

No New Kierkegaard

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to contest an influential recent reading of one of Kierkegaard's most important books, the pseudonymously written *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. According to the reading offered by James Conant, the *Postscript* is an "elaborate reductio" of the very philosophical project in which it itself appears to be engaged, namely, the project of attempting to clarify the nature of Christianity. I show that Conant's position depends upon four inter-related theses concerning Kierkegaard's text, and I argue that none of these theses is sustainable, either philosophically or exegetically. In the course of this critique, alternative and more convincing theses are developed, and I suggest that these theses are altogether better suited than Conant's to account for, and to provide a defense of, Kierkegaard's stature as a religious thinker.

KIERKEGAARD IS A fascinating but still under-appreciated religious thinker. He is also a philosopher in whose work parallels can be discerned with some of Wittgenstein's writings, and it is possible that a certain sort of Wittgensteinian reading might shed light on a number of Kierkegaard's central religious themes and preoccupations. Certainly this is James Conant's view,¹ and—at the current level of generality—I am inclined to agree with him. I disagree with him, however, about the *sort* of Wittgensteinian reading that might most usefully be brought to bear on Kierkegaard. Specifically, I doubt that a reading shaped by Conant's own idiosyncratic interpretation of the *Tractatus*,² one that assumes that a philosophical elucidation can consist only of the attempt to dispel illusions, or else of assembling a set of truisms of which philosophers have lost sight, can deliver the goods. In the present paper I attempt to show that Conant's interpretative preferences can do no justice to the complexities and subtleties of one of Kierkegaard's most important texts, the pseudonymously written *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. On the reading that I will be suggesting, what Johannes Climacus (Kierkegaard's pseudonym) writes at least promises, or threatens, to make sense; Conant's reading, by contrast, offers to reduce the *Postscript* to a kind of burlesque at best.

I. THE *TRACTATUS* AND THE *POSTSCRIPT*

Conant³ (co-inventor with Cora Diamond of the so-called "New" Wittgenstein) regards the *Tractatus* as already replete with insights traditionally thought to be the

¹See James Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense" in *Pursuits of Reason*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock: Texas Tech Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 195–224, hereafter KWN.

²Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. S. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1974).

³See James Conant, "Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein" in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Cray and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 174–217.

results of Wittgenstein's later work, and indeed thought to be the results, at least in part, of Wittgenstein's coming to recognize that his project in the *Tractatus* had been fundamentally misconceived. So, on Conant's construction, the real point behind the *Tractatus* is not, as the traditional view would have it, to delimit what can be said (what is the case) from what is ineffable (what can only be "shown"); nor is it to draw a distinction between "mere" and "deep" nonsense, the latter being somehow revelatory of what cannot be said—of the ineffable, in other words. Instead, it is to reveal that any such ambitions are nonsensical, and that those in thrall to such ambitions are captivated, merely, by an "illusion of sense." On this reading, the point of the *Tractatus* is to show that the project in which the *Tractatus* itself appears to be engaged is, indeed, and as the later Wittgenstein would certainly have agreed, fundamentally misconceived. The *Tractatus* is thus an ironic exercise in self-refutation.

From this perspective, it is not surprising that the notorious "ladder" metaphor with which the *Tractatus* (all but) ends figures large. Wittgenstein claims that "anyone who understands me eventually recognizes [the foregoing propositions] as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright" (*Tractatus* 6.54). Wittgenstein's "ladder" is to be thrown away, Conant says, "not because it has outlived its purpose of conducting the reader into the heights of a higher understanding"—the standard view—"but because the reader comes to recognize that its rungs are unable to bear the weight they appeared to support. He comes to recognize that he has been captivated by an illusion of ascent, that the services of philosophy have furnished him with only an appearance of ethical or religious progress."⁴ On Conant's reading, the *Tractatus* ends by revoking (most of) itself. And it is in this that Conant finds the prompt to relate his reading of the *Tractatus* to Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*,⁵ for that work too includes a "revocation": "what I write," says Climacus, "contains the notice that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked, that the book has not only an end but has a revocation to boot" (CUP 619). It is Conant's proposal that we should read the *Postscript* as if it too, like the *Tractatus*, represented "an elaborate *reductio ad absurdum* of the [very] philosophical project" (KWN 207) in which it itself appears to be engaged.

My purpose here is not to contest Conant's reading of the *Tractatus*. Peter Hacker⁶ has already done that, and in the absence so far of a convincing response to his criticisms, the ball (in this respect at least) is squarely in the "New" Wittgensteinians' court. But Conant might be wrong about the *Tractatus* and still be right about the *Postscript*. So, in what follows I focus only on his reading of the *Postscript*, and I

⁴James Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors" in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, ed. Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 293.

⁵*Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), hereafter CUP.

⁶See Peter Hacker, "Was He Trying to Whistle It?" in Crary and Read, pp. 353–88.

try to show that, whatever the merits of the case might be for a “New” Wittgenstein, there are few or none for a “New” Kierkegaard.

II. CONANT’S READING OF THE *POSTSCRIPT*

Conant’s interpretative strategy in the *Postscript* revolves around two central questions: how to make sense of the work’s pseudonymity and how to make sense of the revocation that is to be found in the Appendix. As regards the former, Conant says: “If we wish to go into the business of interpreting one of these (pseudonymous) works, we would somehow be involved in a confusion if we were to ascribe (as, in fact, most commentators do) any assertions or arguments in the work to Kierkegaard” (KWN 200). However, it is not only attributing anything directly to Kierkegaard that is a problem in the *Postscript*. Given the revocation, Conant thinks, even ascribing anything to Climacus himself would be going astray. He says, “To so much as quote the work appreciatively, to take it to be a partisan of some particular view, is a further sign that one has misunderstood it” (KWN 202). Uncovering what this misunderstanding consists of is, according to Conant, the key to understanding what the *Postscript* is ultimately up to.

The reading that Conant offers can be understood as comprising four principal theses. The first one concerns what Conant calls the “frame” of the work, the second the nature of Climacus’s targets, the third the interpretation of Climacus’s apparently substantive claims about Christianity, and the fourth what it is that is “difficult” about becoming a Christian. I will set these theses out in turn.

(1) *Thesis One*

Directions on how to read the *Postscript*, Conant suggests, are to be found in what he calls the “frames” of the book. These consist, on his view, of the Appendices to be found in the middle and at the end of the work. These function “as do the preface and the final sections of the Tractatus, as part of the frame of the work in which the author allows himself to comment on the work as a whole and provide directions for how to read it” (KWN 202). Conant takes three main interpretative cues from these pieces of “framing” material. From the Appendix in the middle of the work, entitled “A Glance at Danish Literature,” he concludes, following Climacus’s own remarks about *Either/Or*, that the *Postscript* “is constructed as a mirror in which the reader can recognize his own confusions. The work will not have the transformative effect upon the reader to which it aspires unless the task of recognizing the relevant contradictions⁷ is left to him” (KWN 203). From the Appendix at the end of the work he takes note, of course, of the revocation, and also of the following passage: “Consequently, the book is superfluous. Therefore, let no one bother to appeal to it, because one who appeals to it has *eo ipso* misunderstood it” (CUP 618). Conant draws the following conclusion from this remark: “It appears now that it is a sign that one has misunderstood the book not only if one invokes Kierkegaard’s name, but even if one restricts oneself to an appeal to the persona of the pseudonym” (KWN

⁷What Conant takes these “contradictions” to consist of will become clearer below.

201). The reason for the misunderstanding, Conant believes, is failing to see that the point of the book is ethical. He says, “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. Kierkegaard’s aim is to show him that where he takes there to be a problem there isn’t one” (KWN 205). And a little before that: “The problem is not one of teaching the reader something he does not know but rather of showing him that, with respect to the activity of becoming a Christian, there is nothing further he needs to *know*. His quest for knowledge is an evasion of the task of achieving . . . existential resolution” (KWN 205). Thus, Conant concludes, anything in the work that appears to make substantial knowledge-claims of any kind is precisely what is to be understood as having been revoked.

(2) *Thesis Two*

It follows from the first thesis that the target of Climacus’s rhetoric, according to Conant, must be the speculative philosopher *within the reader* who attempts to avoid the task of reflecting on his life by indulging in philosophical speculation about Christianity. As Conant puts it,

The purpose of Climacus’ parody on speculative philosophy is to underscore what he takes to be the ludicrousness of the philosopher’s attempt to advance our understanding of what it means to become a Christian. Climacus represents his literary task as one of “taking away” insofar as his aim is to *deprive* the philosopher of the illusion that a well-conducted speculative inquiry will equip him with a deeper understanding of what it is to be a Christian. (KWN 206)

The point, then, of the *Postscript*, in Conant’s eyes, is to dispel the illusion that a philosophical investigation of Christianity is possible. However, as Conant rightly notices, it appears to be the case that Climacus himself is engaged in the very project that he seeks to undermine. In order to save Climacus, therefore, from refuting himself, Conant suggests that we must read all the passages where Climacus appears to propound a “substantive conception” of Christianity as constituting an exercise in irony.

(3) *Thesis Three*

It follows from theses one and two, on Conant’s reading, that while the first half of the *Postscript* can be read as Climacus offering us “categorical distinctions” (which Conant likens to the later Wittgenstein’s grammatical remarks) about what the difference between a secular and a “religious” use of certain concepts (such as “faith,” “revelation,” etc.) consists in, by the second half, Climacus begins to speak nonsense, as he himself, according to Conant, ends up running the relevant categories together. Conant says,

Climacus, therefore, does not remain faithful to his own claim that all he is doing is marking categorical distinctions. . . . It becomes clear that Climacus’ remark about the “essential incommensurability” of faith and objective reasoning will be invoked as a

thesis, contesting the philosopher's counter-thesis that ordinary belief and religious faith represent commensurable kinds of cognitive states. . . . Climacus himself is therefore driven in his polemic against the philosopher to *insist* upon something that by his own lights is a grammatical truth. He ends up representing what is a mere truism as his own intellectual discovery, *his* contribution to knowledge. (KWN 211)

He goes on, "Climacus's analysis therefore commits him to a distinction between mere absurdity and 'objective absurdity'—a category of deep nonsense which is supposed to be qualitatively more repellent to reason than ordinary nonsense." In an effort to rescue him from espousing this unappetising doctrine, "commentators have tried to dutifully water down and clean up Climacus' argument," but in doing so—and in "ignoring Climacus' vehement warnings about the work's peculiar character"—they have inevitably gone astray. For "the dialectical ladder of the *Postscript* culminates in a demonstration and declaration of the nonsensicality of its doctrine. Its doctrine turns out to be a pseudo-doctrine. It is a ladder which once we have climbed up it, we are asked to throw away" (KWN 215–16).

Conant's suggestion is thus that Climacus specifically wants to draw the reader into an illusion, the better to reveal how powerful that illusion is. The "difficulty" of understanding the work therefore consists, on Conant's reading, of "grasping the contradiction inherent in the relation between the work's form and its content" (KWN 207). This "contradiction" arises, according to Conant, because the form of the work consists of a parody on speculative philosophy, while its *content* seems to consist of something which is itself rather similar to that which it parodies, namely, the advancement of "theses" (and indefensible theses at that) about the nature of Christianity. The way to "grasp" this "contradiction," then, and consequently to understand the central aim of the *Postscript*, is to realize that "the work as a whole represents an elaborate *reductio ad absurdum* of the philosophical project of clarifying and propounding what it is to be a Christian" (KWN 207).

On this reading, in other words, it is impossible to understand the theses that Climacus is propounding, as they reveal themselves, in the end, to the enlightened reader at least, as simply nonsensical. Examples of such "theses" are: "truth is subjectivity," "faith involves a crucifixion of the understanding," "the absolute paradox is incomprehensible." Conant suggests that the apparent philosophical dubiousness of these theses, as well as Climacus's constant insistence that he is not "doctrinizing," should alert us to the fact that these passages should be read ironically, that Climacus never meant us to take them seriously in the first place, that they are themselves part and parcel of Climacus's parody of speculative philosophy. Conant therefore goes on to conclude that,

although there is no such thing as understanding the propositions in the book, there is such a thing as the illusion of understanding them. The guiding assumption of both the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus* is that the philosopher (typically) suffers from an illusion of understanding, from the projection of an illusory sense onto a (pseudo)-proposition that lacks a (clear) sense. The task is therefore not to refute what he thinks, but to show him that there is nothing of the sort that he imagines himself to be thinking. (KWN 217)

On Conant's reading, therefore, the *Postscript*, just like the *Tractatus*, ends by revoking (most of) itself.

(4) *Thesis Four*

Kierkegaard's aim in all of this is, then, on Conant's reading,

to show him (the philosopher) that where he takes there to be a problem, there isn't one. The solution to what he takes to be the problem of life is to be found in the vanishing of the problem. The 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. . . . Climacus' aim is to guide that process of reflection back to its point of departure, to reveal to the philosopher that for the simple task at hand no special application of the intellect is required." (KWN 206)

On Conant's reading, therefore, the "difficulties" that Climacus creates are merely "pseudo-difficulties." Ultimately, there is no "problem" with Christianity at all, or rather, it reduces only to the "practical difficulty of living a certain sort of life." That the philosopher is blind to this is what, on Conant's view, the *Postscript* and Kierkegaard hope to show.

III. A CRITIQUE OF CONANT'S READING

In what follows I argue that none of Conant's principal theses stands up to scrutiny, and hence that Kierkegaard's text calls for an altogether different sort of reading.

(1) *The "Framing" Issue*

I agree with Conant—how could one not?—that the *Postscript* is an exercise in irony. However, there is not a single sentence in the *Postscript* where Climacus says that anything in his work should be taken to be nonsense. It appears, therefore, that the only reason we have for supposing that Climacus wishes the reader to see that what he says about the "absolute paradox," for example, is tongue-in-cheek, is Conant's claim that this is indeed the case and his view that the apparent philosophical dubiousness of Climacus's "thesis" must imply that this is what he wants us to think. Consequently, the distinction that Conant draws between the "grammatical remarks" and the "nonsense" in the *Postscript* seems to come down, in the end, to a distinction between those remarks that Conant finds philosophically palatable and those that he does not. So, unless we are already convinced by Conant's interpretation, there is no reason to suppose that Climacus's revoking the work means that he wants to dispel the illusion of the possibility of there being "substantial nonsense."

There is a further problem with the framing material. Given that Conant believes that in the Appendices Climacus is supplying us with directions on how to read the work, it seems sensible to assume that he can only do that if we can take what Climacus says in these passages at face value. What makes this problematic for Conant is that in the "frames" themselves Climacus says a good deal about things

that Conant classifies as nonsensical in the main text. If, therefore, Conant is right about which bits are nonsensical (and, therefore, part of what is revoked), then the “frames” themselves cannot be immune from revocation. However, given that it is the “frames” that, according to Conant, tell us what should be taken to have been revoked and what not, it now seems that Conant has sawn off the branch on which he was sitting. To give just two examples of this, both of which are from the Appendix in the middle of the *Postscript*, “A Glance at Danish Literature”: “That subjectivity, inwardness, is truth,” Climacus says, “was *my thesis*. I have tried to show how in my view the pseudonymous authors tend toward this thesis, which at its maximum is Christianity” (CUP 278–79, italics added). And further on in the Appendix: “Humor does not take in the suffering aspect of the paradox or the ethical aspect of faith but only the amusing aspect. It is, namely, a suffering, faith’s martyrdom even in times of peace, to have the eternal happiness of one’s soul related to something over which the understanding despairs” (CUP 291–92). If these passages are supposed to be ironic too, then I think that this constitutes a *reductio* of the view that the Appendices function as “frames.” For, if they do, then determining which passages are ironic and which are not must become an entirely haphazard exercise and this, surely, constitutes a parody of serious interpretative practice. So, Conant is presented with a dilemma. Either the “frames” give us directions on how to read the work and therefore are not ironic, in which case Climacus must be taken to mean the things that Conant says he later revokes; or the frames are ironic too, in which case it is unclear how they can function as “frames” at all, for they are then no longer capable of providing any salient criteria by which it is possible to distinguish what Climacus *means* from what is simply nonsense. Conant’s interpretative strategy, therefore, fails on either horn.

(2) *The Targets of the Postscript*

It is true that what Climacus wants to achieve is to get the reader to engage with the question of Christianity on an *existential* level. In this respect I agree with Conant that the book has an ethical purpose. However, where I think that Conant is quite wrong is in believing that this is the *only* purpose of Climacus’s book. For the targets that Climacus is shooting at are more various than that. First, Climacus does not only want to cure the philosopher’s—*any* philosopher’s—propensity for theorizing; rather, his polemic is aimed quite specifically at the *Hegelian* speculative philosopher who believes that he can use reason to “mediate away” the Christian paradox and thus to employ his cognitive faculties to go *further* than faith.⁸ Second, Climacus attempts to show that the *Christians in Christendom* are deluding themselves into believing they are Christians, when they are, on his view, really nothing more than *pagans* or *idol-worshippers*: “If God had taken the form, for example, of a rare, enormously large green bird with a red beak, that perched in a tree on the embankment and perhaps even whistled in an unprecedented manner—then our partygoing man would surely have had his eyes opened. . . . All paganism consists in this, that

⁸For an excellent study of Kierkegaard’s relation to Hegel, see Mark Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood—Hegel and Kierkegaard* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2000).

God is related directly to a human being, as the remarkably striking to the amazed” (CUP 245). About the latter issue Conant says nothing at all, perhaps because this, too, would mean making some sort of “substantive” claim.

Both of Climacus’s aims outlined above can, however, only be achieved if we read him as actually *meaning* what he says rather than as setting an elaborate trap for us. Furthermore, it is simply not the case that Climacus then goes on to fall into his own trap in order to take us with him, as Conant supposes, and that he himself consequently ends up being the target of his own polemic. For, throughout the *Postscript* Climacus distinguishes between knowing what Christianity is and knowing what it is to be a Christian. He says, “That one can know what Christianity is without being a Christian must, then, be answered in the affirmative. Whether one can know what it is to be a Christian without being one is something else, and it must be answered in the negative” (CUP 372). And this claim is perfectly compatible with, and indeed is the reason for, Climacus’s insistence throughout the *Postscript* that he is *not* a Christian. In the light of this, we can therefore read the *Postscript* as an exercise in elucidating what Christianity is (in order, for example, to avoid the errors of the Hegelians and the Christians in Christendom) and not, *contra* Conant, as an “elaborate *reductio ad absurdum* of the philosophical project of clarifying and propounding what it is *to be a Christian*” (italics added). For again, the target here is the Hegelian philosopher who has made Christianity *easy* by doing away with its intrinsic paradoxicality and it is *this* idea that causes Climacus so much vexation. In order, therefore, to show that this thought is a complete misconception spawned by philosophical *hubris*, Climacus decided to make difficulties everywhere (CUP 187).

(3) Climacus’s “Substantive Claims”

That the foregoing is the central problem of the *Postscript* is revealed particularly aptly in a remark that Climacus makes in the *Postscript* about *Either/Or*: “That there is no conclusion and no final decision is an indirect expression for truth as inwardness and in this way perhaps a polemic against truth as knowledge” (CUP 252). For, as Climacus says, “direct communication about what it means to exist and about inwardness will only have the result that the speculative thinker will benevolently take it in hand and let one slip in along with it. The system is hospitable! Just as a bourgeois-philistine, without regard to compatibility, takes along every Tom, Dick and Harry when he goes on an excursion to the woods, inasmuch as there is room enough in the four-seated Holstein carriage, so also is the system hospitable—there is indeed plenty of room” (CUP 250). In other words, what Climacus seems to be worried about here is that the speculative philosopher will read Climacus’s elucidations about the nature of Christianity as simply being one more addendum to the system, one more attempt at “mediation,” when the whole point of the *Postscript* is to challenge the very terms in which speculative philosophy poses the problem.

Effectively, what Climacus is trying to do in the *Postscript* is similar to how Wittgenstein describes his project in the preface to the *Tractatus*—that he wants to draw a limit to the expression of thought in language, not to thought as such, for

in order to do *that* it would have to be possible to think what lies on both sides of the limit, i.e., it would have to be possible to think the “unthinkable.” In the same way, Climacus can only show what faith is indirectly, i.e., negatively, by showing what it is *not*, as saying what it *is* would fly in the face of Climacus’s own view, namely, that Christianity is not a doctrine and that the apostles were not a little professional society of scholars. He says, “Just as for an existing person the highest principles of thinking can be demonstrated only negatively . . . , so also for an existing person the existence-relation to the absolute good can be defined only by the negative—the relation to an eternal happiness by suffering, just as the certitude of faith that relates itself to an eternal happiness is defined by uncertainty” (CUP 455). Consequently, it is not possible to *say* how one can become a Christian. Therefore, and strictly speaking, as Climacus himself says, “the book is superfluous. Therefore, let no one bother to appeal to it, because one who appeals to it has *eo ipso* misunderstood it” (CUP 618).

Conant naturally takes the misunderstanding that Climacus refers to in the latter quotation to consist of taking at face value what Climacus is apparently offering us in the *Postscript*: a dubious philosophical theory about the incommensurability between faith and reason—a piece of doctrinizing, when in fact the point of the book is ethical. That is, on Conant’s reading, the reader must come to recognize that all appearance of doctrine is merely pseudo-doctrine. This is a misconceived interpretation of the foregoing passage. The misunderstanding that Climacus wants to avoid is the thought that he has anything to *teach* us, that he is an authority on matters of faith: precisely because faith has no propositional content, according to Climacus, there is no such thing as being an authority on it, just as no one can be an authority on “existence.” “Existential truths”—perhaps what early Wittgenstein meant by the “ineffable”—cannot be directly communicated in the sense of giving someone a recipe for how to live. Therefore, it would be absurd, on Climacus’s view, to suppose that someone could become a Christian as a result of reading the *Postscript*; and it is partly in order to guard against just this kind of absurdity, to which the theocentric nineteenth century seemed especially prone, that Climacus revokes the book. Therefore, *contra* Conant, Climacus does not revoke the book in order to signal to the reader that *he*, Climacus, has himself become mired in a conceptual confusion that has turned half the book into patent nonsense, but rather to prevent the reader from thinking that conceptual *clarification* about what Christianity is can somehow turn one into a Christian. Furthermore, Climacus wants specifically to prevent the Hegelian speculative philosopher from confusing Climacus’s conceptual clarification with *speculative philosophy*—as if Climacus’s remarks in the *Postscript* could simply be made into one more footnote to the all-encompassing “system.”

In the light of this, it is also possible to make sense of the “theses” that Conant takes to be obviously nonsensical. Climacus’s polemic against “objective truth,” for example, should also be read against the backdrop of Hegelian speculative philosophy—the self-professed “pinnacle” of objectivity. Climacus notoriously claims in the *Postscript* that in religious matters “truth is subjectivity.” What he means by this is that because, according to him, the question of faith is not an objective,

empirical issue which can be resolved by appeal to evidence, historical or otherwise, we have to concentrate instead on the “existential” or personal significance that this question has for us. This is what Climacus means by “subjectivity,” i.e., pertaining to the subject, and this has nothing to do with relativism or irrationalism, as Conant seems to think. He says, “The way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something. The way to objective truth goes away from the subject, and while the subject and subjectivity become indifferent, the truth becomes indifferent, and that is precisely its objective validity, because the interest, just like the decision is subjectivity” (CUP 193). In other words, precisely because religious belief does not, on this view, consist of assenting to propositions, it follows that in order to resolve the question of faith I must be *infinitely interested* in it as an existing person, not as a lofty scholar. For religious belief, on this conception, is something much more fundamental than simply being of the *opinion* that God exists. Therefore, even if evidence could be had, then on Climacus’s view, it would no longer be *religious* belief, and the belief in the Last Judgement, for example, would not be fundamentally different from the secular belief that one will be put into prison for certain crimes. Of course, the very concept of “belief” would then become obsolete too, for on this conception it makes no sense at all to say that I believe in something that is, as it were, before my very eyes. That is, in a world where “God” could empirically manifest himself, our concept of a “God” to be believed in would lose its point. Climacus puts it like this: “Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith. If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast to the objective uncertainty, see to it that in the objective uncertainty I am out on 70,000 fathoms of water and still have faith” (CUP 204). What Climacus means here by “objective uncertainty” is not *empirical* uncertainty, but rather the kind of uncertainty that accrues to making certain “existential” choices. The “70,000 fathoms of water” do not refer to the extreme degree of “empirical uncertainty” but to the intellectual and existential risk that you take when you stop pondering a question “objectively” and rather want to resolve it by making a decision, i.e., by changing the way you live in the relevant way. What Climacus is consequently referring to is the *risk of commitment*—and that is always a risk, be it in the religious domain or in other walks of life where you cannot remain dispassionate and disinterested (what Climacus means by “objectivity”). Where something *can* be resolved objectively, however, faith becomes conceptually impossible and passion becomes madness. Hence someone, says Climacus, who clings to something finite that could be settled objectively with the passion appropriate only to faith is on the brink of insanity (which is just what happens in the case of religious fanatics or religious fundamentalists)⁹.

⁹This shows, incidentally, that Conant is wrong to think that if we take Climacus’s “substantive claims” seriously, we must be licensing “grisly forms of fanaticism” (KWN 214).

Now that we have made sense of Climacus's distinction between the "objective" and the "subjective," it is also possible to understand what Climacus means by the absurdity of the Christian paradox (the eternal, i.e., God, having entered time, having become a human being). When Climacus speaks of "objective absurdity," he does *not* mean an absurdity that is somehow more "absurd" than the absurd, as Conant seems to suppose. Rather, the use of the term "objective" is supposed to alert us to the fact that the "absolute paradox" cannot be comprehended, i.e., made sense of, from the "objective perspective"—from a disinterested, philosophical point of view. The reason why Climacus feels driven to use such high-pitched rhetoric in this passage is because the target of it is not, contra Conant, Climacus *himself*—that is, we are not supposed to be taken in by the illusion that he intends to advance a peculiar doctrine only to see in the end that we were led astray. Rather, the target is again the Hegelian philosopher who believes he can use reason to go "further" than faith. But it is not possible to go further than faith, as faith, for Climacus, is non-propositional and therefore, given that the Hegelian thinks that philosophy *is* propositional, it is not possible to use something propositional, as it were, to "outrun" something non-propositional. Climacus says,

Here the question is not whether Christianity is in the right but about what Christianity is. Speculation leaves out this preliminary agreement, and this accounts for its success with mediation. Before it mediates, it has already mediated, that is, changed Christianity into a philosophical theory. But as soon as the agreement establishes Christianity as the opposite of speculative thought, then *eo ipso* mediation is impossible, because all mediation is within speculation. If Christianity is the opposite of speculation, then it is also the opposite of mediation, since mediation is speculation's idea. . . . But what is the opposite of mediation? It is the absolute paradox. (CUP 379)

In other words, what Climacus is saying here is that the Christian paradox is "absolute," not because, as Conant supposes, it is "maximally indigestible to reason"¹⁰ or qualitatively the most "absurd," whatever that may mean, but because it is utterly resistant to "mediation." And this is so not because we are confronted by an especially resilient species of philosophical concept, but because "mediation" pertains only to philosophical, "objective" thought that, according to Climacus, is the very opposite of Christianity. In other words, we would be making a category mistake in Climacus's view, if we thought that the central question of Christianity—whether or not to believe in Christ—could be asked objectively and could admit of an objective answer. That the Hegelians thought this could be done is the central misunderstanding that the *Postscript* sets out to resolve.

¹⁰It is important to note here that Climacus does not use the word "reason" (*Fornunft*) at all, but rather uses "understanding" (*Forstand*). I agree with Walter Lowrie that Kierkegaard does this in order to prevent readers from thinking that "believing against the understanding" has anything to do with believing logical contradictions, i.e., with believing something irrational. This is not to say, however, that Kierkegaard is drawing any kind of "formal" distinction between the two terms or that he is using them in a Kantian or a Hegelian sense. In other words, it does not imply that "reason" is consequently a higher principle for which the paradox is not paradoxical. For a good discussion of the distinction, see Andrew Burgess, "Forstand in the Swenson-Lowrie Correspondence and in the 'Metaphysical Caprice'" in *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus, International Kierkegaard Commentary*, ed. Robert Perkins (Georgia: Mercer Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 109–28.

Thus, what Climacus wants to get the reader to see in the case of the absolute paradox is that *qua* intellectual or philosophical problem, it is irresolvable.¹¹ There is no way that the understanding, by using more or a higher understanding, can “de-crucify” itself. Because Christianity is not a philosophical theory, the issue of the absolute paradox can only arise for someone who wants *to be a Christian*, that is, it has to arise *subjectively*, for from the objective point of view, the question does not even *come up*.¹² As Climacus says, “Objectively there is no truth; an objective knowledge about the truth or the truths of Christianity is precisely untruth. To know a creed by rote is paganism, because Christianity is inwardness” (CUP 224).

However, none of this implies, on Climacus’s view, that the paradox ceases to be a problem even for the person who has faith. In fact, what Climacus is suggesting, I think, is that it has to remain a problem, in order to prevent a person from relating to the Christian truth in the wrong way—namely, objectively—and this, as we have already seen, would turn Christianity into paganism or idolatry. Climacus says, “Suppose that Christianity does not at all want to be understood; suppose that, in order to express this and to prevent anyone, misguided, from taking the road of objectivity, it has proclaimed itself to be the paradox. Suppose that it wants to be only for existing persons and essentially for persons existing in inwardness, in the inwardness of faith, which cannot be expressed more definitely than this: it is the absurd,¹³ adhered to firmly with the passion of the infinite” (CUP 214).

The emphasis on “existence” is crucial here, because Climacus believes that it is impossible for any finite, existing being to apprehend truth *sub specie aeterni* (which is just what the Hegelians denied). And this provides us with another clue as to why Climacus calls the paradox “absolute”:

But the absolute paradox, precisely because it is absolute, can be related only to the absolute difference by which a human being differs from God. . . . But the absolute difference between God and a human being is simply this, that a human being is an individual existing being . . . whose essential task therefore cannot be to think *sub specie aeterni*, because as long as he exists, he himself, although eternal, is essentially an existing person and the essential for him must therefore be inwardness in existence; God, however, is the infinite one, who is eternal. (CUP 218)

The reason why Climacus is emphasizing the finitude of human beings here is, I think, because it is an awareness of finitude that tends to draw people out of and away from themselves, as it were, in the search of an objective point of view—the

¹¹For a similar argument see Schufreider, “The Logic of the Absurd” in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (1983) 61–83.

¹²In “Putting Two and Two Together” Conant holds that Climacus’s distinction between “subjective” and “objective” problems comes down, in the end, to presupposing “the existence of a category of problem that reason cannot penetrate; it seems as if we need to mark out that which reason can comprehend from that which it cannot” (KWN 292). This is a misunderstanding fueled by pressing the analogy with a “new” Wittgensteinian reading of the *Tractatus* too hard. A “subjective” *point of view* or approach is *not* the “logically alien” counterpart to “objective thought.”

¹³By “absurd” Climacus means something resistant to “objectification” (and consequently “mediation”). For a related point, see Annemarie Pieper, *Kierkegaard* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2000), pp. 48–60.

God's eye view. Christians are just as finite as anybody else. Therefore, Christians too exhibit this tendency, and this is why the absolute paradox represents a continuing challenge even from the perspective of the Christian way of living. The challenge, or the on-going struggle, is continually to reaffirm oneself, as a Christian, as someone with the relevant unconditional commitments, sustained in the face of the temptations to objectivity with which one's finitude presents one. Thus, getting away from seeing the absolute paradox as an intellectual or philosophical problem is not something that one can do once and for all. Rather, it is something that one has to keep on doing, and it is in *that* process that the authentically Christian relation to the understanding (and indeed to the relation between faith and the understanding) can be recognized.

From the non-Christian perspective, then, the paradox is incomprehensible. From the Christian perspective, the paradox is an expression of an infinite commitment to subjectivity—inwardness—and so is neither objectively true nor unintelligible, and may indeed be grammatical with respect to that way of life.¹⁴ If this is correct, then Christianity, as Climacus asserts, indeed turns out to be the opposite of Hegelianism by presupposing the absolute elimination of objectivity.

Is this dangerously close to what Conant calls a “substantive conception of nonsense”? I think not, *unless* one wants to maintain that *anything* which would count as a properly religious remark, on Climacus's view of religion, just *has* to be nonsense and that it is consequently not only impossible to say how one might become a Christian, it is impossible, too, to say anything (distinctive) about Christianity at all. And this is a position that Climacus evidently does not share. If this is what Conant would say, then just as the Hegelians settle the question in advance by assuming that everything meaningful can be made objective and speculative, so Conant settles the question in advance by assuming that anything not objective and (non-Christianly) grammatical must be meaningless. And this would surely be a case of simply begging the question against Climacus, who, as I have emphasized before, nowhere says that the absolute paradox is gibberish.

Nor am I saddling Climacus with the view that the *Postscript* somehow provides us with insights into “ineffable” religious truths—another corollary of the “substantive conception”—for this is precisely the view that Climacus rules out when making the distinction between “objective” and “subjective” conceptions of faith. For Climacus's account expressly denies that there are any truths to be “glimpsed,” since this would again reduce Christianity to aesthetics or paganism (to something that could in principle be “directly perceivable” if one just had the relevant faculties). He says:

If the paradoxical-religious address does not pay attention to this (the incomprehensibility), it abandons itself to the mercy of a legitimate ironic interpretation, whether the address peers behind the curtain with a revivalist's muzziness and spiritual intoxication, reads the obscure runes, catches a glimpse of the explanation, and now sermonizes it in

¹⁴For a related point see John Lippitt and Daniel Hutto, “Making Sense of Nonsense” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 98 (1998) 263–86.

a singing tone that is the echo of the seer's unnatural association with the marvelous. . . . The basis of the misunderstanding is that, despite the use of Christ's name, etc., Christianity has been shoved back into the esthetic (something the superorthodox unwittingly are especially successful in doing) . . . which in time has its explanation in something higher behind itself, rather than in Christianity's being an existence-communication that makes existing paradoxical, which is why it remains the paradox as long as there is existing and only eternity has the explanation.¹⁵ (CUP 562)

What I hope to have shown in this section is that it is perfectly possible to make sense of the *point* of the remarks of Climacus's that Conant takes to be patently nonsensical and that Conant consequently has no reason to drive a firm wedge between the innocuous "categorical distinctions" and the rest of the *Postscript*. On my reading, *all* of the remarks Climacus makes are on a par; they can all be read as conceptual elucidations of the nature of Christianity, whether we like them or not. The ever-present irony in the work is, therefore, not directed at Climacus's own theses, but at the misconceptions of the Hegelian (or neo-Hegelian) philosopher. In this sense, there is also nothing wrong with calling these remarks a "contribution to knowledge"—what Conant is most averse to—as long as this is *not* taken to imply that Climacus is advancing a *theory* about Christianity or about how to become a Christian. That Conant seems to think that this is not even a remote possibility, stems, I believe, from his holding that philosophy can only do one of two things: peddle nonsensical metaphysical theories, or offer us a therapy for that tendency by advancing mere truisms and/or by dispelling those metaphysical illusions. I see no reason to believe, however, that the kind of conceptual clarification that Climacus (and also the later Wittgenstein) offers us need fall into either of these categories.

(4) *The Difficulty of Becoming a Christian*

Climacus characterizes the difficulty of becoming a Christian in the following way:

My intention is to make it difficult to become a Christian, yet not more difficult than it is, and not difficult for the obtuse and easy for the brainy, but qualitatively and essentially difficult for every human being, because, viewed essentially, it is equally difficult for every human being to relinquish his understanding and his thinking and to concentrate his soul on the absurd; and it is comparatively most difficult for the person who has much understanding, if one recalls that not everyone who has not lost his understanding over Christianity thereby demonstrates that he has it. (CUP 557)

The difficulty that Climacus is referring to here is a direct consequence of his claim that Christianity is an absolute commitment to subjectivity or inwardness, and it is

¹⁵What Climacus means by "only eternity has the explanation" is unclear to me. However, I think that Climacus's tendency sometimes to phrase things in an infelicitous way can be explained by the fact that, despite his quarrel with Hegelianism, the Hegelian framework has clearly left its mark on his thinking, so that certain inconsistencies in the text are due to vestiges of Hegelian categories creeping in now and again. These, though, do not pose a problem, I think, for a charitable and generally consistent interpretation of Climacus's work.

in virtue of this that, in the end, there are only two possible responses to it: offense or faith. The understanding, Climacus is suggesting, is repelled by the very idea of having to let go of objectivity. Given that, as I have argued, the absolute paradox is incomprehensible from the objective, non-Christian perspective, if the understanding continues to cleave to pondering this question objectively, then the only possible response to it is offence. However, if the understanding realizes that the only correct response to the paradox is subjective appropriation, then the result will be faith. However, it is exactly this that, Climacus thinks, the understanding is loathe to do. In this much, then, becoming a Christian involves a “crucifixion of the understanding”: if we take the paradigm of “understanding” to be the “objective stance”—a paradigm that Climacus shared with the Hegelians—then anything non-objective will naturally be something “over which the understanding despairs” (CUP 292). Thus the difficulty of becoming a Christian consists of the ever-present struggle against the temptation to view the claims of Christianity objectively—a struggle so intense that Climacus calls it a “martyrdom.”

The problem with Christianity is, therefore, not simply a *practical* one, as Conant seems to urge. It is not simply a matter of deciding to lead a certain kind of life, for this life only becomes a possibility once we have realized that the objective point of view stands in the way of a genuine relationship to the Christian teaching. Furthermore, even the committed Christian has to keep battling against the seductiveness of the objective stance, according to Climacus, as there is no such thing as having faith once and for all. Faith is “the mortal danger of lying out on 70,000 fathoms of water, and only there finding God” (CUP 232).

IV. SO, WHY THE REVOCATION?

At this point I should make explicit what I take Climacus’s point in revoking the *Postscript* to have been, since the revocation is, after all, the chief textual cue for Conant’s interpretation. On my reading the revocation serves three purposes. First, to clearly distinguish the *Postscript* from speculative philosophy. Second, to show that conceptual clarification about what Christianity is cannot turn one into a Christian, for in order to become one, one has to enter into an *existence-relationship* with Christ. In this respect, what Climacus is worried about is that the reader will be content to occupy the metaphilosophical stance the *Postscript* seemingly lets her occupy, that is, that she will be content simply to note the grammatical differences between genuine Christian faith and the travesty Hegelianism makes of it, without letting these differences impinge on her life in the relevant way. The third purpose of the revocation is this: Climacus is ironically hedging his bets against attacks by the Danish Church, given that he is writing “without authority” and given that what he says clearly flies in the face of orthodoxy. That this is one of the main reasons for the revocation—one that Conant, for obvious reasons, completely overlooks—is revealed in Climacus’s juxtaposing his revocation with the way in which Catholic writers traditionally sought to avoid censorship or accusations of heresy. He says, “Just as in Catholic books, especially from former times, one finds a note at the back of the book that notifies the reader that everything is to be understood in accordance

with the teaching of the holy universal mother Church, so also what I write contains the notice that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked, that the book has not only an end but has a revocation to boot" (CUP 619).

On my reading, that is, the revocation has nothing whatever to do with Climacus's coming to realize that the majority of the *Postscript* is patently nonsensical; and that, it seems to me, is a strength of my reading. Nowhere, after all, does Climacus so much as *hint* that the distinction between sense and nonsense, or the non-distinction between mere and deep nonsense, is any part of his concern. And that the revocation can be read—and read perfectly naturally—without imputing that concern to him confirms me in the view that that concern was, indeed, not his. The revocation does not depend for its sense upon the importation of any extra machinery at all, let alone upon the importation of the kind of machinery that Conant brings to it.

CONCLUSION

Conant's interpretation fails. Climacus's assertion that "what can be indirectly communicated, cannot be directly communicated" has nothing to do with the problem of "ineffability" or of "substantial nonsense." That Conant thinks it has is surely due to his wanting to read the same strategy into the *Postscript* that he believes works for the *Tractatus* as well as his implicitly wishing to do away with aspects of the *Postscript* that he finds philosophically problematic. I have argued, however, that Climacus's concept of the absolute paradox, far from being a species of "substantial" or "mere" nonsense, rather undercuts the very standpoint from which such a distinction could be drawn. For as Climacus has tried to show, attempting to "understand" the paradox "objectively" by, for example, mediating it away or calling it nonsensical is, from the Christian perspective, simply missing the point. Therefore, the question of Christianity can only arise *subjectively*, that is, as the existentially relevant question: "How can I become a Christian?" With *this* question, though, Climacus can give us no help at all. In fact, Climacus rather suspects at the end of the book that he has made Christianity so difficult that "the number of Christians . . . in Christendom will perhaps not even be very great" (CUP 587). But, he says, "it would undoubtedly be preferable . . . would be a sign of life, if a number of people in our day would simply confess to themselves that they could wish that Christianity had never entered the world. . . . But let the confession be without scorn and mockery and wrath. . . . One can very well have respect for what one cannot force oneself into. . . . So, then, honesty rather than half measures" (CUP 588).

Whether we agree with Climacus's depiction of Christianity or not is of course another matter, as is the question whether Kierkegaard himself agrees with his pseudonymous character. On these points I remain agnostic. What does strike me as perfectly clear, however, is that if we accept Conant's reading, it becomes nigh on impossible to make any sense at all of Kierkegaard's religious *thought*; and this, I think, must be too high a price to pay for any "new" interpretation.¹⁶

¹⁶I would like to thank Stephen Mulhall, David Owen, and Aaron Ridley for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.