

The Moment and the Teacher: Problems in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*

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The *Philosophical Fragments* is possibly the strangest and most baffling of all Kierkegaard's works, although it is true that it faces some strong competition in that respect. The title might lead us to expect a loosely organised collection of aphorisms, essays and notes, especially as 'Fragments' is a rather over-dignified translation of the Danish 'Smuler,' which really means 'scraps' or 'crumbs.' Instead what we find is, to all appearances, a tightly organised and well-structured treatise, which sets out a hypothesis and systematically develops its consequences. However, when we try to read it as a systematic treatise, we find all manner of strange puzzlements and lacunae. I do not at all claim to have got to the bottom of this extraordinary little book, but in what follows I want to develop a critique of some of the central ideas that it seems to be proposing. I will conclude with some consideration of the significance of this critique, and of the relation of the *Fragments* to its successor, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.¹

I

The main aim of the *Fragments* is reasonably clear. It is to contrast the basic assumptions of Christianity with those of what Kierkegaard calls 'the Socratic' way of thinking, which includes the whole of the (Platonic) idealist tradition, up to Hegel and his successors. The point is to show that these two ways of thinking are so radically different that the then fashionable attempt to use idealist categories to make sense of Christiani-

ty must be rejected as a confusion. Now, had Kierkegaard simply come out and told the Hegelian theologians directly that they were abandoning the true faith and slipping into heresy, he would presumably have been dismissed as just a boring old reactionary. So he writes as Johannes Climacus, a thinker who states no personal convictions, but merely wishes to amuse himself by experimenting with ideas. In this guise he asks if an alternative to the Socratic mode of thought is possible. The heart of the 'Socratic' is the doctrine of recollection, according to which we already have the Truth within us, and only need to bring it to consciousness. The 'Truth' which Climacus is concerned with is essential, eternal Truth; the truth about the ultimate nature of reality, about the Good – he is not concerned here with our knowledge of contingent empirical matters of fact. The assumption he does make is that there is an Ultimate or Absolute, and that the Good for humans consists in bringing themselves into an appropriate relation with it. (One could thus say that he assumes, in a very broad sense, a religious view of the Universe). He also understands 'the Socratic' in a very broad sense; it does not just refer to the specifically Platonic doctrines of Recollection and the Forms – anyone who supposes that human beings have or can acquire by their own efforts, some knowledge of God or the Absolute would count as Socratic.

Climacus then sets out to see, purely hypothetically, whether an alternative model of our relation to God, or to Absolute Truth is possible. On the Socratic way of thinking, the moment in which the learner comes to apprehend the Truth is of no essential importance; neither is the person of the teacher who leads him to the Truth. For Socrates, we can realise the affinity which we have with the Eternal, but have forgotten, by recollection, i.e. by just drawing on our own resources. Our affinity with the Eternal already exists – we just need to rediscover it. The only role of the teacher is to jog our memories, or, to put it in less explicitly Platonic terms, to stimulate us to realise the truth that already exists within us. So a radically alternative hypothesis (which Climacus names simply the B-hypothesis, as opposed to the Socratic A-hypothesis) would have to be one on which the teacher and the moment of learning the truth were of decisive importance. That could only be the case if, as it stands, we are outside the Truth, hostile to it, even. Thus we do not have the Truth within; if we are to acquire it at all it will have to be brought to us from the outside. However, we cannot have always stood outside the Truth, since in that case being outside the Truth would simply be the natural state of human beings, and the whole question of how

we relate to it would become irrelevant. So we must have been related to the Truth at one time, and then lost that relation by our own fault. So if we are to be brought back into relation with it, then it will have to be the Truth itself which takes the initiative; or as Climacus says 'the god' will have to intervene to teach us the Truth. But this will not be Socratic teaching; it will be an inner transformation which gives us back what we had lost.

And so on. By the end of Chapter Two Climacus, apparently just by thinking out what would be necessary to make a hypothesis genuinely different from the Socratic one, has deduced the main points of an outlook which seems suspiciously similar to Christianity. At the end of each Chapter, Climacus introduces an imaginary interlocutor, who accuses him of trying to pass off as his own invention what is in fact familiar doctrine. Climacus admits, of course, that he has been playing a game; although he does not mention the name of Christianity until almost the end of the book, his B-hypothesis is of course, not his own invention. The game has a serious point though; which is precisely to de-familiarise the all-too familiar doctrines of Christianity. By presenting them in this way, Climacus is able to emphasise their radical difference from the assumptions of contemporary philosophy and indeed theology.

I am led to wonder, though, whether Kierkegaard/Climacus has not himself become tangled up in the complexities of this ironic project. In the following sections I will explore four related problems that seem to arise. Firstly; does he unwittingly show that we do not in fact need to appeal to Revelation to explain Christianity? Secondly; does he actually succeed in constructing a hypothesis that is really different from the Socratic? Thirdly; does the B-hypothesis equivocate fatally on the idea of the Moment? And Fourthly; does the required historicity of the god's intervention conflict with the assumption of His universal love?

II

At the end of Chapter One Climacus, having playfully confessed that the B-hypothesis was not his idea, claims that he is not really guilty of plagiarism, since there is not any other person from whom he has plagiarised it. And then he reflects,

Is it not curious that something like this exists, about which everyone who knows it also knows that he has not invented it...? Yet this oddity enthral me exceedingly, for it tests the correctness of the hypothesis and demonstrates it (*PF* 22; *SV* 1 4, 191).²

Here Climacus seems – though it is not quite clear how seriously he expects us to take this – to be presenting the sort of ingenious if rather perverse apologetic argument that some of his readers have certainly found in Kierkegaard. That is, he seems to be arguing that Christianity is so bizarre, paradoxical and counter-intuitive, that it could not have been invented by any human being. Yet it exists. But if not a human invention, what could it be, if not, as it claims, a Divine Revelation? At the end of Chapter Two, Climacus admits that he is a sort of plagiarist, since he has been plagiarising God! The point of his pretending to be the author of the hypothesis is ironically to remind us that it has no human author. When we think about it seems so strange and wonderful that we can only affirm »This thought did not arise in my heart« (*PF* 36; *SV* 1 4, 203; alluding to 1 Corinthians 2:9).

So Climacus does appear to be suggesting that Christianity is so different from all natural ways of thinking that it must have a non-human (and so presumably divine) origin. Setting aside the possibility that it might have been invented by the Devil precisely to lure over-ingenious minds like Climacus' away from the (Socratic) Truth, there does seem to be a rather sharp contradiction between this argument and the whole thought-experiment in the first two Chapters of the book. For it would seem that, however ironic his intentions, Climacus has indeed shown how we might have invented Christianity under our own steam, precisely by trying the experiment of negating all the normal assumptions of our thinking. One might of course point out that a great historical religion like Christianity could hardly have come about as the result of an intellectual amusing himself with a bizarre thought-experiment; but actually, just below the surface of the apparently coolly intellectual exercise, serious existential concerns do make themselves felt. Climacus admits that even on the B-hypothesis »I can discover my own untruth only by myself« (*PF* 14; *SV* 1 4, 184). And in Chapter Three he notes that Socrates himself, for all his efforts at self-knowledge (and on the A-hypothesis, because I have the knowledge of God³ within me, self-knowledge is ultimately God-knowledge) was still left uncertain whether he was »a more curious monster than Typhon or a friendlier and simpler

being, by nature sharing something divine« (*PF* 37; *SV* 1 4, 204, referring to Plato, *Pheadrus* 229e).

So Socrates was in a position to note that his efforts at self-knowledge had failed, and to raise the possibility that he had no participation in the divine, but was, rather, something monstrous. So why could he not have gone on to wonder whether we are in fact alienated from the Truth by our own fault, and then conceive the hope that some divine power might intervene to lead us back to the Truth? And might not Socrates, or anyone else who made the uncomfortable discovery of our failure in self-knowledge, allow himself to be led to believe that the god had indeed acted in this way, by coming to us in human form? Or imagine someone – let us call him Saul – who in the course of struggling to fulfill the Law and thus relate properly to God, makes the terrible discovery that he is incapable of doing so. Might it not be very natural for him to formulate the hope that God himself would take or had taken the initiative to overcome this alienation? And then it is not an impossible leap of the mind – or of the troubled and guilty soul – to go further and identify that initiative with the career of a recently deceased religious teacher.

Despite what Climacus says at the end of Chapter Two, the notion of a divine incarnation is by no means unthinkable or confined to Christianity. Climacus himself notes that the human mind seems unable to accept that God is beyond knowledge, and accordingly falls into idolatry by picturing Him in the form of various living things. And he then has the following strange suggestion:

There exists (...) a certain person who looks just like any other human being, grows up as do other human beings, marries, has a job (...) This human being is also the god (*PF* 45; *SV* 1 4, 213).

This hypothesis seems even odder than the Christian one, for that at least has the incarnate god acting in a way that sets him off from other people. But if the human mind with its strange quirks could come up with this conception of a bourgeois deity, why not the Christian conception also?

It would be hard to prove that any particular idea, however strange, was too strange for a human being to have invented. And although Climacus certainly does a good job of emphasising the strangeness of Christianity, there are other perspectives from which it can seem all-too-hu-

man. For Jews and Moslems, Christianity appears as a back-sliding away from pure Revealed monotheism in the direction of paganism, with its polytheism and its need for imaginable gods in human form. George Steiner has put the point eloquently:

Historically, the requirements of absolute monotheism proved all but intolerable... Christianity found a useful solution. While retaining something of the idiom and centralized symbolic lineaments of monotheism, it allowed scope for the pluralistic, pictorial needs of the psyche. Be it in their Trinitarian aspects, in their proliferation of saintly and angelic persons, or in their vividly material realisations of God the Father, of Christ, of Mary, the Christian churches have, with very rare exceptions, been a hybrid of monotheistic ideals and polytheistic practices.⁴

Right or wrong, this argument that Christianity is more conformable to the natural (idolatrous) bent of the human mind that e.g. Judaism or Islam seems about as plausible as Climacus' argument that it is less so. Every religion after all, has its unique – and some uniquely counter-intuitive – aspects. An argument that any one of them is so counter-intuitive that it cannot have a merely human origin does not, therefore, look too plausible.

The trouble is that Climacus, in ironically 'deducing' Christianity from scratch, needs to do a sufficiently convincing job that he does not just appear silly or dialectically maladroit, while at the same time not doing so well that he makes it plausible to think that we did not need a Revelation for Christianity to have come into being. I think Robert Roberts is probably right when he suggests that by Chapter Two at any rate, when Climacus is trying to explain why 'the god' would have to become incarnate in order to bring us back to the Truth, he is starting to use deliberately bad arguments; at any rate arguments which certainly do not necessitate their conclusions.⁵ If the arguments are too good he will have turned out to have given a philosophical explanation of the rationality of Christianity – which is exactly the kind of project which he is trying to oppose! The trouble is that at least some of the arguments in Chapter One at any rate, do look rather good; in which case they can serve as a demonstration of how we might have thought up at least substantial aspects of Christianity under our own steam, drawing only on our own intellectual and imaginative resources.

III

Probably Climacus could accept all this without too much worry. Though he does suggest what I have called the Ingenious but Perverse Apologetic (IPA) strategy of arguing for the truth of Christianity from its sheer implausibility, he does not put too much weight on it. Nor, indeed, could he, without abandoning his insistence that he is just presenting the B hypothesis, rather than arguing for its truth. Of course, that could be ironic too,⁶ but rather more seriously, it surely would go against his fundamental anti-rationalistic stance to present any philosophical argument of this sort for the truth of Christianity. In any case, even if he has not shown that Christianity could not have been a human invention, Climacus can still feel confident that he has at least shown a radical difference between Christian assumptions and those of Platonic/Hegelian philosophy; and this is enough to convict the theologians of his day (and many of our day) of deep confusions.

Or has he? I want to look in this section at whether he has really shown that the A and B hypotheses are as radically distinct as he claims. The basic presupposition from which Climacus deduces the B hypothesis is that the moment when the learner comes to know the truth must be of »decisive significance« (*PF* 13; *SV* 1 4, 183). With this in mind, we can ask the old question, »Do we have free will?« In other words, are we free to accept or reject the divine Teacher? This poses a dilemma:

a) If we are free to accept or reject, on what basis? Presumably, we would have to be able to recognise that this (heavily disguised) god really was god. But if we can do that, we must have a deity-detecting capacity within ourselves, in which case our affinity with the Eternal has not been lost. In that case, Christ becomes like Socrates; i.e. merely the occasion which reminds us of what we already had within us but had forgotten. The difference would only be one of degree (we have forgotten our affinity with the Eternal so deeply that we need a god rather than a merely human teacher to jog our memories) rather than one of kind. And for these reasons, indeed Climacus clearly rejects the idea that we have free will vis a vis the god (*PF* 15-17; *SV* 1 4, 185-87). However, he is then faced with the other horn of the dilemma:

b) If it is God who enables us to respond to him (»Now, if the learner is to obtain the truth, the teacher must bring it to him, but not only

that. Along with it he must provide him with the condition for understanding it (...)» (PF 14; SV1 4, 184)), then this raises all the old problems of predestination. If God is loving, as He is portrayed as being in Chapter Two, why does he seem to give his grace only to a few people instead of all? (I shall return to this point later). But moreover, even if Climacus is willing to commit his B-hypothesis to this hard Calvinist line, this, ironically enough, still would not manage to establish the clear difference with the Socratic model that he needs. If I am predestined to salvation, then the actual moment when God chooses to make this known to me, is of no great importance. My affinity with the Eternal remains established in principle, in spite of my rebellion against it, because God has decided that He is going to bring me back to Him. But in that case, there is no special significance in the exact moment when He chooses to do so. It is just a matter of waiting for Him to get around to it; just as, on the Socratic model, it is just a matter of waiting until someone or something jogs my memory of what was already there.

Now, when Climacus says that the Moment must be decisive, he does not mean that it matters that I come to the Truth at 2:00 pm, rather than 3:00 pm. What is essential to the B-hypothesis is that the moment is a radical turn-around from untruth to truth. But, just as on the Socratic model it does not, in a sense, really matter that I am in untruth now, because the truth is still in me and can be recollected; so, on the B hypothesis, it does not, in a sense, really matter that I am a sinner, for God has decided from eternity that I will be redeemed. In both cases, my affinity with the Eternal is maintained. The difference is that, in one case, it is retained within me; on the other it is maintained because the Eternal has refused to accept my attempt to break off links with it, which accordingly remains a futile, even rather comic gesture. My redemption consists in my coming to realise that, in God's scheme, I always was redeemed. In an odd way, this actually makes the Moment *less* important than it was on the A-hypothesis. After all, even if the truth is within me, there is no guarantee that I will discover it. To say that on the A hypothesis, I essentially owe nothing to the teacher is somewhat misleading; had I failed to meet this teacher at this time, then I might have gone to the grave without ever coming to recollect the Truth. On the Calvinist model, it *is* guaranteed even before my birth, that I will come to learn the Truth. In which case, the moment and the teacher perhaps matter more on the A hypothesis than on its rival!

What is made clear by his refusal of the first horn of the dilemma is

that, in order to get away from the Socratic, Climacus has to deduce, not just Christianity in general, but a very specific form of Protestantism. Actually this should not come as too much of a surprise. The conceptual foundations of Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic theology were, of course, very largely borrowed from Platonism (that Catholicism later became more Aristotelian makes no essential difference since the disputes between Plato and Aristotle clearly arise within the general 'Socratic' paradigm). But it does follow that Climacus' B-hypothesis can by no means be identified with most of what has historically passed for Christianity. For Orthodox and Catholic theologians have tended to allow at least some room for the operation of human free will in the process of salvation. And they have characteristically insisted that the *imago Dei*, the image of God in which we were made and which constitutes our affinity with the divine, was obscured or damaged by the Fall, but remains essentially intact. So for them, as for Socrates, the truth is within us, however deeply buried.

But even for Calvin himself it remains true that »There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.«⁷ This shows itself in the conscience; we know what we should do, which is why we are justly condemned for not doing it.⁸ If we are to take literally Climacus' remark that on the B hypothesis, prior to the coming of the teacher we »must not have possessed the truth, not even in the form of ignorance« (*PF* 13; *SV* 1 4, 183), this seems to be going beyond even Calvin. On this account the knowledge of God would have been wholly destroyed by the Fall, whereas for Calvin it still exists – and, moreover, we are not even ignorant of it; rather, we just try to ignore it. So one could indeed call Climacus' hypothesis not just Calvinist, but hyper-Calvinist. And then, if the argument above concerning the second horn of the dilemma is correct, comes the ironic turn-around; having made such strenuous efforts to get away from the Socratic, Climacus seems in an odd way to slide back into it again.

But perhaps we should not take a writer as ironical as Climacus quite so literally. A clue to what is going on can perhaps be found if we consult Climacus' alter-ego, Anti-Climacus. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, he compares Christian teaching to the Socratic principle that sin is ignorance (which is of course the converse of the doctrine of recollection). The essential difference on the Christian view is that sin is not due simply to ignorance of the Good, but to a willful rejection of the Good.

What constituent, then, does Socrates lack for the defining of sin? It

is the will, defiance. The intellectuality of the Greeks was too happy, too naive, too esthetic, too ironic, too witty – too sinful – to grasp that anyone could knowingly not do the good, or knowingly, knowing what is right, do wrong (*SUD* 90; *SV1* 11, 201).

This, of course, is much closer to Calvin's view. And, indeed, it is present in the *Fragments*, despite the B hypothesis' apparent claim that we have simply lost all contact with the Truth. In fact I think this claim should not be taken at face value – it should be seen as generated by Climacus' ironically starting his contrastive project by putting it in the terms set by the Socratic. It is not really an – apparently epistemological – matter of how we come to learn the Truth. The real point of the B-hypothesis is that just learning the Truth is not enough. If we really think about the contrast between A and B, we should realise it is too great to be stated as a difference about the nature of teaching. The non-Socratic 'teacher' is not really a teacher at all (*PF* 14-17; *SV1* 4, 184-87). What is needed is not teaching about the nature of the Good, but a transformation of the will so it can become conformed to the Good. Being »outside the Truth« must be interpreted as »being polemical against the Truth« (*PF* 15; *SV1* 4, 185), and one can hardly polemicise against something if one is wholly unaware of it.

Putting it this way, I think we can see what the contrast between the two hypotheses really amounts to. What Climacus has 'deduced' is pretty much traditional hard-line Lutheranism or Calvinism. And this is certainly incompatible in some very important ways with 'Socratic' assumptions. It is, of course, hardly without its own difficulties. Nor does it seem, for the reasons given above, to actually make 'the Moment' quite as significant as Climacus seems to believe. However, this leads us to a further problem: which moment is Climacus talking about?

IV

In Chapter One, Climacus is clearly concerned with the moment in which a person comes to apprehend the Truth. This moment is supposedly decisive on the B-hypothesis but not on the A. But it should be noted that, although he manages to 'deduce' a remarkable amount of Christian doctrine in Chapter One, Climacus says nothing there about the Incarnation. Since he does discuss the difference between the A-hy-

pothesis' and the B-hypothesis' view of the teacher, it is easy to construe this as the difference between Socrates and Jesus. But in fact there is no mention there of the god taking on human form in order to 'instruct' (or actually, transform) us. That topic is only raised in Chapter Two. So by the end of Chapter One, we might well be inclined to agree that there must be a considerable difference between receiving instruction from a human teacher like Socrates, and receiving a Revelation from God. It is not until Chapter Two that we are told that God comes to us in the form of a human teacher, indistinguishable except to the eye of faith from someone like Socrates. And now we get a subtle shift. 'The Moment' becomes, not the time for any individual in which that individual comes to see the Truth, but the brief time in which the god existed here in human form.

Hence, we get the problems set out on the Title Page of the *Fragments*:

Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure be of more than historical interest; can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge? (*PF* 1; *SV* 1 4, 173)

The problem in Chapter One was that I am hostile to the Truth and need the intervention of God in order to transform my corrupted will. But it does not seem that the B-hypothesis as set out there need put any constraints on the way in which God can make the Truth known to me. In Chapter Two, Climacus does attempt to explain why God could be supposed to have acted in the way Christianity says He did, but, as noted above, the argument there is notably weaker than it was in Chapter One; and this is probably deliberate. It would seem that the B-hypothesis as outlined in Chapter One can stand without the addition to it made in Chapter Two. In other words, we can separate the 'non-Socratic' stress on sin as a corruption of the will, forgiven by Divine grace, from the idea of God becoming Incarnate. In which case, 'the Moment' would be the moment in my life when God intervenes to show me the Truth; whereas on Climacus' full B-hypothesis, it seems to be at once that moment AND the moment when God actually came to exist as a human being; or the sense of 'Moment' slides uneasily between these two.

This takes us, it seems to me, to a deep tension in Kierkegaard's thought. On the one hand he puts a great stress on subjectivity; what

matters is my relation to God, here and now, in the concrete circumstances of my life, not any set of speculations about metaphysics or world-history. But he also wants to insist on the historical particularity of Christianity, to insist that God really DID become incarnate in the person of Jesus at a particular point in history, and that it is on our relation to that fact that our chance of eternal happiness depends. This, of course, is what constitutes the Paradox at the heart of Christianity. But if what is existentially crucial is my realisation that I am a sinner, but that God is gracious and offers the forgiveness of my sins, why does that need to be tied to any historical event, let alone one which, as Climacus puts it in the *Postscript*, »Can only become historical against its nature, hence by virtue of the absurd « (CUP 578; SV1 7, 504)? Why could not this Revelation be mediated to me, e.g. via myths or stories, whose historical accuracy is irrelevant to their existential import? If the story of Adam and Eve can convey the Truth of our fallen nature without being historically true, why cannot the story of Jesus convey the Truth of our redemption, irrespective of its historicity?

The parallel is worth considering at a little more length. When the historicity of the story of the Fall was first seriously questioned, theologians were alarmed because it seemed to them that if the events related in Chapter 3 of *Genesis* had not actually happened, then the doctrine of Original Sin would be undermined.⁹ We are guilty and sinful *because* we have inherited this state from our ancestors, Adam and Eve. However, before long it was widely realised that the supposed historical fact of the Fall in Eden could do nothing to *explain* our present sinfulness, since the notion of a literally inherited guilt is itself nonsensical; a hopeless muddling of biological and moral categories. In fact the doctrine of Original Sin made more sense when freed from this nonsensical pseudo-foundation. Hence non-fundamentalist theologians can accept that we are inherently sinful, while treating the Adam and Eve story as a mythological expression of that fact rather than an explanation of it.¹⁰

Jesus was of course a historical figure, as Adam and Eve were not. But is it necessary to suppose that he really, historically was God incarnate in order to see his story as revelatory of God's redeeming love towards us, in spite of our sin? The main orthodox response to this challenge has been to argue that, for our sins to be forgiven, it was necessary for God to become Incarnate and make amends for them by His suffering. This is, I think, what Kierkegaard himself would ultimately say. But it is nowhere suggested in the *Fragments*, which simply does not mention

the doctrine of the Atonement. Yet it lays great stress on the historicity of the Incarnation, and if this can only be made intelligible by reference to the need for atonement, then the omission of that doctrine is puzzling. Moreover, the answer is far from being obviously satisfactory. It is not clear that the notion of substitutionary atonement makes much more sense than that of literally inherited sin. We can recognise that we are all sinners without relying on a historical pseudo-explanation of the fact which actually does nothing at all to explain it. Could we not also recognise that God remains gracious to us despite our sin without relying on what appears to be an equally baffling and unavailing 'historical' explanation for how this is made possible?¹¹ Anti-Climacus insists that »only through the consciousness of sin« can anyone become a Christian (*PC* 67; *SV1* 12, 64). In despair over my sinfulness, I find the assurance that God is gracious, and forgives my sins. But why should this existential transformation involve me in believing that an incomprehensible quasi-judicial transaction was effected in Palestine twenty centuries ago?

There is, moreover, a further deep problem which arises if one insists on the 'historical point of departure' as Climacus does. And this is that, if eternal happiness can only be found by relating oneself to a specific historical event, it is necessarily rendered impossible for those who lived before the event, or in places too remote for news of it to have penetrated in their lifetimes. I shall discuss this in the next section.

V

The problem is not simply that it seems unfair or contrary to our moral intuitions for God to have made salvation available in such a way as to ensure the exclusion of large numbers of people, who have no chance to fulfill the condition on which it depends. To this a traditionally minded theologian might reply: »No one deserves salvation; you should be grateful that God has given you a (totally unmerited) chance of it, instead of complaining that His actions do not measure up to your (Fallen and corrupted) moral instincts.« I'm not saying that this would be a satisfactory reply but it would, by itself, have a certain grim consistency. However, it would sit very uncomfortably with Climacus' firm insistence on the essential equality of all people before God. It is a crucial part of the B-hypothesis that its paradoxical nature makes it equally diffi-

cult for anyone to believe, whether they are contemporaries of the Incarnate God, or live many centuries after. And this, Climacus says, is as it should be, for,

Would the god allow the power of time to decide whom he would grant his favour, or would it not be worthy of the god to make the reconciliation equally difficult for every human being at every time and in every place (...)? (*PF* 106; *SV1* 4, 268).

Nor is this enthusiasm of Climacus for essential human equality merely a personal quirk which he is imposing on the B-hypothesis. In Chapter Two the reason why the god enters time and becomes human is that his nature is love; he will make himself vulnerable and exposed to suffering in order to reconcile the undeserving. Evans has argued that for Kierkegaard, the Incarnation seems paradoxical to us mainly because it »represents the epitome of pure, selfless love. As sinful beings we are incapable of such love and have never experienced it (...). It simply appears to be too good to be true.«¹² But why is it that this pure selfless love is dealt out in such a way that much of the human race is deprived of it? Inadequate as our loving may be, we can still recognise the limited and arbitrary nature of this supposedly limitless love. We may not deserve God's grace, but if He is indeed gracious, why is his grace made available to us in such a restrictive way?

Here we seem to discover a deep contradiction in the B-hypothesis. God enters history because of his love for the human race as a whole; but to approach us only through this one-off Incarnation ensures that only a small minority of us have any real chance of finding salvation by responding to that love. This is perhaps a new Paradox, or, better, a new aspect of The Paradox; one that, oddly, Climacus, does not seem to notice. In the *Postscript*, where he also insists eloquently on the essential equality of all people before God, he does note that this is something which Christianity abandons. Christianity is,

isolating, separating (...) polemical (...). The happiness linked to a historical condition excludes all who are outside the condition, and among those are the countless ones who are excluded through no fault of their own but by the accidental fact that Christianity has not yet been proclaimed to them (*CUP* 582-583; *SV1* 7, 508).

But Climacus does not include this as a aspect of the Paradox itself, but as an additional factor, ‘the pain of sympathy’ which sharpens the ‘existential pathos’ of Christianity. One might also add that it is perhaps this, more than anything else, that constitutes the deepest reason for offense at the claims made by Christianity. (And, if there were any point in speculating about the undisclosed motives of a fictional character, one might wonder whether it is this consideration that keeps Climacus – who in the *Postscript* tells us that he is not a Christian – outside of Religiousness B). However, the problem is not just that this feature of it makes Christianity seem repulsive; it also makes it appear internally incoherent, in that its arbitrary exclusiveness seems impossible to reconcile with the supposed universally loving nature of God.

If, as Evans says, the doctrine of the Incarnation makes God’s love seem too great for us to believe, it also appears to make it seem offensively and arbitrarily limited. And the collision between these aspects presents us with the Paradox in perhaps its harshest and most painful aspect. For Climacus, as for Luther and Calvin, Christianity *is* offensive and paradoxical, in this respect as in others, but we are called on to believe it nonetheless. (Climacus differs from his illustrious forerunners in that he declines the invitation). Some of his commentators however have tried to soften the offense and mitigate the paradox. Both Roberts and Evans suggest that those who do not have a chance to hear the Gospel in this life, will be given a chance in a future life. As Roberts puts it, »If salvation depends on faith, and if Climacus is right about the justice of God, then people must be given opportunities for faith beyond the limits of the present life.«¹³

The trouble with this doctrine of a chance in a future life is that it seems to be wholly speculative. Climacus, as the quote above from the *Postscript* shows, pretty clearly countenances no such thing. Nor do I think it is hinted at anywhere in Kierkegaard’s *oeuvre*. More seriously, it seems to have no real support from the Bible, or the historical teaching of the Church, which, until the softening influence of secular humanism in the last couple of centuries, had seemed quite untroubled in asserting the inescapable damnation of all those who had happened never to have heard of Christ. In fact Roberts and Evans are altering the traditional teaching of Christianity by adding to it a purely speculative doctrine, designed to reduce the scandal of Christianity and thus appease the moral intuitions of tender-hearted moderns. In other words they are themselves doing exactly what they elsewhere condemn more obviously lib-

eral or modernist theologians for.¹⁴ That they are not prepared to simply tough it out in the traditional manner is, I think, entirely to their credit, but it does not help the intellectual consistency of their position.¹⁵

Moreover, the suggestion, speculative as it is, is hardly appealing. Traditionally, Christianity has held that post-mortem existence offers no hiding places. All will be revealed. We will – to our joy, or, more likely, horror – see exactly what we are, and how we stand related to God. But if those who die without hearing the Gospel are to have the same chance as those who have heard it, they must hear it in the same way, and have the same possibility of rejecting it, of responding with offense etc. And this would seem to require that they be reincarnated under the same conditions of temporality and contingency as obtain in this existence – which will of course also mean that it cannot be guaranteed that they will hear the message in this second time around, in which case they will need to be given a third or fourth chance ... This doctrine is now looking not only like a very radical departure from orthodox Christianity, but a really quite bizarre and implausible one. (Evans is clearly a bit uncomfortable himself, referring to his own speculations on these matters as »contortions.«¹⁶

There are still a couple of other options, apart from just toggling it out, which are still recognisably within the mainstream of historic Christianity. The first is to argue that divine grace is not restricted to Christianity; anyone can obtain it, by striving to live according to the best light available to him or her. This is the official position of (post Vatican II) Catholicism as well as that of many liberal Protestants. And it is defended in the *Postscript* by Climacus, who asserts that a pagan who prays in the right spirit to an idol will be heard by the True God (*CUP* 201; *SVI* 7, 168). But this is, as he notes, Religiousness A; for him, as we have seen, Christianity is something altogether harsher and less tolerant. And Climacus is surely right that the B-hypothesis is not compatible with this more tolerant stance. For, as Evans notes, »If, for instance, one simply said that everyone who existentially commits herself to the most adequate idea of God or other moral ideal available to them is thereby in the Truth, then we would clearly be back to Socrates.«¹⁷

Another possibility we could perhaps call Barthian. On this account, salvation is due solely to the grace bestowed on us by the work of Christ. But that grace is available universally; it is given to everyone quite apart from any subjective appropriation on our part. But this too departs from Climacus' account, precisely by leaving out the subjective, existential aspect. I argued above that Climacus was committed to a

more or less Calvinist account, according to which salvation is entirely the work of grace and free will plays no role. Barth's position is a logical development from this Calvinism; if God is love, and grace always unmerited, why should we suppose it to be restricted? Murray Rae has suggested that Kierkegaard was not unsympathetic to this 'Barthian' stance,¹⁸ but Climacus, at least, does seem to explicitly rule it out in the passage quoted above from the *Postscript* about the countless millions who had not heard of Christ being excluded. And the Barthian position is clearly incompatible with the idea that one's eternal happiness depends on one's conscious relation to a historical fact, which is meant to be at the heart of the B-hypothesis. So I think Climacus would have to reject this also. But it is clearly a 'non-Socratic' position; which goes to show that the two hypotheses he discusses do not exhaust the alternatives. And the fact that Climacus' B-hypothesis is incompatible with both the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church and the thought of the Twentieth Century's greatest Protestant theologian should indicate that the B-hypothesis cannot very well be simply identified with Christianity as such.

VI

So far I have noted four major problems with the argument of *Philosophical Fragments*. Firstly, Climacus, while claiming that Christianity could not have had a merely human origin, himself provides enough material to indicate how it might have done. Second, the dependence on grace which is an essential aspect of the B-hypothesis seems in an odd way to render the moment less rather than more important than it was on the Socratic model. Third, Climacus slips the doctrine of the Incarnation into the B-hypothesis, although this is not necessary just to establish the 'non-Socratic' credentials of the Hypothesis. This leads to considerable ambiguity about 'the Moment,' and introduces all the problems about a 'historical point of departure.' What is covered up by this is the possibility of a stance that is genuinely non-Socratic but which does not depend on any historical claims. Fourthly, Climacus' egalitarianism and stress on God's love as a crucial aspect of the B-hypothesis conflict with its requiring a historical condition for salvation. This creates a further paradox which Climacus does not appear to recognise, but which is so offensive that even his most sympathetic commentators find it difficult to stomach.

How should one respond to all this? Climacus after all claims to be simply raising questions, and refuses to tell us what his own opinion is. It seems that, for all my criticisms, Climacus has developed a 'hypothesis' which has the following features:

1) It differs from the Socratic in that it stresses the corruption of the will and the consequent need for grace;

2) It insists that this grace is made available to us only by the Incarnation of the god at a point in history;

3) Though it denies free will, it make grace available only to those who have heard of the Incarnation. (And of course, only to a sub-set of those. How one responds to the Gospel is itself dependent on whether or not 'the god' chooses to provide one with the condition (faith) necessary for receiving it).

This combination is not as tight-knit as all that. Obviously one cannot have 3) without 2), but 1) can be independent of 2) and 3), while 1) and 2) can be held together without 3) – what I called the 'Barthian' stance. However, the combination of all three points does pretty much add up to orthodox Calvinist or Lutheran teaching; »old-fashioned orthodoxy in its rightful severity,« as Climacus puts it in a footnote to the *Postscript* (CUP 275; SVI 7, 234).¹⁹

In that footnote, he explains the point of the irony in the *Fragments*; by presenting these doctrines as a mere thought experiment he was able to de-familiarise them, so that the reader would be able to regain a »primitive impression« of them. Some recent commentators have seen the irony as more pervasive than that; they have seen the book as a whole as Kierkegaard's (rather than Climacus') ironic attempt to indicate the impossibility of writing about faith from a philosophical standpoint.²⁰ Hence, the difficulties he gets into are deliberately set up for him by Kierkegaard to indicate that any attempt to describe Christianity intellectually must fail. I am not convinced by this approach; apart from the fact that Kierkegaard only assigned the *Fragments* to a pseudonym at the last moment, having written it with the intention of publishing it under his own name,²¹ too many of the things said in it are also said by Kierkegaard in his Journals, signed works and in the Anti-Climacus writings. Moreover, it seems to me that Climacus is in command of the book's irony; he is presenting Christianity philosophically with his tongue firmly in cheek, precisely in order to show that it cannot really be treated in this way.

In the *Postscript*, Climacus insists very clearly and quite directly that objective thought is out of place in ethico-religious matters. In these

spheres, Truth is subjectivity. That is, one simply cannot grasp ethical or religious affirmations except as answers to the question, »How shall I live?« If you have not thought of seriously asking the question, then, naturally, the answers will not mean much to you. In the light of this principle, it seems that the fundamental irony of the *Fragments* is that, although it purports to present a doctrine that is different from the Socratic doctrine, what it really offers us is not a doctrine at all. As Climacus puts it repeatedly in the *Postscript*, Christianity »is not a doctrine« but an »existence-communication« (CUP 379–80, 383, 562, 570 etc; SV1 7, 328–29, 332, 490–91, 497). But this is not the whole story either. For in the *Postscript* he also treats Socrates as a ‘Subjective Thinker,’ indeed as the paradigmatic subjective thinker. This amounts to the claim that what Socrates presented was also an existence-communication rather than a body of doctrine.

What has happened, I think, is that Kierkegaard had come to realise that he had lumped too many disparate things together under the heading of ‘the Socratic’ in *Fragments*. Considering the issue of how one might be related to the Eternal Truth, there would seem to be at least the following options.

1) There is no such thing as the Eternal, the Absolute Good etc. and therefore no question of us having an essential affinity with it. (Atheism, Naturalism, etc.)²²

2) There is the Eternal, but we have no affinity with it and it has no interest in us. (This would be a very attenuated sort of Deism; I mention it just for the sake of completeness.)

3) There is the Eternal, we have an affinity with it, and we realise that affinity and thus relate to the Eternal by objective, abstract or pure thinking. This is seen as either,

a) requiring a strenuous existential practice, whereby we have to struggle to die to our finite, bodily and emotional needs, and identify ourselves with pure intellect (Plato); or,

b) something that we do within office hours on weekdays at the University, and get a nice salary for doing. (Perhaps Hegel, and certainly the contemporary Hegelians, according to Kierkegaard.)

4) There is the Eternal, we have an affinity with it, and we relate to it by way of a passionate subjective commitment to a way of life. (Socrates, as Kierkegaard came to see him; Lessing; Religiousness A in general.)

5) There is the Eternal; we had an affinity with it which we have lost through our own fault, but the Eternal itself offers to restore that affinity to us. (Christianity.)

In the *Fragments*, Climacus rolled 3a and b, and 4 together into the ‘Socratic’ position, and opposes that to Christianity. It is true that they all suppose that we can realise our affinity to the Eternal through our own efforts, while Christianity denies that. However, by the time he wrote the *Postscript*, I think Kierkegaard had realised that he had made things too simple, and that just confronting Christianity and idealism in that way could be confusing.²³ So it becomes essential to distinguish between 3) and 4) and to endorse 4) as against 3). (Treating 3a) with respect, while having fun at the expense of 3b)). That is what most of the first half of the *Postscript* is about; and Climacus then goes on to a detailed account of Religiousness A. – i.e. position 4) – before giving a briefer and, compared to what is said about the Absolute Paradox in the *Fragments*, considerably clearer account of the paradoxical Religiousness B. For it is only after we have experienced Religiousness A fully, and come to realise its limitations, that we can even begin to make sense of Religiousness B, or better, of what it would mean for us to accept it.

Both Christianity and Religiousness A are ‘existence-communications’ rather than bodies of doctrine. But if, as Kierkegaard suspects, we have, in our obsession with trying to be objective, lost any understanding of what it is to exist as a finite subject, then they will both simply be incomprehensible to us. If Christianity is supposed to be the final answer to the question, »How shall I live?« then we will find it meaningless unless the question itself is one that we are already asking. And the trouble is that we are forgetting to ask the question. (Hence the whole strategy which Kierkegaard pursues in the pseudonymous works – to inspire us to ask that question). Having forgotten what it is to exist as a human being, I need to be reminded of this before there can be any question of my existing as a Christian. (Hence Kierkegaard’s – and Climacus’ – great respect for Socrates; a Socratic search for self-knowledge is an essential prelude to Christianity (though one might again wonder whether this is quite consistent with the radical reliance on grace which characterises hypothesis B).

Now, if Christianity is an existence communication and not a body of doctrine, the description of it as a ‘hypothesis,’ a set of propositions, is surely misleading. (Deliberately misleading). But this might enable us to mitigate some of the difficulties we found in the *Fragments*, in particular, those arising from the classic issue of grace versus works. Lee Barrett, in a very interesting essay,²⁴ has pointed out that Climacus (in common with Luther and Calvin, of course) not only stresses the necessity of un-

merited grace, but calls upon the reader »to assume responsibility for the basic shape and orientation« of his or her life.²⁵ This can easily seem to create contradictions; we must strive to obtain salvation, make the leap of faith; yet it is all out of our hands, for faith is a gift of God, which is bestowed on whom He sees fit, without regard to any desert. However, Barrett notes, the problem can be dissolved if one adopts the attitude to the meaning of religious assertions that Climacus spells out in the *Post-script*. On this account,

the concepts of 'grace,' 'freedom,' and 'responsibility' can only be grasped in their proper passional contexts, as they are used to shape human lives. Their meaning is rooted in the specific activities of exhorting, praising, trusting and repenting which constitute their natural environment.²⁶

The propositions that we depend solely on grace and that we are free and responsible may conflict, if they are taken abstractly as theoretical statements of doctrine. But dependence on grace and reliance on free will need not conflict in the life of the believer. There is no need for a mediating philosophico-theological theory to reconcile grace and free will;²⁷ rather, it is for the individual to make them co-exist in creative tension in his or her own life.

If Climacus' propositions only acquire meaning and truth-value when they are used in the appropriate activity of shaping an individual's subjectivity, they cannot be regarded as ciphers in an abstract calculus. Their role in the formation of human lives is constitutive of their meaning and therefore delimits the range of intelligible implications they can have.²⁸

Barrett denies, rightly, that this is a non-cognitivist or anti-realist position.²⁹ On the Climacean view, ethical and religious propositions are true in so far as they guide and shape peoples' lives in such a way that those people are related to the Truth. For Climacus and for Kierkegaard there very definitely is a Reality to which we are trying to relate in leading religious lives, but the point of religious assertions is not to provide a neutral description of that reality, but to guide our efforts at living, so that we may live in the light of that reality.

This is, to repeat, as true of Religiousness A as it is of Christianity. In Christianity, however, there is a particular problem; as Barrett notes, »the factual historicity of the god in human history is of passionate con-

cern to Climacus.³⁰ (And even more, of course, to Kierkegaard, who believes in that presence as Climacus does not). Now, given Climacus' general account of religious language, one would assume that the meaning of the doctrine of the Incarnation should be sought in the role it plays in shaping human lives. Kierkegaard – and Anti-Climacus – insist very strongly on the importance of the believer taking Christ as the 'paradigm' for his or her own life, but they do not accept that this exhausts the meaning of the doctrine. Clearly Kierkegaard wants to insist that the Incarnation *is* a historical fact, whether or not anyone believes it. And Climacus seems to agree that, true or not, this insistence is essential to Christianity. How compatible this is with his general theory of religious language, I'm not sure. But perhaps with that suggestion that there may be a still further level of conflict within the Climacus literature, I should bring this already lengthy paper to a close.

Notes

1. I should say that in attempting to come to terms with the *Fragments* I have benefited greatly from the commentaries of Stephen Evans and Robert Roberts: C. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's 'Philosophical Fragments'*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992; Robert Roberts, *Faith, Reason and History: Rethinking Kierkegaard's 'Philosophical Fragments'*, Macon, Mercer University Press, 1986. I shall be fairly critical of some of Evans' and Roberts' views in what follows, but their work remains invaluable for anyone seriously interested in the *Fragments*.
2. The references in the body of the text correspond to the following editions of Kierkegaard's works: *PF*, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. H. & E. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1985; *SUD*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. H. & E. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1980; *CUP*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. H. & E. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1992, *PC*, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. H. & E. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1991, *SV1*, Søren Kierkegaard's *Samlede Værker*, ed. A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg, & H.O. Lange, vol. 1-15, Copenhagen, Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag, 1901-06.
3. Or of the Absolute, whatever you may want to call it, but 'God' will do as a shorthand. My usage is not meant to imply any specific theological or philosophical connotations that would distinguish between different Socratic views.
4. George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1971, p. 39.
5. Roberts, *Faith, Reason and History*, Chapter 2. Roberts patiently shows up the shortcomings of the argument at pp. 49-57, and suggests that they may be deliberately bad on p. 59.
6. As has been argued in Marilyn G. Piety, »A Little Light Music: The Subversion of Objectivity in Kierkegaard's 'Philosophical Fragments,'« *International Kierkegaard Commentary Vol 7, 'Philosophical Fragments' and 'Johannes Climacus,'* ed. R. Perkins, Macon GA, Mercer University Press, 1994.
7. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J.T McNeil, trans. F.L. Battles, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960, Book 1, Chapter 3, Section 1.
8. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 2, Chapter 2, Section 22.
9. Of course, many theologians were also unhappy because they wished to uphold the literal inerrancy of the Bible. I am concerned here with other reasons why it might be thought that the historical reference of doctrines may be important.
10. This is pretty much how Kierkegaard himself treats the story in *The Concept of Anxiety*, though without explicitly saying that this is what he is doing. (I say 'Kierkegaard himself,' as I think the book is only very weakly pseudonymous. On this, see G.R. Beabout, *Freedom and its Misuses: Kierkegaard on Anxiety and Despair*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1996, pp. 22-31.
11. For an admirably lucid, but to my mind unconvincing, attempt to explain why it is important that the Atonement was a historical reality, see C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, Chapter 4.
12. Evans, *Passionate Reason*, p. 107.
13. Roberts, *Faith, Reason and History*, p. 136. See also Evans, *Passionate Reason*, pp. 149-152.
14. Roberts, *Faith, Reason and History*, pp. 30-41; Evans, *Passionate Reason*, pp. 171-175.
15. I think this illustrates a deep problem for theologians who want to be conservative but not fundamentalist. Once you have accepted that one cannot *always* accept the

literal meaning of the Bible, or the traditional teaching of the Church, then there is no principled general argument against theological liberalism. One can still criticise the liberals on specific points, but you are already fighting on their ground. Or (to vary the metaphor) the fundamentalists are probably right to see that once you have moved away even a little from their 'fundamentals,' you have placed yourself at the top of a very slippery slope.

16. Evans, *Passionate Reason*, p. 151.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Murray A. Rae, *Kierkegaard's Vision of the Incarnation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 241.
19. The footnote is a critical comment on a review of the *Fragments*.
20. See M. Holmes Hartshorne, *Kierkegaard: Godly Deceiver*, NY, Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 29-35, and S. Mulhall, 'God's Plagiarist: The *Philosophical Fragments* of Johannes Climacus,' *Philosophical Investigations*, 22.1, 1999.
21. See the Hong's introduction to their translation of the *Fragments*, p. xvi.
22. It is worth noting though, that some atheists, especially those coming along in the wake of Hegel – Feuerbach, Marx etc. – do want to maintain that there is a normatively significant essence of human nature, that we are alienated from this Essence of Humanity and have to transform our present mode of existence so as to conform to it. And this may be held to be in our power, or to depend on external (for Marx, economic) forces. So a lot of the same conceptual structures with which Climacus is concerned here are carried over into atheistic philosophies).
23. So in the Introduction to the *Postscript*, Climacus notes that – despite the title – the bulk of the work at any rate is not really a sequel to the *Fragments* but »a renewed attempt in the same vein (...) a new approach to the issue (...)« (CUP 17; SV1 7, 8).
24. L. Barrett, 'The Paradox of Faith in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*: Gift or Task?' R. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary, Vol 7: Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, Macon GA, Mercer University Press, 1994.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
27. Barrett briefly indicates the range of options of this sort being canvassed in Denmark in Kierkegaard's time; Barrett, 'The Paradox of Faith in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*: Gift or Task?' pp. 262-264. Rae, *Kierkegaard's Vision of the Incarnation*, pp. 15-19, and T. Jackson, 'Arminian Edification: Kierkegaard on Grace and Free Will,' *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. A. Hannay & G. Marino, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, make Kierkegaard out to have his own mediating theory about the respective roles of God and humans in the reception of grace. I agree with Barrett that this whole project is thoroughly un-Kierkegaardian in spirit.
28. Barrett, 'The Paradox of Faith in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*: Gift or Task?,' p. 279.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 282-83.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 282.