilating even the most rigorous attempt at explanation and yet remaining a misunderstanding, only he will be aware of the difficulty of an authorship in which care must be taken with every word...[d]irect communication about what it means to exist and about inwardness will only have the result that the speculative thinker will benevolently take it in hand and let one slip in along with it.⁶⁰

Here Climacus continues to speak as if he were thinking out loud, this time with respect to the faceless “person,” which treats the reader as an observer listening in on a personal accounting rather than as someone who is on the receiving end of a didactic message (of which, in actuality, this is). By orienting his message apparently toward something other than the reader, Climacus gets behind the reader’s analytic defenses. Just as the grandfather’s message to his grandson was not directed at Climacus, so here Climacus treats the reader as if his message were not directed at the individual reader specifically, but instead gives the reader an “in on the secret” feeling.⁶¹ This encourages the reader to agree with Climacus by striving to see his point, which has a high likelihood of engaging the reader’s inward sympathy toward the truthfulness of “truth is subjectivity.”

⁵⁹ *Postscript*, p 249.

⁶⁰ *Postscript*, p 250.

⁶¹ The difference between the grandfather and Climacus to his reader being, of course, the difference between Climacus’ awareness of the reader’s presence and the grandfather’s lack of awareness.

One's inwardness is enlisted through the experience of engaging with Climacus' indirect communication, but does such an experience affect the meaning of "truth is subjectivity" specifically? It is with this question that the reader's current understanding of the statement's meaning is put to the test. Though conceptually coherent on its own, "truth is subjectivity" will only fully convince the individual who has lowered her analytical guard and entertained the possibility of the statement for herself personally. This is because "truth is subjectivity," it will be remembered, is subjective reflection's way of acting upon "an objective certainty held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness." In matters of eternity and essential truth, only the inwardly (and passionately) invested person will have use of ethically-religious truth claims; to speak objectively and dispassionately of the ethically-religious (or, specifically, Christianity) is to *eo ipso* be disengaged and set apart from all essential truth. In this way "truth is subjectivity" is an invitation rather than an alternative truth claim, and is therefore not asking for analytic rebuke. To engage in such a critical exercise anyway would be to miss the biggest point Climacus desires to make: that essential truth is not identifiable as cognitive knowledge, but is only successfully conveyed as a personally invested knowing. The claim, chapter, and *Postscript* itself seem to be "designed to resist not only the attention of philosophers but also serious scholarly scrutiny of any kind. [And] it would surely be a serious breach of scholarship itself to ignore such features [of indirect communication]..."⁶² In this way "truth is subjectivity" is not something one accepts, but something one realizes. It is in light of this purpose behind "truth is subjectivity" that the design of the chapter, and the reader's experience of reading through it, works to convict on an individual level.

2.5 Concluding Remarks

By first working through key sections of Climacus' chapter "Truth is Subjectivity," and then later looking at how meaning is affected by the reader's experience of indirect communication while reading this chapter, it has been shown that the statement "truth is

⁶² Hannay, Alastair 2003, "Introduction" in *Kierkegaard and Philosophy: Selected Essays*, Routledge, London, p 7.

subjectivity” is not as much a declarative statement of what truth itself *is*, but is a statement on how to go about finding it and how the individual will experience it. That is, “truth is subjectivity” is not a “philosophical indicative” but is a “rhetorical imperative,” where the individual needs a “self-relationship” to the process of investigation.⁶³ This has been a presentation and argument for what Climacus means when he says “truth is subjectivity,” but it still remains to be seen how the statement relates to the *Postscript’s* wider conception of truth. This will be pursued in the following section.

⁶³ Mackey, Louis 1962, “The Loss of the World in Kierkegaard’s Ethics,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 15, no. 4, p 602.

Part 3: Truth in the *Postscript*: A Wider Look

“...truth is not like a circular letter on which signatures are collected...”
— *Postscript*, p 243

3.1 Truth and the *Postscript*

Much can be learned about the *Postscript*'s use of truth by closely examining its Table of Contents. The first 50 pages are dedicated to “the objective issue of the truth,” broken into two types of objectivity: the historical (meant to represent evidence-based reasoning) and the speculative (meant to represent idealism). Both fail, according to Climacus to deliver what they promise, leading one into either disappointing approximate knowledge or deceptive abstract knowledge. The *Postscript* then continues into “the subjective issue,” consuming the remaining 450 pages of the *Postscript* with two sections, a combined seven chapters, two embedded appendixes, two “divisions” within a final chapter, and two subsections merely entitled “A” and “B.”⁶⁴ Half of this content deals with subjectivity as truth, before the remaining content deals directly with the guiding question “how does an individual realize his eternal happiness?” Thus, we see that truth's role as an object of interest changes as the work develops. Climacus shifts from the familiar (objective truth) to the less-familiar (truth and subjectivity), reaching a climax in the chapter “Truth is Subjectivity” where the statement “truth is subjectivity” is revealed to be a synonym for faith. This climax is a turning point because it permanently alters how truth is conceived of in the *Postscript*. Though in Climacus' mind this makes the *Postscript* through and through a discussion on the individual's relationship to truth, to others it likely appears as a radical flip that makes the sections before and after the climactic turning point of the *Postscript* very different from each other. I now turn to look at the *Postscript*'s aims in order to situate this shifting treatment of truth more contextually into the work's focused aims.

The *Postscript* does at least two main things. It pursues its guiding religious question about eternal happiness, eventually resolving it in the chapters beyond “Truth is Subjectivity,” and

⁶⁴ This appears to be a satirical parody on systematicians' own layouts.

it humbles speculative philosophy by pointing to what objective reflection can and cannot do.⁶⁵ This second aim has been addressed within the first by positing how objectivity approaches a resolution to the question versus how subjectivity approaches a resolution to the question. Speculation interprets the question “how can an existing individual receive eternal happiness” by saying “first justify these concepts, argue how they relate, and then show how a resolution is to be found”; subjective reflection, or faith as Climacus later terms it, interprets the question differently by saying “here is what I am, here is what my situation is, and here are my options. Now how shall I proceed?” Johannes Sløk provides a separate insight about Kierkegaard and Hegel that helps illuminate this present distinction on perspective:

[Hegel and Kierkegaard] are not two philosophers who had opposite thoughts on the same problem. They are two individuals who had completely different thoughts on completely different problems...The difference between them is categorical. Hegel’s categories are the world and the idea, and Kierkegaard’s categories are Man and God.⁶⁶

Despite being faced with similar philosophical issues, Hegel and Kierkegaard had radically diverging perspectives on how to approach these issues, even starting with how to formalize them. This is similar to objectivity and subjectivity — though the object in question may be similar (in this case, eternal happiness), and each perspective makes use of the same tools (such as reflection and observation), each method of reflection is wholly distinct from the other due to how they conceptualize the issue. Since Climacus maintains the primacy of the existence spheres, this means that issues themselves are to determine an individual’s choice of methodological inquiry, and not the reversal. This is possible to do only because there is a trustworthy reference point for the individual in constantly remembering one is an existing being. Being an existing person implies that the attainment of absolute certain truth is not possible for a finite individual, and so truth is found instead in the individual’s subjective

⁶⁵ It is *prima facie* surprising that a humorous work such as the *Postscript* might resolve its own question, especially given the critique it makes on systematic philosophy striving to explain ethical-religious issues.

⁶⁶ Courtesy of Piety, *Ways of Knowing*, p 6.

engagement with truth (i.e. “truth is subjectivity”). Thus, since the *Postscript’s* question is ethically-religious, Climacus stresses subjective reflection over objective reflection.

Let me draw out the point about perspective of the truth further. By asking a question one is already presupposing much, and those presuppositions reach into the type of answers an individual will acknowledge as acceptable or not. The issue for Climacus is, what if ethical and religious matters are *not* matters of explanation and knowing? If this is the case, then neither the quantity nor the quality of knowledge an individual has will be of any productive use with regard to essential truth. This issue is nicely put in a passage from the chapter “Truth is Subjectivity” on paradox and faith:

What on the whole does it mean to *explain* something? Does explaining mean to show that the obscure something in question is not this but something else? That would be a strange explanation. I should think that by the explanation it would become clear that the something in question is this definite something, so that the explanation would remove not the thing in question but the obscurity. Otherwise the explanation is something other than an explanation; it is a correction.⁶⁷

Climacus finds it strange that one should be motivated to explain (or, as we might say, explain *away*) a paradox, if indeed such a paradox is legitimate. By explaining there is the implication that the paradox was never really there to begin with, which makes the explanation a kind of deception. This harkens back to Climacus’ point about presupposing the nature of an answer, and acting according to those presuppositions. A better attitude towards a legitimate paradox, for example, would be to use explanation only to clarify. Then, still faced with the paradox, one would be in the position to ask a different type of question, such as “how do I persist in existence (i.e. living), given the presence of this paradox?” It is a different question that has nothing to do with mere propositional knowledge or objective truth claims, but living truth-fully.

This does not entail that objective reflection is without value. Climacus acknowledges the positive value of objective reflection repeatedly in the *Postscript*, shown here with two

⁶⁷ *Postscript*, p 218.

examples. First, objective reflection is valuable in generating knowledge about natural, mechanic “disinterested” things such as “railroads, machines, or kaleidoscopes.”⁶⁸ Over time this science is further improved by using a disinterested method of investigation, such as objectivity, all of which is a desirable thing. Climacus’ objections against objectivity arise only when the enthusiasm with this method’s extreme success is applied to things of a different nature, that is, matters of an *interested* nature, such as happiness or justice. Climacus’ point in arguing against objective reflection is motivated by the context of essential truth, where abstract truth claims and truth claims about things “in general” alienate the specific, particular individual.

The second example concerns speculative philosophy. Speculative philosophy is often the objective mode used to philosophize about ethical and religious truth claims, and thus for Climacus to regard it with disdain only would seem fitting. However, this is too simplistic; Climacus makes it clear that he does not object to speculative philosophy *itself*, but takes issue with the claims such all-encompassing systems necessarily make regarding ethical and religious truth. This is evidenced in the *Postscript*:

Whether speculative thought is in the right is a different question. What is asked here is only how its explanation of Christianity is related to the Christianity that it explains. And how should they be related? Speculative thought is objective, and objectively there is no truth for an existing individual but only an approximation, since by existing he is prevented from becoming entirely objective.⁶⁹

This reiterates the points made about general objective reflection above. Speculative thought could be useful or “right” about other questions, but about questions involving “existence-relationships” with truth (such as Christianity) it cannot be of use.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ *Postscript*, p 224.

3.2 A Few Objections

In summary, then, the important difference between subjectivity and objectivity is that subjectivity requires the involvement of an individual's passion and inwardness through consciously relating oneself *to* truth claims. This would be disastrous for science, but is essential for ethical-religious matters. Ethical-religious truth makes a life true by the degree and accuracy with which an individual relates herself to them, given that they are prescriptive matters. Reflection on what ethical-religious truth claims exist (i.e. Christianity), and how the subjective individual might relate herself to what these claims say, is thus one of the surest and deepest ways an existing individual may encounter truth. As I have already discussed elsewhere, the weakest issue with Climacus' stressing of subjective reflection, or "truth is subjectivity," is that he fails to more explicitly draw out how the individual might be sure she is correctly prescribing to the right ethical-religious truth claims. Trial and error appears to be the earnest individual's best and only way of eventually discovering how to truthfully engage with ethics and religion.

There is an additional worry regarding subjective reflection. How can one ensure she is not falling into objectivity or acting objectively at any given point in time? In other words, can one fall out of pursuing subjectivity? Through Climacus' descriptions and portrayal, the sense is given that becoming subjective in accordance to "truth is subjectivity" is a linear (though difficult) pathway that cannot be fallen away from, despite its becoming increasingly difficult over time.⁷⁰ That is, there seems to be a tension between the difficulty and striving required of an individual to maintain "truth is subjectivity" against the epiphany-like quality of realizing one is an *existing* being, where, with such a realization, returning back to what one once was seems impossible. This latter point is hinted at in a nebulous passage of the *Postscript*: "[i]f even Socrates comprehended the dubiousness of taking himself speculatively out of existence back into eternity, when there was no dubiousness for the existing person except that he existed and, of course, that existing was the essential—now it is impossible.

⁷⁰ *Postscript*, p 208-209.

He must go forward; to go backward is impossible.”⁷¹ There is an additional complication to this. In Climacus’ introduction he implies that once one has lost one’s passion for the infinite, the likelihood of ever receiving it back is almost certainly impossible.⁷² If this is really the case, then the *Postscript’s* unstated hope of indirectly convincing others, most of whom are already deeply entrenched in objective (thus dispassionate) thinking, seems hopeless. It could be that such a statement is meant as a scare tactic, where an individual might fear such a charge applies to herself, and thus wrenches herself back to consider her own eternal longing. However, the extent to which one can will herself to conform to a certain way of life, and the need to situate one’s agency over her own desires, is a matter that requires further support and investigation.

Despite these complications, Climacus’ accounting of essential truth as a subjectively encountered thing is a compelling account, given the faith-basis of all philosophical starting-points and the limits of objective reasoning.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² *Postscript*, p 16-17.

Conclusion

*"Perhaps, when all is said and done, it is a more healthful diet to understand little but possess this with passion's unlimited soundness in the setting of the infinite than to know much and to possess nothing because I myself have fantastically become a fantastical subjective-objective something." —
Postscript, p 183*

This thesis began by wondering what, in general, Kierkegaard's thoughts on truth are, and more specifically what the *Postscript's* claim "truth is subjectivity" means. Through a careful analysis of Climacus' key arguments on truth, leading up to the revealing of the statement "truth is subjectivity," it has been seen both through argument and demonstration that, for Climacus, truth is not an objectively-discoverable thing because of an agent's own inability to transcend beyond her finite existing self. Instead, it is precisely due to these limitations that a subject's best potential for success in encountering truth (in order to fulfill her desire for eternal happiness) is to remember this very thing — that she is an existing being. This fact, that an individual is an existing being, is imperative to remember when inquiring after essential truth because of the type of inquiry it is. How is one to live truthfully, given that there are desires for eternal happiness and a well-lived life? To seek an answer is to seek the agent's involvement with an essential truth claim; that is, it is to take the potential of a truth claim and to actualize it through the passion of inwardness. All of this means then, for Climacus, that traditional philosophy's desire to have a direct conversation about truth is *less* truthful a means of discovery, as it forgets to include the implications of a subject's existence throughout its reflective process.

All of this is the strict meaning of Climacus' statement "truth is subjectivity," that method (subjective reflection) and object (essential truth) correspond inseparably. Yet it was also argued that, given "truth is subjectivity's" meaning, appreciating the statement fully is something that can only be shown by having the reader experience it for herself. Through Climacus' extensive efforts with the methods of indirect communication, especially felt in the protracted account of "the garden of the dead," the individual reader is able to see all the more clearly, if not as well become convinced of, "truth is subjectivity's" message. In this

way “truth is subjectivity” appears more as an *observation* of what truth is rather than as an *argument* for what truth is.

The question now remains: from this understanding of “truth is subjectivity,” can one draw observations on Kierkegaard’s own thoughts about truth? In remembering Climacus’ *Postscript* and “truth is subjectivity” itself, this question is posed only in the spirit of curiosity rather than as a serious appeal to Kierkegaard *ad verecundiam*. Furthermore, it is right that everything presented in the *Postscript* is to be interpreted, strictly speaking, as Climacus’ own thoughts and opinions, not to be regarded as Kierkegaard’s own. However, just as two colleges might share opinions in the philosophy department, so too it is quite likely that Climacus and Kierkegaard agree to some extent. A few modest observations might be drawn with a look at excerpts from Kierkegaard’s journals. However, since these are private journal entries, interpretation of what Kierkegaard means will be made with modesty and caution.

Though the explicit phrase “truth is subjectivity” does not appear in Kierkegaard’s journals (which supports Climacus’ insistence that the statement is not a strict doctrine to be referred to), there are many entries on the subject of objectivity, subjectivity, and truth. Many of these, particularly the ones dated in the years immediately before and after the *Postscript*’s publication in 1846, share themes of a similar nature to “truth is subjectivity’s” message. For example, in 1845 Kierkegaard writes “[o]bjective thinking does not care at all about the thinker and finally becomes so objective that, like the customs clerk, it thinks that it merely has to do the writing, that the others have to do the reading.”⁷³ Objective thinking, Kierkegaard seems to be saying, is an incorrect way of expressing the content of life because it dissuades personal involvement, which suggests objectivity provides an allowance for laziness and inaction on the part of the knower. If this interpretation is correct, it fits in well with Climacus’ observations on the merit of objective reflection given its disinterestedness.

⁷³ JP VI 4539

Objective thinking does not care about the thinker — this is good for science, but disastrous for essential truth.

A year following this entry, another entry says “[i]f a man does not become what he understands, then he does not understand it either. Only Themistocles had an understanding of Miltiades; therefore he also became that.”⁷⁴ One gets the general sense here that if an agent does not personally involve herself with a truth claim by acting upon it, then it is likely the truth claim was never understood in the first place. Such a sentiment appears in “truth is subjectivity,” where pursuing essential truth requires the involvement of the passion of inwardness, leading to action.

As a final example, Kierkegaard writes “[w]hen a truth conquers with the help of 10,000 buzzing men—assuming also that which conquers, such as it is, to be a truth: by the form and method of the victory a far greater untruth is victorious.”⁷⁵ The message here is that the way a truth claim is adopted matters more than the content of the truth claim itself. In fact, whether the truth claim is valid *and* sound or not does not matter, as the treatment agents give the truth claim is what ends up having an impact on individuals and society. If interpreted correctly, this would be a paraphrase of Climacus’ ‘how’ over the ‘what’ argument.

Does Kierkegaard have any interest in truth as a subject itself? Given what we have seen, the one-word answer is “yes,” with an important caveat attached. Truth is something of interest and importance for Kierkegaard, but only in light of the existence of individual subjects. Since truth is inquired after by existing subjects, truth may only be related to from this very perspective. This suggests why Kierkegaard has become so popular in other areas of philosophy, such as with existence, the self, and ethical living, rather than as an epistemologist or theoretician. Truth matters, but if one were to talk about it apart from the self, the entire point would be missing. What can be concluded here is that, given what “truth

⁷⁴ *JP VII* 4540

⁷⁵ *JP VIII* 4851

is subjectivity” means and given what Kierkegaard has left behind in his journals, he shared a very similar perspective to Johannes Climacus on how to approach and regard essential truth. After all, “the only proof of a conviction is one’s life.”⁷⁶

⁷⁶ *JP X* 6475

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