

Understanding Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus in the *Postscript*

Mirror of the Reader's Faults or Socratic Exemplar?

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Abstract

In this paper I take issue with James Conant's claim that Johannes Climacus seeks to engage his reader in the *Postscript* by himself enacting the confusions to which he thinks his reader is prone. I contend that Conant's way of reading the *Postscript* fosters a hermeneutic of suspicion that leads him (and those who follow his approach) to be unduly suspicious of some of Climacus' philosophical activity. I argue that instead of serving as a mirror of his reader's faults, Climacus is better conceived of as a Socratic figure whose own philosophical activity represents a positive alternative to the Hegelian style of doing philosophy that is under attack in the *Postscript*. I close the paper by arguing that Climacus adopts two very different experimental stances in his two books: while in *Fragments* Climacus adopts the stance of someone who has "forgotten" about Christianity, in the *Postscript* he openly declares that he is not a Christian and then proceeds to investigate the question, appropriately cast in the first person, "How do I, Johannes Climacus, become a Christian?" I maintain that we will not be in a position to appreciate what makes the *Postscript* a profound work of philosophy until we obtain a better understanding of the various respects in which Climacus is a Socratic figure.

1. Conant's Challenge: What is the Philosophical Significance of the Postscript's Unusual Literary Form?

James Conant has developed over the course of several papers a philosophically interesting and provocative interpretation of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.¹ He argues that inadequate attention has

¹ J. Conant "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?" [abbreviated *MWS*] in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. by Richard Fleming and Michael Payne, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press 1989, pp. 242-283; "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and

been paid to the *Postscript*'s unusual literary form, leading in his view to serious misconceptions about the specific sense in which the *Postscript* is a work of philosophy. He maintains that it is quite common for Kierkegaard scholars to think that they have grasped the *Postscript*'s doctrinal content about how one becomes a Christian while simultaneously failing to see that its true philosophical aim is "not to illuminate the nature of the truth of Christianity but to break the *illusion* that the task of becoming a Christian is one that can be furthered by means of philosophy."² Conant contends that far from being a profound meditation about subjectivity that genuinely seeks to answer the questions it explores, the *Postscript* is rather "an elaborate *reductio ad absurdum*" of the very idea that philosophical reflection could "advance our understanding of what it means to become a Christian."³

On Conant's view, the pseudonymous author of the *Postscript*, Johannes Climacus, engages in an elaborate parody of speculative philosophy over the course of the book.⁴ He argues that Climacus' apparent philosophical activity is actually a kind of ruse, designed to appeal to the kind of reader who has certain speculative philosophical incli-

Nonsense" [abbreviated *KWN*] in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. by Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam, Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press 1993, pp. 195-224; "Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors" [abbreviated *PTTT*] in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, ed. by Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr, New York: St. Martin's Press 1995, pp. 248-331. Throughout this paper I follow Kierkegaard's practice of distinguishing between himself and his different pseudonyms, and so refer to Climacus as the (pseudonymous) author of both the *Postscript* and *Fragments*. See, e.g., "A First and Last Explanation" (*CUPI*, 627 / *SKS* 7, 571, 3-6).

² Conant *MWS*, p. 276 (note 20; italics mine).

³ Conant *KWN*, p. 207; *KWN*, p. 206. Cf. H. Allison "Christianity and Nonsense" in *The Review of Metaphysics*, 20, 1967, pp. 432-460 at p. 443: "[T]he real purpose of [the *Postscript*] is not to convince the reader of a philosophical or religious truth, but to prevent him from theorizing, even in an 'existential' sense about Christianity... [F]ar from being a contribution, good, bad or indifferent, to a philosophy of existence, the *Postscript* emerges as Kierkegaard's attempt at a *reductio ad absurdum* of any such enterprise."

⁴ See Conant *KWN*, p. 205: "Climacus' remarks here on his own earlier work [*Fragments*] are clearly intended to apply to the *Postscript* as well. One has not attained an accurate impression of this work until one has recognized the presence of 'the parody on speculative philosophy involved in the entire plan of the work.'" See also *KWN*, p. 206; *KWN*, p. 215; *KWN*, p. 224 (note 86). Conant follows Allison here, who makes the related claim that "the doctrinal content of the [*Postscript*] must be regarded as an ironical jest, which essentially takes the form of a carefully constructed parody of the *Phenomenology of Mind*" ("Christianity and Nonsense," pp. 432-433).

nations in order, ultimately, to reveal to her that she has an underlying tendency to evade the practical difficulties involved with living an ethical or religious life by transforming what are essentially matters of the will into matters of the intellect: “The [speculative] philosopher is particularly prone, on this view of him, to convert the practical difficulty of *living* a certain sort of life into the intellectual difficulty of trying to *understand* how it is one can become a person who leads such a life.”⁵ Conant also draws our attention to the theme of forgetfulness in the *Postscript*, specifically to a condition of *self*-forgetfulness on the part of the speculative philosopher.⁶ Almost the exact opposite of the Socratic concern with self-knowledge, the manner of philosophizing being targeted by Climacus seems to reinforce what Conant calls, “a particular form of *blindness* as to the character of one’s life,” corroding in the process people’s “capacity to bring the texture of their own lives into imagination.”⁷ By doing philosophy they forget themselves, effectively losing sight of themselves as ethical and religious beings. Conant maintains that the *Postscript* hopes to address this peculiar condition of amnesia, to help the speculatively-inclined reader to remember herself (or even perhaps discover herself for the first time). I entirely agree. Where we disagree concerns our differing conceptions of how Climacus hopes to engage his reader and what specifically he aims to accomplish by means of this engagement.

2. Conant’s Picture: Climacus as Mirroring the Reader’s Confusions

On Conant’s view, Climacus’ primary role is to serve as a *mirror* for his speculatively-inclined philosophical reader: “Kierkegaard’s various pseudonyms present different sorts of mirrors in which different sorts of readers may recognize themselves. Climacus is to serve as a mirror for the philosopher who imagines that he is making progress on the problem of how one becomes a Christian.”⁸ On

⁵ Conant *KWN*, p. 205 (italics mine). See also *MWS*, p. 254; *PTTT*, p. 261; *PTTT*, p. 329 (note 116).

⁶ See also, e.g., J. Lippitt *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought* [abbreviated *Humor and Irony*], New York: St. Martin’s Press 2000, p. 13; M. Weston “Philosophy as Hubris” in his *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy*, London: Routledge 1994, pp. 136-155 at pp. 136; 139.

⁷ Conant *KWN*, p. 204 (italics mine); *PTTT*, p. 278.

⁸ Conant *KWN*, p. 205. See also *KWN*, p. 203: “The work is constructed as a mirror in which the reader can recognize his own confusions”; *PTTT*, p. 257: “The aim is to present the reader with a mirror: a portrait of an idealized character in whose

this picture of Climacus' activity, Climacus seeks to awaken his reader to the fact that she may suffer from this tendency to forget herself (ethically and religiously speaking) and to convert these practical questions of life into merely theoretical questions of the intellect, and he does so, according to Conant, by himself *enacting* the very same tendency.⁹ That is, on Conant's account, Climacus is *not* making genuine progress as he engages in what looks to be philosophical reflection throughout the *Postscript*. Instead, he proceeds *as if* he were genuinely interested in presenting an account of how one becomes a Christian, while what he actually means to do is to try to bring out, ever so slowly over the course of the book, the underlying ludicrousness of such a project: "The work pretends to endorse a point of view which it ultimately aims to reveal as confused....The aim of the work therefore is to present something that has the form of an intellectual difficulty,¹⁰ inviting the philosopher to grapple with it, and leading him to the point where the terms in which he was tempted to pose the difficulty come apart on him."¹¹ If all goes according to plan, Climacus' reader will catch herself identifying with Climacus' own putatively philosophical behavior,

features he might recognize himself (and thereby recognize his life as he fantasizes it to be at variance with his life as he leads it)." M. C. Taylor makes a similar point: "The preface to *Stages on Life's Way* could serve as an epigram for the entire pseudonymous authorship: 'Such works are mirrors: when a monkey peers into them, no Apostle can be seen looking out.' In the first instance the pseudonymous works offer the reader a mirror in which he can see himself, a map on which he can locate his place in existence" (*Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1975, p. 57).

⁹ See, e.g., Conant *PTTT*, p. 283: "Climacus is far more dialectically subtle than his imaginary neo-Hegelian philosophical interlocutors, but he must be so if he is to *exemplify*...mistaking a subjective problem for an objective one, of converting a practical difficulty into an intellectual one. The *Postscript* *participates* in such a misunderstanding in order to expose the confusions it involves itself in and to show the reader his own 'enduring capacity' to fall back into these confusions" (italics mine).

¹⁰ This is arguably exactly what Climacus is *not* doing. He maintains that if he is to try to remind his reader of what the age has forgotten, then "this must not on any account be done didactically....If this is communicated as knowledge, the recipient is mistakenly induced to understand that he is gaining something to know" (*CUP1*, 249 / *SKS* 7, 226-227). Climacus denies that this is his aim and instead claims that by presenting things in the unusual manner that he does, "the matter is placed as close to existence as possible so that it does not become a little more knowledge a knower can add to his [already extensive] knowledge but a primitive impression for his existence" (*CUP2*, 65 / *Pap.* VI B 41, section 8).

¹¹ Conant *PTTT*, p. 283; *KWN*, p. 207. For how, on Conant's account, this process supposedly unfolds, see, e.g., *KWN*, p. 224 (note 86); *KWN*, p. 223.

only to have it eventually dawn on her that this entire enterprise is fundamentally confused and rests on the very same tendency that she herself suffers from, namely, as Conant puts it, a “compulsion to always reflect upon the task of living (a certain sort of life) rather than to attend to the task itself.”¹²

3. *Some Objections to Conant's View*

While I admire Conant's attempt to be responsive to the unusual form of the *Postscript*, I think something has gone seriously wrong in his overall account. In particular, I want to argue that his picture of Climacus' activity in the *Postscript* leads to significant distortions of Climacus' philosophical enterprise. An example from Wayne Booth may help to bring out more precisely what I think has gone wrong. While Booth is speaking about the difficulty of detecting irony, I think what he says nicely generalizes to the variety of difficulties involved with trying to understand the *Postscript's* unusual form and how this bears on its being something other than a straightforward philosophical treatise. Booth claims that there are “two obvious pitfalls in reading irony – not going far enough and going too far.”¹³ While the reader who doesn't go far enough is in danger of missing the irony altogether (of reading the text in question too literally and without nuance), the reader who goes too far is in danger of finding irony where there is none (of reading the text in question with in effect too much sophistication), and so of not knowing “where to stop” when looking for irony.¹⁴ Booth claims that in such a case, “overly ingenious readers sometimes go astray in their search for ironies. Once they have learned to suspect a given speaker, they are tempted to suspect every statement he makes.”¹⁵ I think something analogous

¹² Conant *KWN*, p. 207.

¹³ W. Booth *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1974, p. 169.

¹⁴ Booth *A Rhetoric of Irony*, p. 185. Booth maintains that the best way to determine “where to stop” in our search for irony is by being especially attentive to the texts we are reading: “Where then do we stop in our search for ironic pleasures? Where the work ‘tells’ us to, wherever it offers us other riches that might be destroyed by irony. It takes a clever reader to detect all the ironies in a Fielding or a Forster. But it takes something *beyond cleverness* to resist going too far: the measured tempo of the experienced reader, eager for quick reversals and exhilarating turns, but always aware of the demands both of the partner and of the disciplined forms of the dance” (p. 190; italics mine).

¹⁵ Booth *A Rhetoric of Irony*, p. 185.

is going on in Conant's case. His picture of Climacus' activity in the *Postscript* tends to foster what we might call a *hermeneutic of suspicion*,¹⁶ leading Conant (and those who follow his approach)¹⁷ to be unduly suspicious of some of Climacus' philosophical activity and resulting in what I take to be a radical misapprehension of Climacus' philosophical aim in this work and how he goes about trying to realize that aim.

Let me give you an example of what I have in mind. Because Conant believes that the primary target of the *Postscript* is a reader who tends to convert practical ethical and religious questions into questions of the intellect (thereby indulging her inclination to reflect rather than to act), he is inclined to treat any activity that Climacus engages in that looks like reflection as itself inherently suspect, as something he is doing at best in order to mirror back to the reader her own evasive behavior. Thus the fact that Climacus does not seem to be in a hurry to finish his project and never seems to tire of reflecting about ethical and religious matters looks suspicious.¹⁸ Doesn't this behavior dramatically exemplify precisely what is wrong with the reader? Doesn't it (at least initially) hold out to her what she most desires, namely a way to delay and postpone having to make genuine ethical and religious commitments while fostering the illusion that by indulging her

¹⁶ See, e.g., Conant *KWN*, p. 210: "As the *Postscript* progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that remarks such as these will be asked to support the weight of an elaborate theory concerning the relationship between the subjective and passionate character of religious faith and the essentially disinterested nature of objective reasoning. Climacus, therefore, *does not remain faithful* to his own claim that all he is doing is marking categorical distinctions – assembling reminders that bring to the philosopher's attention what, in some sense, he cannot help but already know....[Climacus] ends up representing what is a mere truism as his own intellectual discovery, *his* contribution to knowledge.... For this reason, as well as because of Climacus' incessant *warnings* that what he is up to *cannot* be taken at face value, our *suspicions* should be alerted..." (all italics mine except for the isolated "his" in the second to last sentence).

¹⁷ See especially S. Mulhall "The Life of Truth; The Absurdity of Philosophy" in his *Faith and Reason*, London: Duckworth, 1994, pp. 23-52; "God's Plagiarist: *The Philosophical Fragments* of Johannes Climacus" in *Philosophical Investigations*, 22, 1999; reprinted (slightly revised) in his *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2003, pp. 323-353; Michael Weston "Evading the Issue: The Strategy of Kierkegaard's *Postscript*" in *Philosophical Investigations*, 22, 1999, pp. 35-64.

¹⁸ On Climacus' not being in a hurry, see *CUPI*, 207 / *SKS* 7,189, 10; *CUPI*, 602 / *SKS* 7, 547,19-20; *CUPI*, 76 / *SKS* 7, 77,15-16; see also *PF*, 16 / *SKS* 4, 224,30-32; *PF*, 25 / *SKS* 4, 232-233; *PF*, 20 / *SKS* 4, 228,14-18; *PF*, 40 / *SKS* 4, 245,27-34; *PF*, 47 / *SKS* 4, 252,10-13.

desire to reflect rather than to act she is actually making real ethical or religious progress?¹⁹

While Climacus' tendency to linger, to slow things down, to be a "loafer" as he puts it,²⁰ certainly looks suspicious by Conant's lights, I think this is due, at least in part, to Conant's having misconceived who the main target of the *Postscript* is. It's not someone who confusedly thinks that philosophy can help her to decide whether she should become a Christian (while it actually provides her with a way to *delay* making such a decision), but rather someone who imagines herself *already* to have made the decision to become a Christian and who thinks that ethically and religiously attending to herself is a relatively straightforward matter.²¹ Basically, such a reader thinks that being a Christian is *easy* and certainly not something that requires much effort on her part.²² At the same time, being someone with certain intellectual inclinations, she finds herself drawn to speculative philosophy, and the more she becomes enamored with the abstract reflection this activity involves the more she develops a habit of neglecting herself. She simply has no patience for attending to herself or rather supposes that she has already finished with such a task.²³ If I am right in suggesting that this is the principal type of reader that Climacus seeks to engage, then behavior that looks to

¹⁹ See, e.g., Conant *PTTT*, p. 311 (note 35): "The attack in Kierkegaard is on a *form of reflection* which subserves a *strategy of evasion* – a form of reflection that offers the promise of enlightening us as to the nature of the ethical or the religious life but in fact *prevents* us from ever arriving at a *decisive action* and hence from properly embarking on such a life...What is under indictment therefore is a specific mode of thought, one that *pretends* to address itself to the ethical and religious life while answering our desire to *evade* such a life. It is part of the genius of this mode of reflection (i.e. speculative philosophy), as Kierkegaard sees it, to succeed in offering the reflecting individual the *semblance* of progress where no genuine movement has been made..." (italics mine); see also *KWN*, p. 206.

²⁰ *PF*, 5 / *SKS* 4, 215,13. Cf. *CUPI*, 83 / *SKS* 7, 82,30.

²¹ See, e.g., *CUPI*, 365-366 / *SKS* 7, 333,1-15: "The most difficult decision is not that in which the individual is far removed from the decision (as when a non-Christian is going to decide whether he wants to be a Christian), but when it is *as if the matter were already decided*....[W]hen it is as if the matter were already decided...there is something that hinders me in becoming aware [of the decision]... – namely, the *semblance* of a decision" (italics mine; trans. modified).

²² Hence Climacus' goal of "mak[ing] something more difficult" (*CUPI*, 186 / *SKS* 7, 172,1), specifically the task of becoming a Christian. See, e.g., *CUPI*, 383 / *SKS* 7, 349,16-19; *CUPI*, 587 / *SKS* 7, 533,18-20.

²³ Climacus warns that "to finish too quickly is the greatest danger of all" and characterizes the age as one that "in systematic, rote fashion has *finished* with the understanding of Christianity and all the attendant difficulties and [that] jubilantly pro-

Conant as though it exemplified a confusion (with the aim of mirroring the reader's own confusion) in fact serves as a *corrective* to the hasty, impatient reader who is unwilling to spend any time attending to herself and whose chosen manner of doing philosophy leads her to forget herself. If such a reader is in a hurry, then Climacus will take his time and take on the appearance of a loafer. If such a reader imagines that she already is a Christian and that being a Christian is easy, then Climacus will try to reacquaint her with just how difficult and strenuous such a task can be.

Furthermore, Conant's misconception of the type of reader that Climacus seeks to engage also leads him to obscure an important respect in which Climacus represents a genuine philosophical exemplar in the *Postscript*.²⁴ In my view Climacus does not adopt the stance of someone who seeks to mirror the reader's faults, but instead adopts a different, more Socratic stance.²⁵ This stance allows him to accomplish two distinct things: (1) to draw attention to the confusions that modern philosophers often fall into; and (2), and perhaps more importantly, to help his reader give up this Hegelian-style of doing philosophy by reminding her of a different conception of philosophy, one which Climacus ties to Socrates and whose principal quality is that it conceives of philosophy as an activity that enables the reader to engage in reflection while always keeping herself in view, thereby avoiding the condition of self-forgetful-

claims how easy it is to understand the difficulty" (*CUPI*, 164/*SKS* 7, 152,17-18; *CUPI*, 276/*SKS* 7, 251, 29-32; italics mine).

²⁴ I am thus quite sympathetic to Lippitt's view that Climacus is what he calls a "positive exemplar" (and so not someone who "himself exemplifies a particular kind of confusion: that he makes the same mistakes as those he condemns"; *Humour and Irony*, pp. 69; 46). At the same time, however, I do not think that he pays adequate attention to the experimental nature of Climacus' endeavors (see note 40 below), or that he assigns appropriate significance to the fact that much of the time Climacus is "in character," that is, playing a role he has assumed that he thinks is suited to the particular condition of his readers (see my discussion below of the two experimental stances that Climacus adopts in his two books; cf. my paper, "The Socratic Method of Kierkegaard's Pseudonym Johannes Climacus: Indirect Communication and the Art of 'Taking Away'" in *Søren Kierkegaard and the Word(s)*, ed. by Poul Houe and Gordon D. Marino, Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel 2003, pp. 139-150 at 149, note 6).

²⁵ Lippitt very fruitfully draws attention to the role that Socrates plays for Climacus in the *Postscript*, calling him "an exemplar of both subjective thinking and indirect communication" (*Humour and Irony*, p. 42; see pp. 40; 42-45; 135-174). He also argues that Climacus himself adopts a "maieutic relationship" with his reader (p. 26; cf. p. 67). See also M. Rubenstein "Kierkegaard's Socrates: A Venture in Evolutionary Theory" in *Modern Theology*, 17, 2001, pp. 442-473.

ness to which she currently is prone.²⁶ Because the speculative philosopher imagines that she has already finished with the task of attending to herself, Climacus suggests that what she is in need of above all is some *self-restraint*: “the task is to exercise restraint, since the temptation is to finish too quickly.”²⁷ Thus in the *Postscript*, even as Climacus often seeks to bring to light the ludicrousness of Hegelian-style philosophy and how modern philosophers often wind up neglecting themselves, it is not his goal to exhibit this self-forgetfulness himself but rather to wean his reader from her bad habits of thought while exemplifying for her the kind of self-restraint that is characteristic of this other, more Socratic style of doing philosophy.²⁸

Significantly, Conant’s picture of Climacus’ activity seems to blind him to the precise *manner* in which Climacus carries out his project in the *Postscript*. On Conant’s view, Climacus sets out to investigate what Conant calls “the guiding question of the work”: “How does one become a Christian?”²⁹ Because Climacus argues that ethical and religious questions can only be properly investigated by those who are existentially committed to or *interested* in leading such a life, Conant thinks we should be suspicious of the fact that Climacus is pursuing this matter since he is a self-described humorist who repeatedly and without exception denies that he is in any sense a religious person (let alone a Christian) and so does not appear to be personally interested in the requisite way:

Johannes Climacus tells us he is not a Christian. Indeed, he is not even interested in becoming a Christian. But he is interested in asking and answering the question: how does one become a Christian? He asks this question from the perspective of someone who is and intends to remain an “outsider” to Christianity and he wishes to pursue

²⁶ Climacus characterizes this alternative, Socratic conception of philosophy as “that simpler philosophy, which is delivered by an existing individual for existing individuals” and which “especially draws attention to the ethical” (*CUPI*, 121/*SKS* 7, 116,32-33; trans. modified). Cf. Jon Stewart *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003, pp. 641-647.

²⁷ *CUPI*, 165 / *SKS* 7, 153,12-13.

²⁸ Climacus claims that the power to restrain himself is the only power he possesses: “I am one of those who have power; yet my power is not that of a ruler or a conqueror, for the only power I have is the power to restrain. My power, however, is not extensive, for I have power only over myself, and I do not have even that if I do not exercise restraint every moment” (*CUPI*, 164-165 / *SKS* 7, 152-153).

²⁹ See Conant *KWN*, p. 201: “The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* begins as a work that aspires to clarify the question: how does one become a Christian?...[Climacus] insists that he, Johannes Climacus, in preoccupying himself with the guiding question of the work, ‘how does one become a Christian?’, is himself far from being a Christian”; see also *KWN*, p. 205; *PTTT*, p. 262.

the answer in a "disinterested" fashion. His own interest in the matter, as he himself explains it, is of a purely objective and impersonal nature.³⁰

³⁰ Conant *PTTT*, p. 262. See, e.g., *CUPI*, 501 / *SKS* 7, 454,12-13: "I am not a religious person but simply and solely a humorist"; *CUPI*, 483 / *SKS* 7, 438,3-5: "I...am neither a religious speaker nor a religious person, but just a humorous, experimenting psychologist" (trans. modified); *CUPI*, 466 / *SKS* 7, 424,1-2: "I...do not even pretend to be a Christian"; see also *CUPI*, 617 / *SKS* 7, 560,3-7. It's worth noting, however, that Climacus also claims that religious individuals sometimes cloak themselves in humor, using the outward appearance of a humorist as a kind of disguise or "incognito" (see, e.g., *CUPI*, 500-501 / *SKS* 7, 453-454; *CUPI*, 505-509 / *SKS* 7, 458-462; cf. Lippitt *Humour and Irony*, pp. 91-96). What is at issue here, however, is not the character of Climacus' inner life (which arguably remains hidden from the reader), but the fact that he consistently denies in everything that he *says* that he is a religious individual (thanks to John Lippitt for pressing me to be clearer about this point).

There is one passage that scholars sometimes cite as evidence that Climacus is not unequivocal in his denials that he is a religious person: "In my opinion, Religiousness A (within the boundaries of which I have my existence) is so strenuous for a human being that there is always a sufficient task in it" (*CUPI*, 557 / *SKS* 7, 506,31-33). Anthony Rudd, e.g., nicely illustrates what I have in mind: "Climacus refers quite explicitly to Religiousness A as that 'within the boundaries of which I have my existence'" ("On Straight and Crooked Readings: Why the *Postscript* Does Not Self-Destruct" in *Anthropology and Authority*, ed. by Poul Houe, Gordon D. Marino, and Sven Hakon Rossel, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2000, pp. 119-127 at 120). Lippitt also cites this passage (p. 69) and later claims that "Climacus locates his own existential position 'within the boundaries of' Religiousness A" (*Humour and Irony*, p. 93). In general, however, Lippitt rightly recognizes that Climacus draws a sharp distinction between the humorist and the religious individual (see, e.g., pp. 86; 88). Since he believes, however, that he needs to accommodate this passage, he winds up positing what he terms "the person of full-blown Religiousness A" (as opposed to the less than full-blown form of Religiousness A that he thinks must be assigned to the humorist). See also, e.g., C. Stephen Evans *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* [abbreviated *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*], Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press 1983, p. 202; Michael Lotti "Who is Johannes Climacus?: Kierkegaard's Portrait of the Philosophical Enterprise," M. Phil. Thesis, University of Wales, Swansea 1999, p. 210. T.F. Morris objects to Evans' interpretation of this passage but does not offer a satisfactory alternative ("Humour' in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*" in *The Heythrop Journal*, 29, 1988, pp. 300-312 at 310, note 16). What is objectionable about this line of interpretation is the suggestion that we should understand Climacus to be claiming in this passage that he falls *within* the scope of Religiousness A (as if Religiousness A were a country and he had declared himself to be someone who resides within its borders, who makes his home so to speak on religious ground). That reading is understandable in the light of how the passage has been translated (the passage is essentially identical in the Swenson/Lowrie translation – see *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1941, p. 495), but the translation is incorrect and misleading as a result. The Danish passage reads: "min Mening er, at Religiositeten A (i hvis Confinium

Conant thus accuses Climacus of falling into a kind of “performative contradiction” since he allegedly approaches in a disinterested manner a topic (how one becomes a Christian) that by its very nature appears to require that it be approached in a personally-interested manner.³¹ But this picture of Climacus rests on a mischaracterization by Conant of the question actually being investigated in the *Postscript*. Climacus does not in fact set out to investigate the question “How does one become a Christian?” but instead seeks to answer the question, “How do *I*, Johannes Climacus, become a Christian?”³² I take it that Climacus’ use of the first person here is critical and indicates that he does not wish to pursue this question in a strictly disinterested fashion.³³ While it is true that he remains an outsider to Christianity (and regularly denies that he is a Christian), his goal is not to approach this topic in a manner that mirrors the disinterested approach of the speculative philosopher, but instead to remind her

jeg har min Existents) er...” Note that the Latin term “confinium” in this passage is singular (nominative plural = *confinia*), giving us “in the boundary of which I have my existence” or perhaps better: “in whose boundary/border territory I have my existence.” On this rendering of the Danish, Climacus is merely reasserting here what he maintained earlier in his discussion of the spheres of existence: “There are three existence-spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical, the religious. To these correspond two *confinia* [border territories]: irony is the *confinium* between the aesthetic and the ethical; humor is the *confinium* between the ethical and the religious” (*CUPI*, 501-502 / *SKS* 7, 455,1-3; trans. modified); see also *CUPI*, 500 / *SKS* 7, 453,7-8. As a humorist, Climacus does not dwell *within* Religiousness A but rather on the border or boundary that *separates* the ethical and the religious; hence this passage perfectly squares with his claims elsewhere that he is not a religious person.

³¹ Conant *PTTT*, p. 263.

³² Conant consistently substitutes the impersonal “one” for the first personal “I.” In the final appendix to the *Postscript*, Climacus maintains that the posing and exploring of this question in the first person is the “content of the book”: “In the isolation of the experiment, the whole book is about myself, simply and solely about myself. ‘I, Johannes Climacus, now thirty years old, born in Copenhagen, a plain, ordinary human being like most people, have heard it said that there is a highest good in store that is called an eternal happiness, and that Christianity conditions this upon a person’s relation to it. I now ask: How do I become a Christian?’ (see Introduction [*CUPI*, 15-17 / *SKS* 7, 25-26]) I ask solely for my own sake. Indeed, that is certainly what I am doing or, rather, I have asked this question, for that indeed is the content of the book” (*CUPI*, 617-618 / *SKS* 7, 560,21-28; trans. modified). See also *CUPI*, 15-16 / *SKS* 7, 25,3-8; *CUPI*, 17 / *SKS* 7, 26,10-13.

³³ By posing things in the first person, Climacus claims that though “the issue pertains to [him] alone...if properly presented, it will pertain to everyone in the same way” (*CUPI*, 17 / *SKS* 7, 26,13-15). Cf. Weston *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy*, pp. 9; 136; Lippitt *Humour and Irony*, pp. 13; 16; 18; 41.

of a type of philosophical reflection that properly employs the first personal "I."³⁴

4. A Competing Picture: Climacus as Socratic Figure

I began this paper by calling attention to an interpretive challenge that I think Conant sets Kierkegaard scholars in his writings on the *Postscript*. Conant contends that scholars have not paid adequate attention to the unusual form of Climacus' second book and challenges us to come up with an account of the *Postscript* that makes clear how its unusual form contributes to the *Postscript*'s being a work of philosophy. As should be apparent by now, I do not think that Conant's own attempt to meet this challenge succeeds. I have suggested that a more promising way of trying to meet this challenge is to conceive of Climacus as a Socratic figure, and in the remainder of this paper I want to say a bit more about this competing picture.

Climacus calls his two books "pamphlets" and denies that they make "any claim to being a part of the scientific-scholarly endeavor."³⁵ I take it that he means thereby to designate his works as somehow different in kind from the systematic philosophical treatises that are the norm in his day. Even as Socrates may provide Climacus with a model of how philosophy should be done, to call Climacus a Socratic figure is not to say that he proceeds exactly as Socrates does. Nor is it to say that he proceeds in the same manner in each of his two books. Though Socrates is best known for the elenctic method of questioning and refutation that he regularly employs in Plato's dialogues, his

³⁴ It's also worth noting that the two philosophers who are most celebrated in the *Postscript*, Socrates and Gotthold Lessing (who Climacus notes "reminds us vividly of the [ancient] Greeks") are both singled out for their ability to teasingly employ the first person, enabling them to remain alone in the solitary activities that Climacus associates with ethical and religious development, while also maieutically throwing their interlocutors back on their own individual selves (*CUPI*, 99 / *SKS* 7, 97,35-36). Climacus expressly compares Lessing to Socrates in this particular respect: "This nimbleness in teasingly employing his own *I*, almost like Socrates, in declining partnership or, more accurately, guarding himself against it in relation to that truth in which the cardinal point is precisely to be left alone with it..." (*CUPI*, 69 / *SKS* 7, 71,7-10). Lessing in effect serves as a modern bridge back to Socrates and "the beautiful Greek way of philosophizing" he represents, in which "to philosophize was an act" and "the one philosophizing was an existing person" (*CUPI*, 99 / *SKS* 7, 97,34-35; *CUPI*, 331 / *SKS* 7, 302,16-17).

³⁵ *PF*, 5 / *SKS* 4, 215,2-4; *CUPI*, 8 / *SKS* 7,12, 4. Hence his use of "uvidenskabelig" (unscientific, unscholarly) in the title of the *Postscript*.

more generic concern is with helping people to discover that they suffer from that reproachable form of ignorance where a person thinks she knows something she doesn't actually know.³⁶ In the *Apology*, while recounting to the jury a philosophical encounter he had with someone with a reputation for being wise, Socrates characterizes this concern quite generally as follows: "I thought that he appeared wise to many people and especially to himself, but he was not. I then tried to show him that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders."³⁷ Note that Socrates makes no mention here of *how* he tries to reveal to his interlocutor his ignorance, only that he tries to do this and that his interlocutor comes to dislike him as a result. I think Climacus is best thought of as someone who also seeks to address this generic Socratic concern (aiming to reveal to a person that she thinks she knows something when she does not), but who employs different philosophical means than Plato's Socrates. Furthermore, unlike Conant, I actually think that Climacus seeks to address his reader's ignorance in quite different ways in his two books.

Climacus claims that the particular form that his reader's ignorance takes is a kind of amnesia, noting that "people have forgotten what it means to exist and what inwardness is" while simultaneously continuing to think of themselves as Christians.³⁸ He reports that once it became apparent to him that people were suffering from this condition of forgetfulness, he concluded that if he wanted, in good Socratic fashion, to try to make his reader aware of the fact that she suffered from such an illusion, he wouldn't be able to do this by directly informing her but would have to take a more roundabout approach and give his writings an "indirect form."³⁹ Having the desire to approach his reader indirectly while also wanting to avoid the system-building of modern philosophers, Climacus therefore, like many of Kierkegaard's other pseudonymous authors, casts his writings in the form of "experiments" (what the Hongs render in their translations as "imaginary constructions").⁴⁰ While some pseudonymous authors create further

³⁶ See, e.g., *Ap.* 29b.

³⁷ *Ap.* 21c-d in *Complete Works / Plato*, ed. by J. Cooper, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 1997.

³⁸ *CUPI*, 242 / *SKS* 7, 220,10-11 (I have removed Climacus' italics).

³⁹ *CUPI*, 242 / *SKS* 7, 220,12-14 (I have removed Climacus' italics).

⁴⁰ In an apparent effort to avoid scientific connotations, the Hongs translate the pseudonyms' use of the term "Experiment" as "imaginary construction" and "at experimentere" as "to imaginatively construct." See their introduction to *FT; R*, xxi-xxxi.

characters to serve in their experiments, Climacus primarily employs himself, "using [himself]," as he puts it, "in an experimenting way."⁴¹ What this means in practice is that Climacus, a pseudonymous author, adopts or enacts different character roles in each of his books as a way of Socratically engaging his reader.

In the *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus adopts the stance or persona of "an ignorant person"⁴² who has forgotten⁴³ about Christianity and who sets out to see if he can hypothetically discover something that genuinely "goes beyond the Socratic."⁴⁴ Such an intellectual endeavor will presumably be attractive to the speculatively-inclined reader and hold out to her the prospect of some wonderful new philosophical discovery, while also seemingly going along with her neglect of herself and her relationship to Christianity. By openly assuming the guise of someone who has forgotten the very thing that the reader thinks she knows all too well, Climacus thus adopts a Socratic stance that provisionally grants that the reader is more knowledgeable than he is, with the ultimate aim of bringing home to her that she actually knows less than she imagines. If Climacus' reader is under the illu-

Both Climacus and Kierkegaard draw a contrast between didactic forms of writing and writings that exhibit an experimental character. Climacus notes that "[t]he reader of the fragment of philosophy in *Fragments* will recollect that the pamphlet was not didactic but was experimenting" (*CUPI*, 361 / *SKS* 7, 329,8-9; trans. modified). Kierkegaard makes a similar point in his journals – see *JP* 5:5827 / *SKS* 18, JJ:362,8-11. See also Evans *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1992, p. 12; *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, p. 22.

⁴¹ *CUPI*, 15 / *SKS* 7, 25,2-3 (trans. modified). Climacus also, however, certainly does create other characters (the *Postscript* is teeming with them), most notably the imagined interlocutor in *Fragments* who serves as a stand-in for the speculatively-inclined reader and who repeatedly charges Climacus with plagiarizing the Christian teaching. See, e. g., *PF*, 21-22 / *SKS* 4, 229-230; *PF*, 35-36 / *SKS* 4, 241-242.

⁴² At the beginning of what he calls his "Thought-Project," Climacus claims that "the question is asked by an ignorant person who does not even know what provided the occasion for his questioning in this way" (*PF*, 9 / *SKS* 4, 218,2-3; trans. modified). Cf. Socrates' ignorance, which Climacus calls both "an expression of love for the learner" and, at the same time, "a kind of deceit" (*PF*, 30 / *SKS* 4, 237,5-6; *PF*, 32 / *SKS* 4, 238,18-19).

⁴³ See *PF*, 109 / *SKS* 4, 305,14-26: "As is well known, Christianity is the only historical phenomenon that...precisely by means of the historical – has wanted to be the single individual's point of departure for his eternal consciousness....To a certain extent, however, *I have wanted to forget this*, and, availing myself of the unlimited discretion of a hypothesis, I have supposed that the whole thing was a whimsical notion of mine that I did not want to give up before I had thought it through" (italics mine; trans. modified).

⁴⁴ *PF*, 111 / *SKS* 4, 306,5.

sion that she knows what it is to be a Christian, then Climacus claims that one way to make her aware of this condition is by presenting the traditional Christian teaching in an unusual form so that “a reader can scarcely recognize in the presented material” that with which she thought she had “finished.”⁴⁵ When Climacus maintains therefore that he is parodying speculative philosophy in *Fragments* and satirizing its method of inquiry, he partly has in mind his proceeding as if “something altogether extraordinary, that is, [something] *new*” were going to come of his investigations while what always emerges, often to the annoyance of his imagined interlocutor, is the traditional Christian teaching: “*old-fashioned orthodoxy in its rightful severity.*”⁴⁶

In the *Postscript*, Climacus adopts an entirely different stance. While in *Fragments* he appears as someone who has forgotten about Christianity, in the *Postscript* he openly declares that he is not a Christian and that he plans to investigate the question, appropriately cast in the first person, “How do I, Johannes Climacus, become a Christian?” Climacus notes that because he raises this question in a context where everyone seems to assume almost as a matter of course that she already is a Christian, his doing so may initially appear to the reader to be “a kind of lunacy.”⁴⁷ Kierkegaard himself is quite explicit that he conceives of Climacus’ adopted stance here as an indirect, Socratic way of engaging his reader: “If it is an illusion that all are Christians, and if something is to be done about it, it must be done indirectly, not by someone who loudly declares himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by someone who, better informed, even declares himself not to be a Christian.”⁴⁸ In a footnote to this passage, Kierkegaard adds: “One recalls *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, whose author, Johannes Climacus, directly declares that he himself is not a Christian.”⁴⁹ While this stance of declaring oneself not to be a Christian in the midst of those who assume that they are Christians is thus also arguably a Socratic stance, it does not appear, as Conant would have

⁴⁵ *CUPI*, 276 / *SKS* 7, 252,20-22. See also note 23 above.

⁴⁶ *CUPI*, 275 / *SKS* 7, 250,25-28 (italics mine). On Climacus’ imagined interlocutor see note 41 above.

⁴⁷ *CUPI*, 17 / *SKS* 7, 26,19.

⁴⁸ *PV*, 43 / *SVI* 13, 531. At the end of his life, Kierkegaard not only maintained that this was a Socratic stance but also claimed that this was the stance that he himself had adopted and that characterizes his authorship as a whole. See my paper “Kierkegaard’s Socratic Point of View” in *Kierkegaardiana*, 24, 2005; reprinted (abridged version, new first section) in *A Companion to Socrates*, ed. by Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar, Oxford: Blackwell 2005, pp. 389-405.

⁴⁹ *PV*, 43 / *SVI* 13, 531. See also *PV*, 8 / *SVI* 13, 496; cf. *PV*, 15 / *SVI* 13, 505.

it, to involve leading the reader to believe that a speculative inquiry is going to take place, with the ultimate aim being to parody such an endeavor. While something like this may take place in *Fragments*, where the reader is led to believe that Climacus is embarking on a bona fide speculative inquiry, only to find, to her frustration, that all that he is able to discover by these speculative means is “nothing more or less than what any child [who has been to Sunday school] knows,” in the *Postscript* Climacus seems instead to produce a long, drawn-out work that is designed precisely to keep the reader *from* indulging in the sort of speculative, philosophical reflection that tends to lead her to neglect herself.⁵⁰ Repeatedly, just when the reader may start to imagine that Climacus has finished with his seemingly trivial investigation of how one becomes a Christian (which the reader already imagines herself to be), thus allowing her (finally!) to get back to speculating, Climacus introduces something further that needs to be thought through, thereby providing the reader with yet another opportunity to engage in a form of philosophical reflection that requires her to employ the first personal “I” and so keep herself in view. Thus while in *Fragments* Climacus proceeds as if doing speculative philosophy might lead to new philosophical discoveries (only to dash the reader’s hopes by repeatedly returning her to things she has been neglecting), in the *Postscript* he repeatedly draws attention to the shortcomings of speculative philosophy while trying to impress upon the reader that there exists another, more Socratic way of doing philosophy, a way of doing philosophy that she will find intellectually engaging without leading to her present condition of self-forgetfulness. I have argued that this Socratic manner of doing philosophy places a premium on the power of self-restraint⁵¹ and the correct employment of the first personal “I,” and that Climacus himself is best conceived of as a Socratic figure.

⁵⁰ *PF*, 35 / *SKS* 4, 241,3-4.

⁵¹ One of the places to look for Climacus’ exercise of self-restraint is in his ability to keep from finishing his reflections, to keep returning to the same topics with new variations while always upholding the Socratic ideal: “continually to say the same thing and about the same thing” (*CUPI*, 285 / *SKS* 7, 260,3-4). He appears to have the ability to carry on as long as the reader (and suggests that his ideal reader is someone “who can stick it out as long as the author,” *CUPI*, 621 / *SKS* 7, 563,31-32). If the speculative philosopher is prone to finish too soon and to think that once she’s encountered one formulation of the issues she’s done with the task of attending to herself, then Climacus will try to show her that if one learns to restrain oneself properly then the task of attending to oneself becomes lifelong: “To be finished with life before life is finished with one is not to finish the task at all” (*CUPI*, 164 / *SKS* 7, 152,32-33).

In my view if we are eventually to meet Conant's challenge and so to grasp the sense in which the *Postscript* truly is a remarkable and profound work of philosophy, then we must start by seeking a better understanding of the various respects in which Johannes Climacus is a Socratic figure the likes of which we haven't seen since Plato's dialogues.⁵²

⁵² A version of this paper was read at the Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association (December 29, 2005). Thanks to members of the audience for their helpful questions, to Tony Aumann, Bridget Clarke, Tony Edwards and John Lippitt for their comments on an earlier draft, and to James Conant for being my teacher and for encouraging me to do philosophy.