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Anthropology and Authority

Essays on Søren Kierkegaard

Edited by

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To Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong.

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of each of these. Faith is "the relationship with God," more specifically, an interpersonal, not just individualistic phenomenon. The eloquent statement of this in *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger* (1847; Works of Love) is imprinted upon every other writing of his, even the attack literature. What do all the polemics sound like when one recalls that God is always the third party, that He is the constant "middle term," that we are called by God to love every person as neighbor, that the supreme work of love is to presume love in the other like the "sprout in the grain"?²⁵

All this is heard once more in Kierkegaard's proclamation of an unchanging, forgiving, self-emptying, suffering God in the "last" sermon. In the end, the authority that Kierkegaard invokes and obeys, is not a rule, not an institution, not a holy book, not a destructive, vindictive Judge, but the One who is Infinite Love. As I have argued in other articles (cited in the notes), this other side of Kierkegaard's theological understanding reveals a fullness even in the nihilistic, anarchic polemics of the attack. I called this his "incarnational optimism." In an eschatological perspective, Kierkegaard presents a suffering God who shares in the suffering of those who would follow Him. Ultimately, Kierkegaard's authority is that of the cross and the resurrection, the "indescribable grace" of sacrifice, "the only way in which God can love a person and be loved by him."²⁶

25 SV1 IX, 210; *Works of Love*, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, eds. and trs. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964, 207.

26 SV1 XIV, 356; *Kierkegaard's Attack*, 287. Two contemporary thinkers who dwell on the infinite, suffering even absurd love of God are the Orthodox lay theologian Paul Evdokimov (*L'amour fou de Dieu*. Paris: Seuil, 1972; *Le Christ dans le pensée russe*. Paris: Cerf, 1970; *Ages of the Spiritual Life*, Michael Plekon and Alexis Vinogradov, rev. trs. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998) and Fr. Lev Gillet, who published under the *nom de plume* "A Monk of the Eastern Church" (*Jésus. Simples regards sur le Sauveur, Présence du Christ, Le Visage de lumière, Amour sans limites, Ils regarderont vers Lui, La Colombe et L'Agneau*. Paris: Seuil, 1959, 1960, 1966, 1976, 1979; *Au coeur de la fournaise*. Paris: Cerf, 1998.)

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ON AUTHORITY AND REVOCATION: CLIMACUS AS HUMORIST

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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 a conclusion but has a revocation to boot (CUP 619).¹

Commentators have sometimes considered it fruitful to make comparisons between the ethical, religious and methodological approaches of Søren Kierkegaard and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Within this context, James Conant has argued, in a series of articles,² that the revocations made of the *Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift* (1846; Concluding Unscientific Postscript) and the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) by their respective authors means that we should view these texts as containing "simple ... nonsense." Conant's reading has attracted support from a number of other Kierkegaard commentators.³ If he were right, it would follow that many other commentators on the Climacus writings had seriously misunderstood them. But the main aim of this

1 Quotations from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* are from the translation by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, eds. and trs., NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992. The only exceptions to this are when I 'requote' something already quoted by Conant. In these cases, since Conant quotes from the older translation by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), I have, when 'requoting', used this translation too; while nevertheless also giving a reference to the place in Hong and Hong where the relevant passage can be found. In the present case, I have modified the Hong's translation slightly. In this passage, they translate *Slutning* as 'end'; I have, along with Swenson and Lowrie, gone for 'conclusion' because Climacus is here clearly referring back to the section immediately preceding the Appendix. This is also headed *Slutning* in the original text; and both sets of translators have labelled this section 'Conclusion'.

2 "Must we show what we cannot say?" In: *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*. R. Fleming and M. Payne, eds. Lewisbury, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989; "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense." In: *Pursuits of Reason*. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer and Hilary Putnam, eds. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1993; "Putting Two and Two Together." In: *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*. Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr, eds. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995; hereafter MWS, KWN and PTTT respectively.

3 See, for instance, Stephen Mulhall, *Faith and Reason*. London: Duckworth, 1994, especially Chapter 3, and "God's Plagiarist: the *Philosophical Fragments* of Johannes Climacus;" plus Michael Weston, "Evading the issue: the strategy of Kierkegaard's *Postscript*," both forthcoming in *Philosophical Investigations*, 22:1 (1999). Conant's work was also the main focus of a workshop at the University of Essex in May 1997.

article is to challenge Conant's claim that the *Postscript* should be read as containing "nonsense ... simple, old garden variety nonsense."⁴ This, we shall see, relies upon a particular view of the significance of Climacus's 'revocation' of the text.⁵ I shall offer a brief account of Conant's position, before going on to suggest that there is in fact no need to go beyond the text of the *Postscript* to see the significance of the revocation; that Climacus's description of himself as a 'humorist', and his account of what this term means, in his mouth, suggest a reading of the revocation very different from Conant's.

Conant's general argument is as follows. Though he is at times ambivalent about exactly what he takes Climacus to be revoking, the overall suggestion is that the whole book, other than what he calls the "frame" (the Appendix in which the revocation appears; and the 'Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature') is supposed to be read as 'revoked'.

Conant argues that the *Postscript's* project is to develop "an elaborate *reductio ad absurdum* of the philosophical project of clarifying and propounding what it is to be a Christian."⁶ It does this by a movement from "propositions for which a clear sense can be given (depending upon whether we construe them aesthetically or religiously), to ones which teeter on the brink of sense (where mere truisms are *insisted* upon) to sheer nonsense (an affirmation of objective absurdity)."⁷ The first category aims to draw attention to the idea that "dialectical confusion" can arise from the fact that terms such as faith and revelation have different meanings in religious, as opposed to merely "aesthetic" (or epistemological), contexts; and that a specifically religious use of such terms only has a sense "within the context of a certain kind of life."⁸ The second category arises (in the section on Lessing) when the incommensurability of faith and 'objective' reasoning is offered as a *counter-thesis* to the assumption that ordinary belief and religious faith are simply different points along the same epistemic spectrum. Conant says that Climacus thus "ends up by representing what is a mere truism as his own intellectual discovery, *his* contribution to knowledge."⁹ In other words, Conant is objecting to Climacus's claiming *as a thesis* something which is simply supposed to be obvious once it is pointed out as the result of a "grammatical investigation." Dispelling confusion, the argument goes, should not be presented as offering a "thesis;" to do so is to speak nonsense.

This argument results in Conant's conclusion that while both Lessing and Climacus *appear* to be advancing a philosophical doctrine about the nature of Christianity, they should really be seen as *parodying* any such attempt. Hence the third category of Climacus's allegedly spiralling nonsense. Climacus's 'argument' culminates in a claim that "from the standpoint of objective thought, the object of faith must be maximally

4 MWS 253.

5 It also depends upon a highly contentious view of how Wittgenstein uses the term 'nonsense'. For more on this, see John Lippitt and Daniel Hutto, "Making Sense of Nonsense: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 98:3 (1998), 263-86.

6 KWN 207.

7 Ibid.

8 KWN 209.

9 Ibid.

indigestible to reason."¹⁰ Christianity's superiority lies in its asking us to believe in something - the "absolute paradox" of the incarnation - which requires "the complete sacrifice of one's reason; " a "crucifixion of the understanding."¹¹ But Conant points out that Climacus also says that "Nonsense ... [the believer] cannot believe against the understanding, for precisely the understanding will discern that it is nonsense and prevent him from believing it."¹² Underlying such claims, Conant argues, must be the idea that the believer *retains* his understanding; for it is precisely this which enables him to distinguish between "the objective absurdity of Christian doctrine and less repulsive forms of nonsense ... 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."¹³ But this view, argues Conant, is itself nonsense. We cannot "rank incomprehensible 'thoughts' by the degree of their absurdity."¹⁴ How could we determine that the statement "God became man in Jesus Christ" is more nonsensical than, say, "My thoughts smell belligerently"? If it is true that both are nonsense, then that is all there is to it; there is no way that we can judge the former to be *more* nonsensical than the latter. Nonsense does not come in "a spectrum of degrees".¹⁵

Conant concludes that scholars who have attempted to "water down and clean up"¹⁶ Climacus's argument - thus preventing the *Postscript* from looking like a parody of serious philosophy - have missed the point:

When approaching the *Postscript*, a scholarly commitment to adhere at all costs to such a principle of sympathetic textual interpretation - while systematically ignoring what Climacus calls the "incessant activity of irony" in the work - will lead one astray. Indeed, this has been the fate of all the standard attempts to extract the argument of the work while ignoring Climacus's vehement warnings about the work's peculiar character - in particular, his remark at the end that the book was written in order to be revoked.¹⁷

Hence Conant's final conclusion: "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."¹⁸ We have climbed up it, and are ready to throw it away, when, having understood that Climacus is showing us a position from which we shall

10 KWN 215.

11 Ibid.

12 This quote is from CUP, Swenson and Lowrie, trs., 504. Since Conant quotes this passage from the Swenson and Lowrie translation, I have not amended it. The Hongs' translation of the same passage, which appears on their p. 568, is not different in any significant way.

13 KWN 215.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 KWN 215-16. Actually, Climacus's comment about the "incessant activity of irony" of the work refers to the *Fragments*, not the *Postscript*.

18 KWN 216.

be led to speak nonsense if we advance certain kinds of theses, "we are no longer tempted to advance such theses ourselves."¹⁹

There is much that is perceptive in this analysis. We can take on board Conant's illuminating suggestion that the *Postscript*, rather than advancing original theses, offers us 'grammatical remarks' which function as reminders of what we already knew (but have forgotten, or have become confused about). As Climacus himself tells us, what he is saying about Christianity is nothing new, but "old fashioned orthodoxy" (CUP 275n). In this way, Conant - like his mentor Stanley Cavell - usefully complements readings of the *Postscript* which make no attempt to draw connections between Climacus and Wittgenstein. However, we can do this without committing ourselves to the view that any of these reminders are themselves nonsensical.²⁰ I have argued elsewhere that while one indeed cannot and should not attempt to make sense of the 'absolute paradox' as a metaphysical thesis, the term is not nonsense, since a meaningful sense *can* be given to it *in a Christian life* by attempting to live in terms of the picture of self-emptying love with which the paradox presents one.²¹ But there are several problems with Conant's argument. In another place,²² I show that much of what Climacus says about the absolute paradox is echoed perfectly sincerely by Kierkegaard himself in the journals and elsewhere. In the space remaining to me here, however, I want to argue that we can better explain the significance of the revocation in terms of the text of the *Postscript* itself. An appropriate reading of the revocation requires unpacking the significance of Climacus's description of himself as a "humorist." Conant acknowledges this general point, but does not - I shall argue - consider in anywhere near sufficient detail the *Postscript's* account of what it means to be a "humorist."²³

The first point to notice here is that humour and revocation are regularly linked by Climacus: "... revocation characterizes the humorist."²⁴ One would thus *expect* a humorist to issue a revocation. But what does it mean for him to do so? Climacus's revocation must be read in terms of the *modesty* characteristic of the figure of the "humorist." Against those who would claim their position as The Truth, Climacus is saying something like: 'This is how it appears to me: but you don't have to listen to a mere humorist.' This modest, humoristic denial that is not *quite* a denial involves the technique central to the mauietic art: letting the reader "stand alone - with another's help."²⁵ In this connection, we must pay close attention to Climacus's saying "that to write a book and to revoke it is not the same as refraining from writing it, that to write a book that does not demand to be important for anyone is still not the same as letting

19 KWN 218.

20 I am grateful to Anthony Rudd for discussion on this point.

21 Lippitt and Hutto, 1998, section V, struggles to say something like this.

22 Lippitt, 1999. See my comment after note 44.

23 The same point could be made of an older, 'classic' paper to which Conant is indebted, namely Henry E. Allison's "Christianity and Nonsense." *Review of Metaphysics*, 20 (1967), 432-60.

24 David Cain, "Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Johannes Climacus on humor and faith." In: *Irony and Humor in Søren Kierkegaard*. Niels Thulstrup and Marie Mikulova Thulstrup, eds. Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag, 1988, 91.

25 Cf. JP 2, 650, 15.

it be unwritten." Climacus has written a book and revoked it, and made the link between this activity and writing a book which does not demand to be important. This supports my claim that the revocation is intended to be read in the above way. But it is important that we read this as a statement of *modesty*, not, as Conant reads it, an *instruction* to throw away the main body of the text.²⁶ (As Cain puts it, quoting *Philosophiske Smuler* (1844; Philosophical Fragments), "The book is called back by Climacus so that it can be called back into the existence of a reader 'to see if it contains anything that he can use'."²⁷) There are two closely connected reasons for reading the "revocation" in this way. Firstly, issuing such instructions would be out of keeping with the general spirit of both the "Appendix" and other aspects of Climacus's self-presentation. And secondly, we should not expect "humorists" - as Climacus describes them - to be so authoritarian.

How can the above claims be justified? In relation to the first point, recall, as quoted earlier, that part of the "Appendix" in which Climacus describes himself as a humorist. Conant claims that Climacus here issues "vehement warnings"²⁸ as to how his work should be read. But this 'vehemence' is difficult to find. By contrast, the two particularly striking aspects of Climacus's self-presentation are his *modesty*, and his *lack of a sense of urgency*. To illustrate this, consider one passage in which Climacus talks about himself: the section in which he describes how he became an author:²⁹

It is now about four years since the idea came to me of wanting to try my hand as an author. I remember it very clearly. It was on a Sunday; yes, correct, it was a Sunday afternoon. As usual, I was sitting outside the cafe in Frederiksberg Gardens, that wonderful garden which for the child was the enchanted land where the king lived with the queen, that lovely garden which for the youth was a pleasant diversion in the happy gaiety of the populace, that friendly garden which for the adult is so cozy in its wistful elevation above the world, that garden where even the envied glory of royalty is what it indeed is out there - a queen's recollection of her late lord. There as usual I sat and smoked my cigar. Regrettably, the only similarity I have been able to detect between the beginning of my fragment of philosophic endeavor and the miraculous beginning of that poetic hero was that it was in a public place. Otherwise there is no similarity at all, and although I am the author of *Fragments*, I am so insignificant that I am an outsider in literature. I have not even added to subscription literature, nor can it truthfully be said that I have a significant place in it.

I had been a student for half a score of years. Although I was never lazy, all my activity was nevertheless only like a splendid inactivity, a kind of occupation I still much prefer and for which I perhaps have a little genius. I read a great deal, spent the rest of the day loafing and thinking, or thinking and loafing, but nothing came of it ... of all comforts, indolence is the most comfortable.

So I sat and smoked my cigar until I drifted into thought. Among other thoughts, I recall these. You are getting on in years, I said to myself, and are becoming an old man without being anything and without actually undertaking anything. On the other hand, wherever you look in literature or in life, you see the names and figures of celebrities, the prized and highly acclaimed

26 While he does not use precisely this language, recall the earlier point that in his second article Conant describes "An Understanding ..." as part of the "frame of the work" which is intended to "provide *directions* for how to read it" (KWN 202; my emphasis).

27 Cain 91. As well as "revoked," an alternative translation of *tilbagekaldt* would be "called back."

28 KWN 216.

29 For a fuller justification of this view of Climacus, see John Lippitt, "A funny thing happened to me on the way to salvation: Climacus as humorist in Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript." *Religious Studies*, 33:2 (1997), 181-202,

people, prominent or much discussed, the many benefactors of the age who know how to benefit humankind by making life easier and easier, some by railroads, others by omnibuses and steamships, others by telegraph, others by easily understood surveys and brief publications of everything worth knowing, and finally the true benefactors of the age who by virtue of thought systematically make spiritual existence easier and easier and yet more and more meaningful - and what are you doing?

At this point my introspection was interrupted because my cigar was finished and a new one had to be lit. So I smoked again, and then suddenly this thought crossed my mind: You must do something, but since with your limited capabilities it will be impossible to make anything easier than it has become, you must, with the same humanitarian enthusiasm as the others have, take it upon yourself to make something more difficult. This idea pleased me enormously; it also flattered me that for this effort I would be loved and respected, as much as anyone else, by the entire community (CUP 185-86).

Though there is irony in this passage, I see no justification for dismissing it as merely ironic. Rather, it gives us important clues about aspects of Climacus's character. Note, as before, the modesty of his denial of being anything special. Unlike the "prized and highly acclaimed," his own "limited capabilities" prevent him from contributing to humanity by making life easier in some way. Although he has published one book prior to the *Postscript*, he did so at his own expense and remains "an outsider in literature." (Elsewhere, he tells us that this book has had no impact, attracting only one review [CUP 274n].) Even more striking is the lack of a sense of urgency that leaps out from this self-description. He wanted to "try his hand as an author" (as long as four years ago, but there is no suggestion that he set to the task straight away ("... of all comforts, indolence is the most comfortable"). Indeed, it is the thought of having discovered a task for himself that pleases him, rather than what arises from the task itself. All the aspects of Climacus's self-presentation and prose-style - the long digression about Frederiksberg Gardens; the fact that his "activity was ... like a splendid inactivity," since he spent much of his day "loafing and thinking, or thinking and loafing" (he has time to give us this combination both ways around); the fact that relighting his cigar is a more pressing demand than continuing his train of thought - all this indicates a person who is, to say the least, in no great hurry. This is some distance from what Conant detects: Climacus as an issuer of "vehement warnings" as to how his work should be read.

But these aspects of Climacus's character should come as no surprise. For his own account of what it means to be a 'humorist' explains why we should expect such a figure to have an attitude and view of himself which is both modest and 'laid-back'. It is to this that we now turn.

Climacus tells us quite a lot about the life-view of a 'humorist', most of which Conant ignores. There are two particularly important points to note for the present discussion. Firstly, humorists - unlike 'ironists' - are concerned with the existential situation shared by all human beings. Secondly, for the humorist - unlike for the Christian - there is no sense of urgency about the human condition, since our 'goal' is 'behind us'; whatever salvation may be available to us is assured.

In relation to the first point, note that Climacus does not, unlike most contemporary humour theorists, take 'humour' as an all-encompassing umbrella term for anything perceived as funny, a category of which irony (along with, say, jokes, satire and wit)

would be a sub-category.³⁰ Rather, Climacus's umbrella term is 'the comic', and irony and humour are the two subsections thereof which he discusses in detail. One of the most important distinctions between irony and humour, as Climacus uses the terms, is that humour is more gentle than irony. Whereas irony is proud, and tends to divide one person from another - at one point, Climacus talks of it in terms of self-assertion and "teasing" (CUP 551) - humour is concerned with those tragicomic aspects of the human situation which we all share; hence Climacus's description of it as "sympathetic" (CUP 582) and "profound" (CUP 552n).³¹

The second point is related to this. Irony and humour have similar roles as 'border territories' between the 'aesthetic', 'ethical' and 'religious' existence-spheres which are pivotal to the thought of both Climacus and Kierkegaard. At one point, Climacus asserts: "... irony is the *confinium* [border territory] between the esthetic and the ethical; humor the *confinium* between the ethical and the religious" (CUP 501-02). If Climacus is a humorist, how does this work, in the latter case?

The relationship of humour to the ethical and religious existence-spheres is complex.³² However, all that matters for the present discussion is the difference between humour and Religiousness B, since it is clear that humour, for Climacus, stands somewhere between ethical and Christian living. Whatever their exact relationship, it is clear that Religiousness A and humour have some important things in common. As C. Stephen Evans puts it, both the person in Religiousness A and the humorist believe "like Socrates and Plato, that the eternal is something that all humans possess already."³³ From the standpoint of Religiousness A, "it must be assumed that every human being, viewed essentially, participates in ... eternal happiness and finally

30 My claim that 'humor[u]r' is the main umbrella term in contemporary usage is supported by the fact that the scholarly journal devoted to various aspects of the study of jokes, cartoons, irony, satire, wit etc. has taken as its name *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. This same usage is also made by John Morreall in his collection of the thoughts of philosophers from Plato to the present on these subjects: *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. John Morreall, ed. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987.

31 Climacus and other pseudonyms, such as Quidam in *Stadier paa Livets Vei* (1845; Stages on Life's Way), stress that the 'true comic' requires the comic and pathos; jest and earnestness, to be kept in balance (cf. CUP 87ff.; SLW 365-66; also JP 2, 1743). At one point, Climacus explicitly identifies such "legitimized comic power" with humour (CUP 282).

32 In particular, there is some debate as to whether humour is on the boundary between the ethical and Religiousness A, or whether it borders Religiousness B, humour somehow being incorporated within Religiousness A. This issue depends largely upon whether one takes there to be, in the *Postscript* specifically, a genuine distinction between the ethical and Religiousness A. I side with commentators such as Sylvia Walsh and Merold Westphal, who think that in the *Postscript*, this distinction is pretty unimportant (the ethical and Religiousness A are continuous), and that the real tripartite division is aesthetic/ethical-religious/Christian. (See Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics*. Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, 210; and Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996, 169, 187.) For a brief overview of different scholars' positions on the relation between humour, Religiousness A and Religiousness B, see Walsh, 212-13n.

33 C. Stephen Evans, "Kierkegaard's view of humor: must Christians always be solemn?" *Faith and Philosophy*, 4:2 (1987), 182.

becomes eternally happy" (CUP 581). According to Climacus, this is essentially the view shared by the humorist, as exemplified by his attitude to suffering. The humorist, like the Christian, "has an essential *conception* of the suffering in which he is [but] revokes the suffering in the form of jest" (CUP 447). In other words, he has an *intellectual* understanding that suffering is essential to human existence, "but at the same time it occurs to him that it most likely is not worth the trouble to become involved in explaining it. The revocation is the jest" (CUP 448). The key difference between the religious person and the humorist is that for the former, "reflection is on the suffering;" for the latter, it is "away from the suffering" (CUP 443). For the humorist, there is no real *momentous* distinction between those within and those outside a religious mode of existence:

The difference between the religious person and the person who does not religiously transform his existence becomes a humorous difference: that whereas the religious person utilizes his entire life in becoming aware of the relation to an eternal happiness and the other does not concern himself with it ... they both, viewed eternally, go equally far (CUP 581-82).

The standpoint of Religiousness B, however, is different from humour: "Only on this condition do I become blessed, and as I absolutely bind myself to it, I thereby exclude everybody else" (CUP 582). The Christian, according to Climacus, has a "pathos of separation" which involves "the pain of sympathy" (CUP 582). Within Religiousness A, one can sympathise with "every human being *qua* human being" (CUP 585); within Christianity, that "sympathy" can only be with other Christians. So in virtue of his faith, the Christian, according to Climacus, is conscious of himself and his kind as being fundamentally different from non-Christians. What matters about this for our purposes is as follows. The sense of us all being in the same existential boat which is present in Religiousness A (and which can thereby bring about "sympathetic humour" [CUP 582]) is absent from the Christian who lives with the view that salvation is dependent upon each individual's commitment to God through Christ, and the anguish of being unable "to win" for Christ his family or beloved (CUP 586).

Thus the lack of urgency of a humorist such as Climacus should come as no surprise, owing to the clear distinction between the humorist and the anguished Christian living the life of suffering for his faith.³⁴ The distinction is this: while the Christian *lives* the suffering and anguish of religious existence, the humorist, thinking that nothing can be done about the suffering that is essential to the human condition, chooses to smile, albeit sadly, about it. His reflection is, as we noted above, "away from the suffering," comforted by his view that "the goal [of existence] lies behind" (CUP 449); that whatever salvation is available, is available to all. For the humorist, in the end "everyone advances equally far" (CUP 450).

Let us review the above argument. I am suggesting that Climacus's revocation should be understood in the light of his description of himself as a humorist. Both this self-description and Climacus's account of what it *means* to be a humorist give us reasons to expect him to lack a sense of urgency, and to have a sense of modesty.

³⁴ Climacus is unclear as to where those fully in Religiousness A fit within this framework. But as we have said, for our present purposes, we need only compare the humorist with the Christian.

Both factors should be taken into consideration when assessing how Climacus's revocation of his work should be read. And this gives us cause to doubt whether this revocation should be understood as 'directions' for how to read the work. Rather, I have suggested, he is simply denying that he is (or, perhaps, that anyone could be) any authority on the matters on which he has been ruminating.

To be fair to Conant, he does explain what *he* thinks is the significance of Climacus's describing himself as a humorist. (Conant owes us some such explanation, since Climacus repeats his claim to be a humorist in the "Appendix" itself: in that crucial section which contains the revocation around which Conant's reading revolves.) But Conant's explanations, I suggest, are inadequate. "The humour of Climacus's doctrine," he tells us, "is that it gradually subverts any possible hope for a ground upon which the integrity of a distinction between the absurdity of the paradox and mere nonsense could be drawn."³⁵ Now we might well ask: is that all? Why should we accept that this, and this alone, is "the correct point of departure"³⁶ for understanding what Climacus means when he describes himself as a humorist? Why is there no need to consider the lengths to which Climacus goes to distinguish irony from humour, the outlook of the humorist from that of a Christian, and so on? Moreover, Conant's overlooking the fact that Climacus distinguishes irony from humour leads him to blur an important distinction. He does this when he simply maps the contemporary understanding of 'humour' as an all-encompassing umbrella term on to Climacus's description of himself as a humorist, by quoting a passage in which Climacus in fact talks about *irony*. According to Conant, in a passage crucial to the 'frame' of the work, Climacus says that what caused the reviewer of *Philosophical Fragments* to have "the most mistaken impression one can have" of that text was that he managed to "leave out the humour."³⁷ But 'humour' is the wrong word here, given Climacus's very definite use of that word to mean something more gentle than irony. As we have said, humour, for Climacus, focuses upon aspects of the human situation which we all share: it is not a catch-all term which would include even the most savage, unsympathetic irony. What Climacus actually says is that the reviewer has gone wrong in omitting to mention "the indefatigable activity of *irony*, the *parody* of speculative thought in the entire plan, the *satire* in making efforts as if something *ganz Auszerordentliches und zwar Neues* [altogether extraordinary, that is, new] were to come of them, whereas what always emerges is old-fashioned orthodoxy in its rightful severity" (CUP 275n; my emphases).³⁸ Irony, parody, and satire are all branches of "the comic" (Climacus's all-encompassing term), but note that there is no mention of 'humour'. This quote clearly cannot be used, therefore, as Conant attempts to use it, to provide "the correct point of departure" for explaining Climacus's claim to be a 'humorist'. (Note, too, that

³⁵ MWS 261.

³⁶ MWS 280n.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Conant actually quotes essentially the same passage as this, but does not seem to notice that there is a problem in conflating irony, parody and satire with 'humour'.

this inadequate explanation comes from Conant's being forced to rely, for *his* explanation, on a part of the text which is the 'frame' of the work.³⁹)

While he is right to suggest that Climacus's self-description "should cause us to carefully consider what sort of conviction he has in the doctrines he sets forth,"⁴⁰ Conant's own consideration is not detailed enough. As I have been arguing, a more careful consideration of what Climacus takes a 'humorist' to be will suggest conclusions different from Conant's. *Pace* Conant, I would support Evans's view that Climacus's revocation "must be taken as expressing his own attitude toward the book, not as an 'objective' judgment that the book contains no serious content. A humorist will therefore read the book in the same spirit as it was written, a [Christian] religious individual rather differently."⁴¹ In other words, we are not compelled to take Climacus's revocation 'straight'. But there is another perspective from which Conant's position can be criticised. Let us finally deal with this.

Conant seems to assume - and to castigate "most commentators" for failing to recognise - that Climacus's is the final word on how the reader with integrity should approach the text. In other words, Conant's work assumes an implicit 'ought' with regard to the act of reading. The reader *ought* to follow Climacus's 'directions' and revoke what has been said. This is the assumption which underlies the following worry: "... one of the difficulties of writing about Kierkegaard ... is learning to live with the delicate burden of both facing up to and yet not collapsing under the burden of the following thought: how would *he* respond ... to what I have just written about him?"⁴²

But why is Conant so concerned about this kind of 'faithfulness'? If we take "A First and Last Explanation" seriously, we notice that Kierkegaard himself renounces any privileged perspective with regard to the views of the pseudonyms: "There is in the pseudonymous books not a single word by me. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader."⁴³ Moreover, Climacus agrees. In the "Glance" - an essential part of the *Postscript's* 'frame', remember, according to Conant - Climacus praises the other pseudonyms because they have "not said anything or *misused a preface to take an official position on the production*, as if in a purely legal sense an author were the best interpreter of his own words" (CUP

39 We might also note that if, as Climacus claims in the above quote, the parody is in the *plan* of the *Fragments* (and I can see that this might indeed be the case for the layout of the *Postscript* too), there is no need to infer from this that the text *itself* (in the case of the *Postscript*) is parodic. Conant does make this inference - but note that Climacus does not claim that the actual *text* is parodic.

40 KWN 201.

41 C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: the Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1983, 204. (Evans himself asserts this view, rather than adequately supporting it. I have added the word 'Christian', since Evans's exact phrasing raises questions about humour's relation to Religiousness A which, while important in their own right, need not concern us here.)

42 MWS 279 n29. Note that Conant here seems to conflate Climacus and Kierkegaard, despite having criticised other commentators for doing this.

43 Søren Kierkegaard, "A First and Last Declaration," appended to the end of the *Postscript* in unnumbered pages (p.626 in the Hongs' translation), following Climacus's "An Understanding with the Reader," and signed "S. Kierkegaard."

252; my emphasis). If issuing 'directions' on how to read a work would be a 'misuse' of a preface, clearly the same would apply to doing so in an appendix. Conant claims that this is what Climacus is doing, yet Climacus's own words - moreover, words found within the 'frame' - tell us otherwise. Thus Conant's reading of the 'frame' on which his interpretation depends is rather selective.⁴⁴ Neither Kierkegaard nor Climacus demand of the reader a particular kind of reading in the way Conant implies.

In summary, we have been considering Conant's claim that the *Postscript* - like the *Tractatus* - contains material that is simply nonsensical, and that we are supposed to be able to see this if we read the text aright. Conant is wise to focus attention upon Climacus's revocation of the text. But, amongst other flaws, he pays insufficient attention to Climacus's description of himself as a 'humorist' and the clues the *Postscript* gives us as to the humorist's *tendency* to issue 'revocations.' The difference between the outlook of a humorist and that of a 'Christian-religious' individual indicates that we are in no way compelled to take such revocations as seriously as does Conant. However, we do need to take seriously that Climacus's self-description as a 'humorist' - and the clues the text gives as to what this means - are vital to understanding the *Postscript*. This idea - hinted at by both Allison and Conant but not really developed by either - deserves further exploration. The present essay has attempted to set the ball rolling in this direction.

44 In KWN, Conant suggests the following way of reading the *Postscript*: "... if what one seeks is a mode of writing that can help the philosophically-inclined reader to overcome his 'forgetfulness,' then what is required is a literary form which will avoid 'dogmatizing' and which allows the author "to withdraw himself" in such a manner that the reader is left to confront himself" (KWN 204). But a pseudonymous author issuing 'directions' as to how his work should be read is hardly going to achieve this end.

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