

## 4 Kierkegaard and Hegel

The story of German idealism is the story of Kant and the aftermath. By aftermath I mean the *Aufhebung* of critical philosophy in the speculative idealisms of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. The latter, of course, took himself to be the *Aufhebung* of Fichte and Schelling as well as Kant, to say nothing of Plato and Aristotle, Anselm and Aquinas, Descartes and Spinoza, and so forth.

The gods are jealous and do not tolerate such hubris. So German idealism involves a second aftermath, this time with Hegel rather than Kant as the subject of simultaneous critique (cancellation) and appropriation (preservation). Speculation, mediation, reconciliation, and the Idea are names by which Hegel designates a single strategy for trumping the tradition and becoming its fulfillment. The most unkindest cut of all for Hegel was to be himself outtrumped by Feuerbach, Marx, and Kierkegaard. The various ways in which his massive *Aufhebung* was *aufgehoben* in the 1840s make up one of the most fascinating stories in the history of philosophy.

Kierkegaard is a major figure in this story; he is one of the great anti-Hegelians. There are other illuminating ways to read his writings. He is a religious thinker in the Augustinian tradition. As such he is also an existentialist, a postmodernist,<sup>1</sup> and a critical social theorist.<sup>2</sup> But each of these stories will have to include an account of his complex relation to Hegel. The relation is complex precisely because it is an *Aufhebung*. There is appropriation as well as negation, and Kierkegaard is never simply anti-Hegelian.

Hegel writes,

The true shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of such truth. To help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the

goal where it can lay aside the title “love of knowing” and be *actual* knowing – that is what I have set myself to do. . . . To show that now is the time for philosophy to be raised to the status of a Science would therefore be the only true justification of any effort that has this aim, for to do so would demonstrate the necessity of the aim, would indeed at the same time be the accomplishing of it.<sup>3</sup>

*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is a sustained satire against the idea that philosophy can be systematic science in this sense. Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author, finds this claim to be comical. First he states the objection. “Existence itself is a system – for God, but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit. System and conclusiveness correspond to each other, but existence is the very opposite. . . . Existence must be annulled in the eternal before the system concludes itself” (*CUP* 118, 122).<sup>4</sup> Then comes the satire.

If a dancer could leap very high, we would admire him, but if he wanted to give the impression that he could fly – even though he could leap higher than any dancer had ever leapt before – let laughter overtake him. Leaping means to belong essentially to the earth and to respect the law of gravity so that the leap is merely the momentary, but flying means to be set free from telluric conditions, something that is reserved exclusively for winged creatures, perhaps also for inhabitants of the moon, perhaps – and perhaps that is also where the system will at long last find its true readers. (*CUP* 124)

Two things especially should be noticed here. First, the issue is theological. For Climacus the gap between the human and divine is fundamental, while the system requires that it be compromised or even collapsed. We shall return to this point. Second, while finding Hegel to be absentminded to the point of being ludicrous (*CUP* 120–1, 125), Climacus pays him no small compliment. In conceding that this dancer leaps higher than any other dancer, he concedes that Hegel is the greatest of the philosophers, that his “system” is more comprehensive and more systematic than the great systems of, say, Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, or Kant. It is just that he spoils his magnificent achievement by making an absurd claim about finality and completeness. Suddenly the great dancer looks ridiculous.

It is as if some new Whitehead and Russell were to develop a system of formal logic more powerful than any previously developed and then, after Gödel, to claim that it is at once consistent and com-

plete. Their unparalleled brilliance would be spoiled by their unparalleled blindness.

Still, if Hegel is the most brilliant of the philosophers, it would not be surprising if Climacus, or other voices in which Kierkegaard offers a critique, including his own, were to incorporate Hegelian insights so that the critique would truly be an *Aufhebung*, a cancellation that preserves and a preservation that cancels.

The critique that culminates in *Postscript* begins in Kierkegaard's academic dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*.<sup>5</sup> This is widely recognized to be Kierkegaard's most Hegelian work. Those who find it necessary (but why?) to see Kierkegaard as simply anti-Hegelian suggest that the Hegelian features of *The Concept of Irony* are themselves ironical.<sup>6</sup> Those features are of two sorts. Formally speaking there are the triadic structures that give the book its shape; substantively speaking there is the critique of romantic irony.

It is Stephen N. Dunning who gives most careful attention to those triads. He acknowledges that such "Hegelian structures are perfectly obvious in the first part of *The Concept of Irony*" and that it is "startling that the very 'systematic *ein, zwei, drei*' ridiculed in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*" (CUP 357; cf. 150n) should appear in Kierkegaard's own writings. But he tries to show that they not only structure the whole of *The Concept of Irony* but are to be found in five pseudonymous works as well, beginning with *Either/Or*, though "neither acknowledged nor obvious." His conclusion is that "Kierkegaard was quite unconscious of the extent to which he continued, even after breaking with Hegelianism, to think in terms that permit – and often seem to demand – a Hegelian structural analysis."<sup>7</sup>

We need not ask whether such a strong claim can be sustained. We only need notice that triadic structures as such would not compromise the positions normally attributed to Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms over against Hegel. Climacus, for example, insists that his own presentation is dialectical and rejects only the notion that it is a speculative dialectic, one that can be brought to closure. *The Critique of Pure Reason* is loaded with triads, but the difference between the human and the divine is not collapsed and the goals of philosophical speculation are quite famously renounced. Yet we must include Kant among the most ardent anti-Hegelians, even if we

must speak anachronistically to do so. There is no need for Kierkegaard to undermine the triads of *The Concept of Irony* with irony.

There is even less reason to treat *The Concept of Irony* as ironical at the substantive level, as if it were too Hegelian for the anti-speculative posture of the pseudonymous authorship; for the critique of romantic irony that it contains is basically the same as is found in *Either/Or*.<sup>8</sup> From an ethical point of view, it represents excessive subjectivity.

The treatment of romanticism is indeed very Hegelian, not only in its ultimate conclusion, but in many of its details.<sup>9</sup> But there is no reason why Kierkegaard and Hegel should not agree in finding romanticism's flight from actuality to be problematic. Having a common enemy does not remove the differences between two people. Churchill did not become a totalitarian nor Stalin a democrat by virtue of their agreement that Hitler must be stopped.<sup>10</sup> A deep agreement about romanticism leaves room for Kierkegaard to distance himself quite decisively from Hegel. It need not be ironized away.

That distance already begins to appear in *The Concept of Irony*. Ironical negativity is seen as the birth of a subjectivity no longer completely submerged in society or the state (*CI* 168, 171, 178, 196, 228). This links Socrates to the sophists and provides whatever excuse there is for Aristophanes and for the jury whose verdict proved more fatal than his satire. But Kierkegaard also sharply distinguishes Socrates from the sophists as well as from Plato and the speculative impulse.<sup>11</sup>

The Socrates who emerges is quite ready to become the hero of the spirit that Climacus takes him to be in *Postscript*. He stands over against the established order, which he does not acknowledge as absolute. But his teleological suspension of the ethical, his recognition that he has a higher duty than his duty to Athens, is not a romanticism of personal preference (the aesthetic stage), as can be seen in his quarrel with the sophists. Nor is it that of Hegelian speculation (assimilated by Climacus to the aesthetic), as can be seen in his difference from Plato. The movement is not from the social institutions of Objective Spirit, which are unchallenged in their own sphere, to their philosophical self-consciousness in the higher realm of Absolute Spirit.<sup>12</sup>

Neither aesthetic, speculative, nor ethical (in the Hegelian sense

of the term that signifies a particular *Sittlichkeit*, the laws and customs of one's people), Socratic subjectivity as presented in *The Concept of Irony* is just the sort of ethico-religious subjectivity that Climacus will explore in *Postscript* as an alternative to both the theoretical complacency of Hegelianism and the practical complacency of Christendom. However deeply Hegelian Kierkegaard may be in his dissertation, he is already on a collision course with the system. Robert L. Perkins summarizes the situation eloquently:

The similarities expressed between Kierkegaard and Hegel [in relation to romantic irony] also posit a real dissimilarity . . . in Hegel's dialectic, irony is overcome through the objective march and development of spirit in the actualities of family, civil society, state, and history, in which the individual appears ultimately to be transcended, except insofar as he is caught up in art, religion, and philosophy as absolute moments of Spirit. On the other hand, for Kierkegaard as, we may say, also for Socrates, irony is not a movement or phase of world history and its overcoming is not achieved by the spirit or through the concrete universal, but rather irony is an individual manifestation and is overcome through the concrete individual. The move beyond irony is indeed in Kierkegaard as in Hegel the affirmation of this world, or ordinary human actuality; but according to Kierkegaard, within the new human actuality of ethical existence there remains irony. Human existence is not simply rounded off in the sphere of the ethical as defined by the ethics of Hegel. The infinite still calls.<sup>13</sup>

In *Either/Or* this call of the infinite comes in the sermon that concludes the second part, entitled "The Upbuilding That Lies in the Thought That in Relation to God We Are Always in the Wrong" (*EO* II 339). But in order fully to appreciate its force, we need to see how deeply Hegelian the book is up to that point. Within the theory of the stages or spheres of existence, the aesthetic is perhaps best described as the sphere in which preethical or amoral categories such as interesting/boring crowd out such ethical criteria as right/wrong and good/evil in defining what shall count as the good life. Excitement is in; duty and virtue are out.<sup>14</sup>

In the first part, the aesthetic mode of being-in-the-world is eloquently articulated in the papers written and collected by the young man we know only as A. As already mentioned (note 8 above), he is the embodiment of a romanticism that Hegel and Kierkegaard would both find to be inordinately subjective, an immediate selfhood in need of mediation by ethical ideals and constraints. (Even

the highly reflective seducer whose diary A obviously cherishes is immediate in this sense.)

In the second part, B, whom we also know as Judge William, writes two long letters to A describing and defending the ethical sphere. He is clear about the categorical character of the spheres and therefore clear that to enter the ethical is not the same as becoming good. "I only want to bring you to the point where this choice [between good and evil] truly has meaning for you. . . . Rather than designating the choice between good and evil, my Either/Or designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out. Here the question is under what qualifications one will view all existence and personally live" (EO II 168–9).

Judge William describes this choice in two ways. He often describes it as an *absolute* choice of the self in its *eternal* validity (EO II 166–9, 178, 188–90, 214–19, 223–4). When he speaks this way it is easy to construe the ethical in Platonic, Thomistic, or Kantian contexts, as if one were choosing to make some eternal truth the criterion for one's life, whether this be the Form of the Good, the Natural Law, or the Categorical Imperative.

But most of the time Judge William talks about marriage, as if the ethical did not so much consist in becoming pure reason so as to apprehend some unchanging reality or principle, as in learning to participate in a specific social practice. As with Aristotle, socialization rather than science (*episteme*, *scientia*, *Wissenschaft*) is the basis of the ethical life. I choose myself in my eternal validity when I sincerely say, "I do. . . . With this ring I thee wed."

But this means that whether he knows it or not, Judge William is an Hegelian. For Hegel is an Aristotelian who repudiates the Platonic, Thomistic, and Kantian models in favor of an ethics in which the self has no immediate relation to the Good but only one mediated through the laws and customs of one's people. *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life) signifies the social institutions that mediate the Good to the individual. Not only does Hegel identify these as Family, Civil Society (the economic sector of a capitalist society), and State, but he focuses his analysis of family life on marriage.<sup>15</sup> Nothing could be more Hegelian than the move by which Judge William makes the meaning of marriage the key to the ethical sphere.

We can now appreciate the significance of the sermon with which *Either/Or* concludes: "The Upbuilding That Lies in the Thought

That in Relation to God We Are Always in the Wrong." To call it (as above) the call of the infinite is to see it as the disturbing reminder that the laws and customs of my people are finite. Even when such laws and customs sincerely seek to embody the Good, they are shot through with contingency and corruption. Both in their aspiration and in their achievement, ethically speaking, they are at best approximations. This means that when I have done all that my society requires of me and am an honored role model within it, I have still not fulfilled the infinite requirement that the ethical purports to express. A religious way of putting this is to say that in relation to God I am always in the wrong. No, that's not quite what the sermon title says. It is we, I and my *Sittlichkeit*, the laws and customs, institutions and practices of my society, that are always in the wrong once God is on the scene. For God is the Infinite and Eternal, while we are finite and sinful. "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"<sup>16</sup>

*Either/Or* is Janus faced by virtue of this ending, which in the fewest of words puts the long, Hegelian exposition of the ethical in question. It looks back to *The Concept of Irony* and its appreciation of a Socrates who refuses to make his society the absolute criterion for his life, not on the basis of private, preethical preferences (the sophist, the romantic, the aesthete) but on the basis of the Eternal, which has apprehended him without enabling him to comprehend it (Socratic ignorance). And it looks forward to the two texts in which the polemic against Hegel will find its most overt and most sustained expression: *Fear and Trembling* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. It is two deeply Hegelian texts, *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or*, that set the stage for a religiously motivated critique of Hegel every bit as explosive as the antireligious critiques of Feuerbach and Marx.<sup>17</sup>

Hegel is the main target of *Fear and Trembling*, along with "our age," which is seen to be the everyday correlate of speculative philosophy. The evidence that Johannes de silentio, the pseudonymous author, has Hegel in mind is abundant. His preface makes it clear that his retelling of the Abraham story is directed at "our age" and its assumption that faith is easy and can be presupposed as given, while the really challenging task is to "go further" – presumably to

understanding. Recalling the ancient skeptics for whom doubt was "a task for a whole lifetime," and anticipating the Abraham story, Johannes de silentio longs for the good old days. "Faith was then a task for a whole lifetime" (FT 5–7).<sup>18</sup>

Since it is Hegelian philosophy that embodies this urge (fatal to faith) to "go further" most explicitly and emphatically, Johannes de silentio concludes his preface with a paragraph in which he denies that he is a philosopher and identifies the philosophy he is challenging by calling it the "system" (nine times) and "science" (twice). To be sure that even the most inattentive reader does not miss the Hegelian reference, he further identifies philosophy as the attempt "to transpose the whole content of faith into conceptual form" (FT 7–8). But that is the central claim of Hegelian philosophy in its relation to religion, namely, that the content is the same but that philosophy replaces the inadequate, representational form (*Vorstellung*) with a properly conceptual form (*Begriff*).<sup>19</sup>

After the preface, Johannes de silentio turns his attention to Abraham, first in a "Eulogy on Abraham" and then in a "Preliminary Expectoration." What the latter is preliminary to is the main event, the heart of the text, spelled out in Problems I, II, and III. Each of these three reflections on the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac opens with the same formula, which goes like this. If such and such is the case, then Hegel is right; but then Abraham is lost (FT 54–6, 68–70, 82). In other words, *Fear and Trembling* is a confrontation between Abraham and Hegel. Its central theme is the incompatibility of Hegelian philosophy with biblical faith, of which Abraham is the paradigm in both the Jewish and the Christian Bibles. Contrary to its own central claim, the system is the abolition rather than the perfection of Christian faith.

This Hegelian focus of the text is more often than not overlooked. Then, when Johannes de silentio talks about a teleological suspension of the ethical, it is assumed that the ethical signifies the Moral Law in something like the Platonic, Thomistic, or Kantian senses mentioned above. Kierkegaard [sic] is then said to hold that religious faith is absurd and paradoxical because it is at odds with the Moral Law.<sup>20</sup> Or that the ethical, my duties to my neighbor and myself, is distinguished from the religious, my duties to God. Kierkegaard [sic] is then said to hold that religious faith is absurd and para-



doxical because my duties to God are in conflict with my duties to my neighbor and myself.

But these conceptions of the ethical are imported into the text by the reader and impose a meaning on the text that cannot be found there. Over against his own view that moral insight is always embedded in the concreteness of the culture in which it occurs, Hegel usually uses the term *Moralität* for the historically unmediated ethics of pure reason that I have been calling Platonic or Thomistic or Kantian. Such theories abstract from moral experience too radically to be adequate to it. Moral philosophy needs to orient itself to the ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), that is, the laws and customs, institutions and practices, of the people to whom the philosopher belongs. Far from distinguishing the ethical from the religious, this conception of the ethical as *Sittlichkeit* includes the religious within it, as one can easily see by reading either Hegel or Judge William.

Like Judge William, Johannes de silentio simply presupposes this Hegelian conception of the ethical. Two further indications of this turn up when he explicitly poses the question of a teleological suspension of the ethical. First, he writes, "For if the ethical – that is social morality – is the highest . . ." (*FT* 55; 346n7). The term here translated "social morality" is the Danish equivalent of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*.

Second, Johannes de silentio distinguishes Abraham from the tragic hero. Jephthah and Agamemnon actually killed their daughters; Brutus actually killed his son. But they are tragic heroes who remain entirely within the ethical. The *Sittlichkeit* that justifies these killings and comforts the fathers in their sorrow is the laws and customs not only *of* their people but also *by* their people and above all *for* their people. Its highest requirements are the needs of the nation, the state, and society; and these needs prevail over the otherwise protected needs of the family. But no such larger social need motivates or justifies Abraham, whose society only asks that he love and protect his son (*FT* 57–9, 62).

Abraham is lost (a murderer) unless the laws and customs of his people are only the penultimate norms for his life, ultimately subordinate to a higher law. It is just such a claim that Johannes de silentio calls the teleological suspension of the ethical. This is not the claim that religious faith is in conflict with the Moral Law or

with my duties to my neighbor and myself but the claim that to be seriously religious is to have a higher allegiance than to my people and their conception of the Good. What is at issue is the ultimate source of the Moral Law, including my duties to God, neighbor, and self. Is it society or God?

Johannes de silentio makes this point by distinguishing the universal from the absolute.

Faith is precisely the paradox that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal, is justified before it, not as inferior to it but as superior – but in such a way . . . that the single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. . . . The paradox of faith, then, is this . . . that the single individual – to recall a distinction in dogmatics rather rare these days – determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal. (FT 56, 70)

It is clear that the absolute to which the individual here is absolutely related is God.<sup>21</sup> If this were a Platonic, Thomistic, or Kantian context, the universal would be the Moral Law as a principle of pure reason. But in the Hegelian context that Johannes de silentio has so repeatedly emphasized, the universal is the concrete universal of the social order. What stands over against the particularity of the individual is not a principle but a polity and the practices that prevail within it. Thus, when he writes that for faith “the ethical is reduced to the relative” (FT 70), he means that the believing soul never identifies the law of the land with the law of God but gives absolute allegiance to the latter and only relative allegiance to the former. This “never” relativizes every *Sittlichkeit*, not just the historical precursors of modernity but modernity itself.

But in this case the self-consciousness of the modern world could not be Absolute Knowledge, as it is taken to be in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, nor could the modern state be the embodiment of reason or the teleological fulfillment of the historical process, as it is taken to be in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. Like the critique of political economy in Marx, the teleological suspension of the ethical is the rejection of modernity’s ultimacy. In both cases Hegelian philosophy is seen as the illegitimate legitimizer of an order hostile to genuinely human life.<sup>22</sup>

This raises the epistemological question of how one might know the higher law that relativizes the norms of one's culture. In *Philosophical Fragments*, the very next pseudonymous text, Johannes Climacus explores two possible answers, reason and revelation.<sup>23</sup> This sets the stage for the next round of Hegel critique; for while reason is represented by the Platonic doctrine of recollection in *Fragments*, it is the Hegelian version of this speculative project that is the explicit target of the lengthy sequel to this little book, ironically entitled *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.<sup>24</sup>

Here the difference between recollection and revelation intersects with the difference between objectivity and subjectivity. At the same time the difference between Socrates and Plato that disappeared in *Fragments* reappears. Speculation, whether Platonic or Hegelian, is a mode of objectivity in which the finitude of the subject is stripped away for the sake of an objective, universal, timeless apprehension of the truth. But Socrates develops the recollection motif in the subjective mode in which it is always in the service of the individual's infinite, personal, passionate concern for eternal happiness and never claims to deliver the individual from the conditions of temporal finitude. Hence the Socratic ignorance, the objective uncertainty that belongs to truth in its subjectivity, not only for the pagan Socrates but also for the authentic Christian believer.

Socratic faith (Religiousness A, immanence) will be distinguished from Christian faith (Religiousness B, transcendence) in due course. But this will only reinforce the anti-Hegelian point that has already been made by then. Hegelian speculation is not even playing the same game as Christian faith. *A fortiori* its conceptual moves cannot be the supreme mode of Christian faith. A triple somersault on a trampoline may be quite spectacular, but it is not the consummate form of the triple axel. Climacus is clear that this analysis does not establish the truth of Christianity; but he thinks it shows the falsehood of Hegelianism, which claims to be the highest form of Christianity.

The polemic begins in the introduction, which opposes dialectic to speculative thought in such a way as to make the surprising claim that Hegel is insufficiently dialectical (*CUP* 13). The distinction is Hegel's own, in Sections 79–82 of *The Encyclopedia Logic*. Whereas Kant had distinguished Understanding from Reason and portrayed the latter as falling into dialectical illusion, paralogism,

antinomy, and so forth, Hegel distinguishes both a negative, dialectical mode of Reason and a positive, speculative mode. In Kantian fashion, the dialectical moment undermines the metaphysics of the Understanding, which employs finite categories suited to finite realities and is unable to attain the unconditioned totality to which it aspires. But the speculative moment puts Humpty-Dumpty together again both as the Idea (in the Logic) and in the light of the Idea (in the philosophies of Nature and of Spirit). As the skeptical overturning of Understanding's finitude, dialectical Reason is the herald of the infinite power of speculative Reason.<sup>25</sup>

Climacus introduces himself as a kind of Kantian thinker for whom the dialectical prevails over the speculative. He challenges the Hegelian attempts to make dissonance resolve into harmony and difference constitutive of identity. Then, as if he had just finished reading *Fear and Trembling*, Climacus points to faith as a paradigmatic resistance to the Procrustean embrace of the system (CUP 14). Neither Johannes (de silentio or Climacus) claims to be a man of faith; but both set out to rescue faith from a mode of reason that is its end, not as telos (the Hegelian claim) but as termination.

It is not reason as such that is opposed to faith but modes of human reason that have forgotten their limits as human and have lapsed into self-deification. This is why Socrates, who represented "the hypertrophy of the logical faculty" for Nietzsche,<sup>26</sup> can be an anti-Hegelian hero of subjectivity. Kierkegaard's sharp separation of Socrates from the sophists in *The Concept of Irony* is a reminder that we should not assume that subjectivity is synonymous with subjectivism in *Postscript* before reading the text. The synonym for "subjectivity" in Climacus's usage is "inwardness" not "arbitrariness." Far from being the release from all tasks, subjectivity is the highest task of all.

Part I of *Postscript* is devoted to a brief analysis of objectivity as an epistemological project. Part II is devoted to an expansive analysis of subjectivity and is fifteen times the length of Part I, which serves as little more than a foil. Hegel's insistence that philosophy must be scientific answers Kant's question whether metaphysics can be objective knowledge, free from the perspectival subjectivities of sense, opinion, tradition, authority, interest, and so forth. It is easy to recognize in this aspiration to objectivity not merely a modern awe of physical science but an ancient awe of mathematics that

goes back to Pythagoras and Plato. When this awe gives place to envy and this envy in turn gives rise to the quest for the metaphysical comfort that comes from metaphysical certainty, we have a dominant tendency in Western philosophy.

Climacus takes the empiricist position that apart from purely formal systems, the search for objective knowledge never yields more than approximation. History and speculative philosophy are similar in that just as no final history of this or that can be written, so no final philosophical system can be written. Knowledge is a regulative ideal, and what counts as knowledge at any given moment is only the latest approximation.<sup>27</sup> This is especially troublesome for an anti-foundationalist system like Hegel's, for which truth is found not in the parts but only in the whole. When Climacus constantly taunts Hegel and his followers with the suggestion that the system is not finished (*CUP* 13, 76–7, 106–9, 119–24, 145), the incompleteness to which he points means that the whole is missing and with it, on Hegel's terms, the truth.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, when philosophy seeks to go beyond faith to something better, understanding as objective knowledge, it makes faith a promise it cannot keep. If faith is faith because it is not yet sight (full presence), philosophy, too, is at best partial and perspectival vision. But, Climacus says, let us grant for the sake of argument that philosophy could keep its promise. Should faith then join its bandwagon?

To do so faith would surely go beyond itself, precisely by committing suicide and ceasing to be faith. As an act of appropriation faith belongs to subjectivity or inwardness, to infinite, personal, passionate interest (*CUP* 51–6). This is because the question at issue is, as we have come to call it, an existential question, one about the meaning of my life and how I shall live it. But for the sake of objectivity the knower abandons first person discourse and seeks to become impersonal, dispassionate, and disinterested – systematically and intentionally cut off from all existential questions and *a fortiori* from faith.

Climacus gives the reader two images with which to make objectivity concrete. One is the Aristotelian portrait of the gods, whose “blissful pastime of thinking” (*CUP* 56) is completely devoid of either questions or decisions about how they should live their lives. But not only in Aristotle are they paradigms of the contemplative life. Since Hegel's system culminates in a quotation

from Aristotle that portrays God as thought thinking itself in perfect repose, Climacus feels he has good reason to associate Aristotle's image with Hegelian speculation, which aspires to a repose free of questions and of tasks.

The other image is satirical. A man begins to wonder whether he is truly a Christian. His wife responds, "You are Danish, aren't you? Doesn't the geography book say that the predominant religion in Denmark is Lutheran-Christian? You aren't a Jew, are you, or a Mohammedan? What else would you be, then?" (CUP 50).

If we ask what this census bureau approach to religious identity has to do with Hegelian speculation, we find a clue in Climacus's earlier reference to "a speculative and almost Hegelian public" (CUP 34n). What is "speculative and almost Hegelian" about this wife, who quite possibly knows nothing at all about Hegel, is that she instinctively and in good conscience transforms a subjective question into an objective question. Her husband is asking, out of personal passion and interest, how he should live his life. By moving the discourse to the area of objective facts (of more interest to population statisticians than metaphysicians, to be sure), she tells him at one and the same time (1) that his question is already answered objectively so there is nothing for him to ponder or to choose, and (2) that for this reason his question is a silly one that should never have arisen in the first place. In this way the objectivity that purports to be the fulfillment of his subjectivity is in fact its obliteration. Climacus sees the move less as *Aufhebung* than as annihilation.

It is against the background of this account of objectivity and the dialectic of approximation and appropriation that Climacus later explores the hypothesis that truth is subjectivity. The point is not to deny objective truth but (1) to insist, with regard to the *what*, that human knowledge can never do more than approximate it and (2) to insist, with regard to the *how*, that the task of appropriation must not be supplanted by the quest for objective knowledge. Hence the following account 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.*" But this means that all substantive knowledge is a kind of faith rather than sight or sheer presence, and Climacus hastens to add that this definition of truth is "a paraphrasing of faith. Without risk, no faith.

Faith is the contradiction (tension, incongruity) between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty" (*CUP* 203–4).

The Hegelian project of going beyond faith is doubly mistaken, as Climacus sees it. First, it promises to replace the objective uncertainty with certainty, which it cannot do. It, too, is an interpretation, a perspective.<sup>29</sup> But though Climacus sees the system as on a par with faith so far as certainty goes, he will not construe it as an instance of faith. For, in the second place, it eliminates the moment of passionate, inward appropriation, reducing the self to an impersonal observer devoid of existential identity. If the man who asked his wife if he were really a Christian would be foolish enough to turn to the system for help, it would respond just as his wife did. It would absorb the *what* of the question into objectivity and discard the *how* as superfluous and silly subjectivity.

Climacus himself has not made the movements of faith, nor does he recommend that his readers do so. But he fights doggedly to keep open the space in which decisions about such matters can be made.

As the dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity unfolds, it becomes clear that the tension between time and eternity is fundamental to it. But, since Climacus insists that only God inhabits eternity, this means for him that the underlying tension is that between the human and divine. In the forgetfulness of its limits as human, speculation is the self-deification of (human) reason (in its latest version), now identified simply (but deceptively) as Reason. If faith should turn out to be mad or absurd or paradoxical or contradictory in relation to this Wizard of Oz Reason (as both Johannes's insist it is), this does not mean that it is inherently mad or absurd or paradoxical or contradictory, but only that it is at odds with this version of human reason (and possibly others as well). This would be a fatal objection to faith only if this version of human reason (or perhaps some other version) were the highest standard of truth – were, in effect, the divine intellect.

It is the temporal character of human existence to which Climacus appeals against any such claim, Platonic, Hegelian, or whatever. The definition of truth given above is presented not as the highest truth there is but as the highest truth available to "an *existing* person." It is by making "existence" a technical term that applies uniquely to temporal modes of being that Kierkegaard

(through Climacus) became simultaneously an existentialist and a postmodernist. His argument that we are not divine has a Cartesian flavor to it. If I were God I would not have left myself *in medias res*, given over to becoming, striving, and incompleteness.

This theme emerges with special clarity in the fourth and final thesis attributed by Climacus to Lessing:

*If God held all truth enclosed in his right hand, and in his left hand the one and only ever-striving drive for truth, even with the corollary of erring forever and ever, and if he were to say to me: Choose! – I would humbly fall down to him at his left hand and say: Father, give! Pure truth is indeed only for you alone! (CUP 106)*

The problem is that speculation needs to see the world *sub specie aeterni*. But since “to exist does not mean to be *sub specie aeterni*,” any such project will presuppose a “fictive objective subject” and the “illusory termination” of the quest for objective certainty (CUP 362, 81; cf. 189–93, 197–8, 217, 305–8, 361). In other words, existence itself “must be annulled in the eternal before the system concludes itself” (122).

In order to have a direct intuition of the forms, the Platonic soul must have reflected itself out of the cave so as to stand in an eternity prior to all worldly approximations of it. In order to have Absolute Knowledge, the Hegelian philosopher must both (1) possess the totality of the divine ideas and thus stand side by side with the Platonic soul<sup>30</sup> and (2) at the same time stand at the completion of the historical process so as to encompass the totality of the unfolding of the Idea. Standing at the Alpha and Omega points, the Hegelian philosopher would be reflected out of existence (becoming, striving, incompleteness) and into eternity – not once but twice.

Lessing recognizes that to see the world *sub specie aeterni* is to see the world as God sees it. But he also insists on the ineradicable temporality of human knowledge and thus on a distinction between human and divine that speculation cannot obliterate. “Pure truth is indeed only for you alone!” Perhaps Climacus loves this reaffirmation of Socratic ignorance all the more because it does not come from some romantic fideism but from a rationalist philosopher with strong links to Leibniz and Spinoza. In any case, he develops four versions of the claim that pure truth is for God alone:



A system of existence is for God alone. (CUP 118–19)

To be the spectator for whom *die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht* is for God alone. (141, 158)

The identity of thought and being (subject and object, truth as objectivity) is for God alone. (190, 196)

To have the explanation of the paradox of Christian faith so that it ceases to be paradoxical is for God alone. (212, 562)

The first and third of these are directed against Hegel's Logic (either version), together with the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the journey that initiates the thinker into the sphere in which it is possible. The second and fourth of these are directed against the Philosophy of Spirit developed in the *Phenomenology*, the *Encyclopedia*, the *Philosophy of Right*, and in the lectures on the *Philosophy of Religion*, and the *Philosophy of World History*. A look at the first will illustrate the strategy common to all four ways of resisting the collapse of the infinite qualitative difference between the human and the divine that Climacus sees as a necessary condition of speculative philosophy.

He claims that "(a) a logical system can be given; (b) but a system of existence cannot be given" (CUP 109). So that this will not be interpreted as a kind of Heraclitean assertion that deep down reality is chaos, he adds, "A system of existence cannot be given. Is there, then, not such a system? That is not at all the case. Neither is this implied in what has been said. Existence itself is a system – for God, but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit" (118). The original statement, then, presupposes the essential difference between God and human existence and makes a statement about what is available to the latter. God, but not Hegel, can be an Hegelian.

We might think that Climacus is granting to Hegel his Logic and challenging his *Realphilosophie*, the Philosophy of Nature and the Philosophy of Spirit. But that would be a mistake. We have already seen that Hegel's Logic is no mere formal system of deductive inference. He takes it to be "the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite mind."<sup>31</sup> But he also identifies his Logic with "*metaphysics*, with the science of things grasped in thoughts that used to be taken to express the *essentialities* of the things."<sup>32</sup> As such his logical system is a system of existence; for it not only gives us information about God, who

simply is and thus dwells in eternity, but also about the things of the world that exist, that have come into being, that dwell in time.

It is in fact Hegel's Logic in particular that Climacus has in mind here, as is clear from his complaint "that Hegel's matchless and matchlessly admired invention – the importation of movement into logic . . . simply confuses logic" (CUP 109). But rather than focus on the way in which "everything flips over into its opposite by itself" (115) once we get started, Climacus turns to a question that exercised Hegel greatly, the problem of getting started.

According to Hegel's understanding, the beginning of philosophy as scientific system must be absolute, immediate, without presuppositions. But since Hegel takes two running starts to get to the starting line, Climacus doubts that he can satisfy his own criterion. In the first instance, there is the *Phenomenology*, a long journey that presupposes ordinary experience of many sorts in order to show that Absolute Knowledge is implicit within them. In the second instance, the *Science of Logic* opens with a chapter, "With What Must the Science Begin?" which argues as follows: "Thus the beginning must be an *absolute*, or what is synonymous here, an *abstract* beginning; and so it *may not presuppose anything*, must not be mediated by anything nor have a ground; rather it is to be itself the ground of the entire science. Consequently, it must be purely and simply an immediacy, or rather merely *immediacy* itself. . . . The beginning therefore is *pure being*."<sup>33</sup>

With reference to this second running start, and possibly also to the first, Climacus asks, "*How does the system begin with the immediate, that is, does it begin with it immediately?*" To which he replies, "The answer to this must certainly be an unconditional no. . . . The beginning of the system that begins with the immediate *is then itself achieved through reflection*" (CUP 111–12). But reflection, Climacus proceeds to argue, is something we do, not something that happens of its own accord. It requires "resolution" or decision, and with that we have left presuppositionlessness behind (112–13).

Ironically, this is a point Hegel seems already to have conceded. Just before the passage cited two paragraphs up, he writes, "All that is present [at the beginning of the Logic] is simply the resolve, which can also be regarded as arbitrary, that we propose to consider thought as such." Climacus's point is that this resolve is anything

but innocent. By "arbitrary" Hegel no doubt means "contingent" rather than "capricious," but the dependence of the system on a contingent human decision raises questions that are made all the sharper when the substantive presuppositions of such a decision are noted. The resolve "to consider thought as such" presupposes both (1) that it is possible for an existing thinker to consider thought apart from the finite thinker who does the thinking, and (2) that it is desirable to do so. Climacus thinks it is neither (1) possible, since one would have to become the "fictive" subject who could see the world *sub specie aeterni* nor (2) desirable, since it would involve claiming, in effect, to be God. But it doesn't matter whether Climacus is right on these points. The decision to embark upon the system presupposes that he is wrong, thus violating the system's own requirement of a presuppositionless point of departure.

Moreover, an existing knower who cannot stand at the Alpha point required to get the system started will be equally unable to occupy the Omega point required to get it finished. To his doubts about the immediate starting point Climacus adds his previously expressed doubts about a totalizing conclusion. In existence, subject and object, thought and being are held apart by time. This is but another way of expressing the approximation motif from the earlier discussion of objectivity. If the system somehow could get started, it could only be completed with the help of "a conclusiveness that corresponds to the eternity into which the past has entered" (CUP 118). In other words, "Existence must be annulled in the eternal before the system concludes itself" (122). That Hegel wrote two versions of his *Logic* and revised them both suggests that no published version could claim to be more than the latest approximation of The Science of *Logic*.

There is really no new issue here. That the system must be presuppositionless and that it must be final are two sides of the same coin. In both cases the speculative philosopher needs to occupy a standpoint outside of time, and whether the eternity that must be achieved is represented as before or after time is not very important. In either case it involves the claim to have a God's eye view of the world.

While the details change as Climacus explores the other three forms of his claim that speculative philosophy arrogates to itself what properly belongs to God alone, the heart of the matter remains

unchanged. He thinks that by collapsing the difference between God and human creatures the speculative philosopher becomes comical, and he is unsparing in the employment of his considerable satirical skills. But in the final analysis he is more offended than amused. He sees the speculative project as "impious, pantheistic self-worship" (*CUP* 124), though he is committed strategically to emphasizing the comical side of the story. But he shows his truest colors when he pleads, "Let us be human beings" (114) and when he writes, "I, Johannes Climacus, am neither more nor less than a human being; and I assume that the one with whom I have the honor of conversing is also a human being. If he wants to be speculative thought, I must give up conversing with him" (109).

Climacus is eager to return to the project initiated in *Philosophical Fragments*, that of comparing the modes of religious subjectivity embodied in Socratic and Christian faith. But before he can further distinguish the immanent pathos of Religiousness A from its teleological suspension in the transcendent dialectic of Religiousness B, he feels it necessary to devote considerable effort to point out the great divide that separates both Hegelian philosophy and "a speculative and almost Hegelian public" (*CUP* 34n), namely Christendom, from both Socrates and Christianity.

The centrality of *Postscript* in the Kierkegaardian corpus makes it easy to think that its richly developed contrast between Religiousness A and Religiousness B is the culmination of the authorship's presentation of the religious stage. But this is not the case. I have found it useful to designate central themes of post-*Postscript* accounts of faith as Religiousness C. Like Religiousness B, it is distinctively Christian, but whereas in Religiousness B Christ is the Paradox to be believed, in Religiousness C he is also the Pattern or Paradigm to be imitated, most particularly in his compassion for the poor and the powerless.<sup>34</sup>

Kierkegaard belongs to the tradition of ideology critique. His quarrel with prevailing theory has its telos in his quarrel with prevailing practice. In the writings of Johannes Climacus he charges Hegelian speculation with reducing the divine other to the human same in contrast to the welcoming of the divine other as other in a Christian faith oriented to the paradox of the Incarnation. But *Fragments* and *Postscript* are sandwiched between texts that focus on practice rather than theory. Over against Christendom (sup-

ported by Hegelian theory), which takes prevailing social practices to be divinely sanctioned (the ethical as presented in *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*), Religiousness C presents an ethic of radical compassion that welcomes the neighbor even across the class boundaries of ethically sanctioned marginalization.

Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel is embedded in a larger project of trying to understand what it means to love God and neighbor in terms of overcoming our allergies to their alterity. The critique of modernity that emerges gives to the authorship a distinctively post-modern flavor.

## NOTES

- 1 Those who stress the postmodern tendencies in Kierkegaard usually want to filter out the religious element, while those who emphasize the religious heart of his writings are, for this very reason, usually leery of linking him with postmodernism. But a religious postmodernism is to be found in the writings of Jean-Luc Marion as well as in works such as Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) and Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). I have argued for a religious postmodernism in Kierkegaard in *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1996).
- 2 This category will surprise some readers. But Kierkegaard practices a (non-Marxist) form of ideology critique which is closely linked to a more direct critique of modern society. I have argued this in *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), especially in chaps. 3, 4, 5, and 7.
- 3 *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 3–4.
- 4 The annulment of existence in the eternal has two senses in *Postscript*, individual and collective. Individually, the focus is on the Platonic escape from time, backing into eternity by means of recollection. Collectively, the focus is on the Hegelian completion of world history. Since both of these involve the attempt of philosophical speculation to see the world *sub specie aeterni*, Climacus treats them as variations on a single theme. Hegel's philosophy of world history is a footnote to Plato.
- 5 In a rather remarkable parallel, both Marx and Kierkegaard laid the foundations for their critiques of Hegel in their 1841 dissertations, but neither found his truly anti-Hegelian voice until writings of 1843.

- 6 See Lee M. Capel's translator's introduction to *The Concept of Irony* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), pp. 34–5; Niels Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*, trans. George L. Stengren (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 257; and Sylviane Agacinski, *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Kevin Newmark (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1988), pp. 65–77.
- 7 Stephen N. Dunning, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Inwardness: A Structural Analysis of the Theory of Stages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 4–5.
- 8 The standard reading is not as careful to avoid identifying Judge William with Kierkegaard as it should be and therefore does not notice that the young aesthete of part I, known only as A, scores some rather damaging points against the judge. But it remains the case that (1) A is the spitting image of romanticism as portrayed in *The Concept of Irony* and (2) Judge William's critique parallels just as closely the critique developed in the dissertation.
- 9 For specifics, see Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 55–6.
- 10 It is not the point of this analogy to Stalinize Hegel, politically speaking, though it is worth noting an affinity between the Kierkegaardian critique and postmodern accounts of the totalizing tendencies in Hegel's thought as a violent suppression of otherness.
- 11 For the sophists, see *CI* 201, 208–11; for Plato, see pp. 48, 87–8, 121.
- 12 Hegel suggests this reading of Plato's *Republic* when he says that far from being an empty ideal it "is in essence nothing but an interpretation of the nature of Greek ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*]." *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), p. 10.
- 13 Robert L. Perkins, "Hegel and Kierkegaard: Two Critics of Romantic Irony," *Review of National Literatures* 1, 2 (Fall, 1970): 250–1.
- 14 In contemporary culture it is perhaps the entertainment industry that most fully embodies the aesthetic standpoint.
- 15 This structure is developed briefly in the third part of Hegel's *Encyclopedia, The Philosophy of Mind* (*Geist*, Spirit) and more expansively in *The Philosophy of Right*. For an analysis of his little discussed view of marriage, see chap. 3 of my *Hegel, Freedom, and Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).
- 16 Isaiah 6:5. In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus puts it this way, "Every human being is to live in fear and trembling, and likewise no established order is to be exempted from fear and trembling . . . fear and trembling signify that there is a God – something every human being and every established order ought not to forget for a moment" (*PC* 88).

- 17 If we distinguish Kierkegaard's critique from Marx's on the grounds that they grow, respectively, out of religious and political/economic concerns, it will be necessary to remember that Marx is concerned in a major way with religion, while Kierkegaard's writings contain a radical social critique. See note 2 above.
- 18 In the epilogue a similar point is made with respect to love and faith as lifetime tasks. See *FT* 121–3.
- 19 For this theme in Hegel, see chap. 11 of *Hegel, Freedom, and Modernity*, and chap. 7 of my *History and Truth in Hegel's Phenomenology* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1990).
- 20 Attributing this view to Kierkegaard only compounds the primary error. For the author is Johannes de silentio, and Kierkegaard pleads with his readers not to attribute to him the words he puts in the mouths (or pens) of the authors he creates, just as a novelist might hope that his or her readers would not confuse any of a story's characters with their author. See *CUP* 625–30.
- 21 In *Postscript*, Climacus defines the religious as the task of being simultaneously related absolutely to the absolute and relatively to the relative. See *CUP* pp. 387, 407, 414, 422, and 431.
- 22 By putting Judge William's God radically in question, *Fear and Trembling* is a form of ideology critique not entirely unlike Marx's. But since Abraham's God is the relativizer rather than the legitimizer of the social order, it is not clear that the religious dimension of Marx's ideology critique has any critical bite against the conception of faith put forth in this text.
- 23 On the relation between Johannes Climacus and Johannes de silentio, see my essay, "Johannes and Johannes: Kierkegaard and Difference," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1994).
- 24 In "Johannes and Johannes" I have argued that in spite of the explicit reference to Platonic doctrine *Fragments* should be read as ultimately directed against Hegel. The interpretation of *Postscript* that follows is developed in greater detail in *Becoming a Self*.
- 25 What Hegel says about skepticism in §81 of *The Encyclopedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, et al. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), should be compared with what he says about it in §§24 (Addition 3), 32, 39, and 78. Cf. section 1B. of *History and Truth in Hegel's Phenomenology*.
- 26 *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954), p. 475.
- 27 From Climacus's perspective it does not matter whether we interpret the movement of the sciences in terms of progress or incommensurable paradigms.

- 28 On Hegel's holism, see *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 3–11; and Westphal, *Hegel, Freedom, and Modernity*, pp. 75–81 and 118–22.
- 29 There are obvious affinities here with the perspectivism of Nietzsche, the fallibilism of Peirce and Dewey, the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, and the undecidability of Derrida. Such a list could easily be lengthened.
- 30 Thus Hegel introduces his Logic by saying, "This realm is truth as it is without veil and in its own absolute nature. It can therefore be said that this content is the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite mind." *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), pp. 50, 43.
- 31 See note 30 above. Cf. *The Encyclopedia Logic*, §85, where Hegel claims that the categories of his Logic "may be looked upon as definitions of the Absolute, as the *metaphysical definitions of God*."
- 32 Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, §24. Cf. *Science of Logic*, pp. 27, 63.
- 33 Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 70.
- 34 See "Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of Religiousness B," in *Foundations of Kierkegaard's Vision of Community*, ed. George B. Connell and C. Stephen Evans (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1992). *Practice in Christianity* is the most important text for Religiousness C, but *For Self-Examination*, *Judge for Yourself*, and *Works of Love* are also very important.