

# The Reed Journal of Existentialism

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## *Letter from the Editors*

“Let each of us examine his thoughts; he will find them wholly concerned with the past or the future. We almost never think of the present, and if we do think of it, it is only to see what light it throws on our plans for the future. The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means, the future alone our end. Thus we never actually live, but hope to live, and since we are always planning how to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so.”

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

*The Reed* is an undergraduate journal dedicated to the discussion of existentialism and its applications to the modern world, published by students and *for* students. From a wide range of academic and creative writing, the editorial staff has selected five pieces that fit well together as explorations of existentialist themes. This year’s edition of *The Reed* is a landmark in the history of the publication. Reaching out across one river, two miles, and three college bars to the other side of Northfield, Minnesota, we joined hands with the students of Carleton College for the first time to collaborate on the publication of the journal.

With this year’s edition we are also inaugurating the Howard & Edna Hong Memorial Essay Prize, a one hundred dollar award presented to the student who submits the highest quality essay. The prize honors the memory of Howard & Edna Hong, the founders of St. Olaf’s Kierkegaard Library. The scholarship of these two beloved professors is a model for any student of philosophy and their translations are central to the spread of Kierkegaard’s thought in the United States.

This year’s winner is Vincent Weir of Davidson College, whose application of Søren Kierkegaard’s philosophy in an analysis of Facebook’s impact on the self contains equal parts creative wit and academic rigor. Kierkegaard would be proud, and so are we, to award Vincent this year’s prize.

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## Kierkegaard on Facebook: The Threat and Medicine of Self Choice

*Vincent Weir*

**Abstract:** When we hear Kierkegaard chastise the “superficial nonperson or group-person” who needs the “lullaby of social life in order to be able to eat [or] drink,” we can easily imagine that person on Facebook. Popular opinion tells us that social media are addictive and depressing. Simultaneously, longstanding Western worldviews lead us to distrust the material intrusion of technology on the human soul. Yet, as today’s dominant literary genre, Facebook can prove deeply edifying. Literature upbuilds when it teaches us truths about ourselves and motivates our development. Facebook, through its unique capacity to induce despair, has the power to motivate improving change. This line of reasoning makes Kierkegaard, the great student of despair, a valuable defender of social media. In *Either/Or II* and *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authors argue for the moral advantage of despair when they show how its adversity can yield the redeeming power of self-choice. Following Kierkegaard’s detailed exploration of despair as it refracts the complexities of the human spirit, this essay seeks to venerate and to a lesser extent redeem the functions of Facebook.

With a winding, Kierkegaardian arch, this essay argues that Facebook can help us become better persons. As today’s preeminent literature, social media inculcates a tragic lesson: we are not who we want to be. This message, one that kneels close to the motivations of morality, expresses itself in a form of self-abnegation that Kierkegaard calls despair. Following Pascal, Kierkegaard identifies despair as an excellence and a defect—a spiritual sickness that exposes the problems in our consubstantial self. This sickness may at first sound artificial and arcane, but according to Kierkegaard, it is immediately relevant to everyone. To show the relevance of despair in the consubstantial self, I will first draw our attention to the resurgence of Gnosticism, that endemic Western worldview which seeks to answer the massively complex problem of our spiritual identity in simple terms. After associating Gnosticism with today’s distrust of technology, I will go on to show its connections to Kierkegaard and Facebook.

Conjuring the sound of a stifled cough, the word “Gnosticism” strikes the modern English ear as non-native, perhaps even hostile. Its silent letter betrays unfamiliar Greek roots and hints at hemlock philosophy. It holds the distinction of heresy. Still, foreign as the word feels in our mouth, this

ancient belief remains amazingly relevant.

Modern technology, in a way, awakened Gnosticism. According to this worldview, humans, like amphibians refusing to evolve, slither between the material and immaterial worlds, tainting the latter with the former. Technically a product of early Christian thinking, Gnosticism can trace its origins back to Plato's cave and perhaps further.

Today Gnosticism's critique of human nature includes a critique of our technological extension: phones. As their adjective suggests, smart phones are serviceable types for humans. Like literary characters throughout history, smart phones have been created in our image as vessels made to transmit better versions of ourselves. They communicate perfectly with one another at enormous distances, they store annals of conversation in their memory, and of course they die—only to renew themselves with a charge period that plainly resembles sleep. Like us, a phone (indeed the entire hoi polloi of high tech) fills its physical substance with an energy that gives it life. When I refer to my iPhone, for instance, I invoke more than the visible entity in the same way that when I refer to "somebody" I refer to that person's body plus something else. This automatic yet peculiar pairing of body and soul (the Greek word *pneuma*—"breath, spirit"—gets at the pairing more efficiently) is the starting point for Gnosticism.

Consider the language we use to describe our phones. Gnosticism thrives in situations that pit Manichean objects against noble spirits, a trend that manifests itself in our approach to phone technology. Mobile's threatening nomenclature of "nets," "webs" and "cells" surfaces a latent fear, one that expects objects to incarcerate that otherwise free-roaming energy or "service" of the cloud. We level this fear at something physical: the mobile device, an object we frequently label as addictive. Our linguistically expressed aversion to the device participates in our broader bias against "materialism," a word which today takes connotations of profligacy and evokes images of oversized Samsung televisions.

Contrast our distrust of objects with our praise for the information space. Unlike the computers that trap it in costly hardware, the World Wide Web (or Internet, still always capitalized) is ennobled: open, accessible, and, at least in coffee shops, free. Of course most of what we imagine to be immaterial about an iPhone consists of physical electrons, but similar to "life" itself, the capacity that fills our device seems to transcend it. As

we acknowledge this duality of the mundane and transcendent, we revive the Gnostic impulse. No matter how cautiously we enter its sanctuary, high-tech leaves us awkwardly prostrate. Much like the Gnostics—who began as a sect of Christianity perplexed with the physical personhood of Christ—we are left trying to explain a thing we love and relate to, yet suspiciously distrust.

Nicea answered the Gnostics by refusing their dualism. Resurrecting the Greek word *homoousios*, the Church Fathers posited a "consubstantial" or equally valid relationship between God's material and immaterial self. Despite our suspicions or indeed the dictates of logic, they said, spirit and body form a single self that cohabits us seamlessly.

Embracing this feature of Christianity's paradoxical optimism, Søren Kierkegaard argued a similar point a millennium later. "A human being," he suggests pseudonymously in *The Sickness Unto Death*, "is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal." Struggling to explain *homoousios* without appealing to more technical words, the Kierkegaardian pseudo-author Anti-Climacus advances his well-known and almost comical logic of relation: "A human being is a spirit, but what is a spirit? A spirit is a self, but what is a self? A self is a relation of a self relating itself to itself, or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation."<sup>1</sup> This playful and admittedly arcane riff reveals the difficulty of reducing consubstantiation to algebraic terms. Indeed, we can demonstrate the difficulty of this algebra by expressing it in a series of logical statements.

Let's begin with the Gnostic view, a simple but inelegant rendering of human complexity. Like many philosophers, the Gnostics realized that human beings contain elements of greatness and wretchedness—good and evil, boundlessness and limitation. This observation led them to separate the two elements categorically, gathering human greatness under the umbrella of the spirit and annexing the physical to the wretched. We can state this position with a simple formula:

$$A_{actual} \neq B_{ideal}$$

In this equation A represents the physical self the Gnostics seek to change or suppress in order to become the spiritual ideal, B. According to this Gnostic view, nothing good comes from the physical. Like an atavistic molar, it must be extracted.

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1. Anti-Climacus, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13.

Kierkegaard saw greatness and wretchedness as more closely related. Realizing, like the Gnostics, that our ideal balances imperfectly with our actual, he claimed that the problem was not just with the actual self, but rather with the entire relation between the selves. Recall Anti-Climacus' logic from earlier: a human being is a relation, the relation of a self relating itself to itself. We can make sense of this repetitive, difficult expression with the following:

$$A_{actual} = A_{ideal}$$

In the tradition of *homoousias*, Kierkegaard sees the actual and the ideal selves as identical. Eternal spirit and physical body seamlessly cohabit the single self. This formula, the elegant law of identity, represents the relationship between the infinite and finite in a perfect world—a world where we are who we want to be and vice versa. The problem is that for most of us, the equation looks like this:

$$A_{actual} \neq A_{ideal}$$

Notice again how the ideal and actual still have the same identity, which is precisely what makes their “misrelation” so problematic. Unlike the Gnostic view, which attempts to separate greatness and wretchedness into a hierarchy of different natures, Kierkegaard's more complicated rendering claims that the problem lies in the broken relationship between our consubstantial selves. We must, in other words, fix our ideal and actual self simultaneously if we want to restore the misrelation between them. Anti-Climacus calls this misrelation despair, and describes its origin in the language of formula. “Despair is the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself [...] To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself—this is the formula for all despair.”<sup>2</sup> The Gnostic solution, trying to get rid of one identity—trying to negate or change one side of the misrelation (trying, in other words, to transform the contradiction in your identity from  $A_{actual} \neq A_{ideal}$  to  $\sim A_{actual} \neq A_{ideal}$ )—does not work in Kierkegaard's consubstantial self. The problem of despair goes deeper than eradicating physical nature.

Intuitively, Kierkegaard's more complex vision of despair makes sense. Though many in despair pursue suicide as a solution, we instinctively recognize this simple act of severance as inadequate precisely because despair affects both our spirit and our body, not just our body. In this sense, the Danish word *Fortvivlelsen* does a better job conveying despair than does the English word. In English, despair tends to suggest intense

2. Ibid., 15, 21.

episodes culminating in migraines or suicide. Meanwhile *Fortvivlelsen*, at least in Kierkegaard's vocabulary, connotes a state of chronic illness that cannot be resolved: “Despair is the sickness unto death, this tormenting contradiction, this sickness of the self, perpetually to be dying, to die and yet not to die.”<sup>3</sup> As we have already seen, despair describes a state of internal contradiction ( $A_{actual} \neq A_{ideal}$ ) that affects our entire person, not just our physical body. Again, this means that the Gnostic's attempt to exclude the body from the solution won't work:

If a person were to die of despair as one dies of sickness, the eternal in him, the self, must be able to die in the same sense as the body dies of sickness. But this is impossible [...] the person in despair cannot die [...] he cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot reduce himself to nothing.<sup>4</sup>

Because despair reveals our highly complex, consubstantial nature, it paradoxically serves as a marker of both honor and humiliation. Like hemophilia in aristocrats, this sickness carries nobility. Pascal, who claimed that “man's greatness comes from knowing he is wretched,”<sup>5</sup> prefigures Kierkegaard, who also acknowledged despair as an excellence and a defect.

As a crossroad of the honor and darkness, despair has much in common with Aristotelian tragedy. For Aristotle—dark though it was—tragedy held the highest place in literature because it connected our actual life with events shown possible by history, presenting us with the most universal narrative truth. Unlike history, which shows only what has happened to others, tragedy shows what could happen to us: “what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Kierkegaard, through Anti-Climacus, saw despair as “man's superiority over the animals.”<sup>7</sup> Tying Aristotle's notes on tragedy to Kierkegaard then, we can say that despair shows us what is possible in ourselves and where we fall short.

Literature has always been an essential access point to tragedy, but it also services the excellence and defects of despair. The ingredients of novels and other literary genres mix with us in ways likely to stir up despairing sentiments. Literature demands high degrees of reflection and requires

3. Ibid., 18.

4. Ibid., 18-19.

5. Blaise Pascal, *Les Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Classics, 1966), 114.

6. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by S. H. Butcher, web version, <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html#341>> (April 26, 2014), Part IX.

7. Anti-Climacus, 15.

us to use our intertextual instincts to connect patterns in our experience. Meanwhile rich arrays of literary characters confront us with ideals we see imperfectly in ourselves (I might watch *Mad Men*, for instance, and see myself as a less perfect Don Draper). We furthermore tend to consume literature alone, and this process of solitary reflection fuels our natural tendency to compare ideal things we experience to ourselves. Enervated with reflection and confronted by ideals we recognize but do not match exactly, our mind fatigues of optimism. In these circumstances we struggle to escape through indifference. When we fail, we collapse into despair.

As the dominant literature of today, Facebook, Instagram, and other eidolon-inducing media illustrate despair's mechanics up close. One popular journal noted that Facebook "showcases the most witty, joyful, and bullet-pointed versions of people's lives, inviting constant comparisons in which we tend to see ourselves as losers."<sup>8</sup> But more importantly for despair, Facebook gives us an opportunity to curate our ideal and present it directly to ourselves and to others. In the ease with which it enables self-creation—and the ease with which it enables comparisons—Facebook is unique to all literature and especially likely to launch us into despair. Just as tragedy makes the sad truth of history more relevant to us, social media makes the despair of literature more obviously ours.

In concluding this argument, I hope to capture one of Kierkegaard's greatest insights—that despair, by confronting us with our inadequacy, contains enormous potential for moral conversion. I will take this insight a step further and argue that Facebook, which as we have just seen has high potential to induce despair, can be a significant source of edification.

In *Either/Or II*, a work that elucidates the consubstantial self even further, we encounter a solution to despair in the concept of "self-choice." Using language that anticipates the modern concept of "profile curation," Kierkegaard's character Judge Wilhelm advances the existential idea of "choosing yourself," that powerful action whereby an individual orients her life toward the good and endows it with unifying structure:

*gnothi seauton* [know yourself] is a stock phrase and in it has been perceived the goal of all person's striving [...] this is entirely proper [...] but this knowing is not simply contemplation [...] *It is a collecting of oneself,*

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8. Libby Copeland, "The Anti-Social Network: By Making Other People Look Happy Facebook Makes Us Sad," *Slate* (January 2011). <[http://www.slate.com/articles/double\\_x/doublex/2011/01/the\\_antisocial\\_network.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2011/01/the_antisocial_network.html)> (Jan. 24, 2011).

which itself is an action, and this is why I have with aforethought used the expression "to choose oneself" instead of "to know oneself."<sup>9</sup>

This otherwise abstract notion of "collecting" selfhood (the Judge calls it *self-editing* two pages later) becomes easy to understand in relation to social media. If a Facebook or Instagram profile serves as the visible, edited collection of self-fragments corresponding to an ideal self, then the user collects those fragments in curating his profile. Thus Facebook emerges as another channel for the moral activity of self-choice.<sup>10</sup>

Since despair takes root when we compare the mesmeric ideal to our un-photogenic actual and see no hope of connecting them, the Judge's advice is: *look more actively*. If we can't see a connection between our ideal and actual self, then chances are we misunderstand their relationship. Just as dreams consist of elements we have experienced in real life, so our ideal lies inextricably bound to our actual. By searching ourselves we come to realize how our actual self influences our eidolon. We realize where we are and where we want to go, and with those two images in mind, we *choose* to fill the gap between them. The Judge calls this choice "emerging," and argues (1) that the more we collect about ourselves, the more material we have to build a complete self-image, and (2) that the more we build within ourselves, the more we bridge the gap between the ideal and the actual:

When the individual knows himself this knowing is very productive, and from this knowing emerges the authentic individual [...] The self the individual knows is simultaneously the actual self and the ideal self, which the individual has outside himself as the image in whose likeness he is to form himself, and which on the other hand he has within himself, since it is he himself.<sup>11</sup>

Note the peculiar location of the authentic self: it rests not only "within" the individual but also "outside" him, as an external image. In other words,

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9. Victor Eremita, ed., *Either/Or Part II*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 258.

10. To be clear, Kierkegaard's shortsighted virulence against the press would likely extend to Facebook. His frequent attacks on public letters of any sort echo the anti-democratic teachings of Socrates, his great teacher, who saw democracy as the least stable government and the progenitor of harmful inventions like the alphabet. Oft-cited criticisms of "advertising" and "instant publicity" in *The Present Age* aside, however, Kierkegaard presents a remedy for despair sympathetic to our day of Facebook. If we can see past his dismissal of mass media, we find a prescient understanding: that Facebook and other social literature like it can help us become better people.

11. *Ibid.*, 259.

the authentic version of the self relates both representation (“the image”) and essence (“he himself”). In order to achieve authentic self-hood, we need to learn how to pair image with essence in harmony.

I do not know a better way to visualize *the one that rests outside the self but at the same time is the self* than through Facebook, a platform that represents the individual in a series of ideal images that proceed from real life. The identity we form on Facebook is actually our own, not a disembodied avatar’s. Without conceding too much to post-humanism we can say that we *inhere* in our Facebook profile in the same way we inhere in our phone voice or letters to a friend.

Let’s pursue a Kierkegaardian reading of Facebook with an example. My ideal self might exist in the beautiful profile picture of me and my girlfriend, or in the confident post announcing my job acceptance. I despair when my “actual self” doesn’t match up (or “relate”) to the ideal: when I see myself as an under-qualified employee stuck in a dead-end dating life. To escape this despair I need to establish a proper relationship between my ideal and actual selves. That involves a lifestyle that “authentically” incorporates my eidolon with daily life. In order to incorporate these selves, of course, I need to choose the right eidolon. To return to the Judge’s diagnosis: “what [I] want to actualize is certainly [my]self, but it is [my] ideal self, which [I] cannot acquire anywhere but within [my]self.”<sup>12</sup>

This is precisely where Facebook—or any other literature—gives us the opportunity to choose evil or good. And many of us choose evil. Just as the novel reader might sour from isolation to sorrow<sup>13</sup> so the Facebook user might collapse from self-collector to thoughtless self-comparer. Indeed, Kierkegaard might have given the most visceral description of Facebook overdose when he described the “utterly superficial nonperson or group-person” who needs “the soothing lullaby of social life in order to be able to eat, drink, sleep, fall in love, etc.”<sup>14</sup> That, to be sure, is how many people use Facebook: submitting their life events for scrutiny and deleting ones with fewer likes. In short, these users have chosen the wrong ideal. Like the Gnostics, they try to eliminate their actual selves in favor of something that isn’t really them.

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12. *Ibid.*, 259.

13. Accusing his correspondent elsewhere in *Either/Or II*, Judge Willhelm says “you think the whole meaning of life is to sorrow... this is something you have learned to know very well from novels” (256).

14. *Anti-Climacus*, 154.

But the solution to this excess isn’t abstinence. Indeed, in a rather startling turn on Gnostic wisdom, Kierkegaard’s approach to Facebook isn’t “eliminate it completely,” but “*study yourself more.*” Care less about what other people think of you and more about how you view yourself. Use social media the way you use other literature, as a mirror to help you know both selves. As it turns out, social media’s distinct advantage over other literature is that it makes this process of collecting actual into ideal more apparent. It shows us what we value or fear in ourselves and lets us explicitly choose our eidolon. If we use social media the way we use other serious literature, as a place to examine our life and use the insights we glean there to make lasting choices, then we see in it the threat and the medicine of self choice.

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## A Note on Authentic Existence in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*

Austin Sarfan

**Abstract:** This paper examines freedom in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. Arguing that freedom consists of a mode of existence as *dépasser* (passing beyond one's situation), I characterize this existence in terms of a “creative” authentic existence which reveals the contingency of fixed historical definition and likewise brings new possibilities into being. This mode of existence brings oneself and others to freedom because such historical definition imposes artificial limits on existence.

In this paper I want to outline a conception of authentic existence as it can be found in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (*PP*). I will begin with an analysis of Merleau-Ponty's conception of freedom as an awareness of possibility. From there I will distinguish two modes of existence which emerge in *PP*: existence as *dépasser* (passing beyond), which is a free and authentic human existence, and existence as a *thing*, in the form of containment, which consequently is an unfree and inauthentic human existence. *Dépasser* manifests as a kind of creative existence because in passing beyond one's situation, one creates new situational possibilities and reveals a primordial human freedom beneath fixed cultural forms which impose limitations.

The last chapter in *PP* attempts to chart a new concept of freedom undistorted by the demand that it reveal an absolute nature that would be above and beyond phenomenal experience. This kind of demand for absolute freedom resounds in typical challenges such as, “If every decision I make is based on a previous decision, and if every previous decision is based on social conditions which I did not author, then how can I really be free?” Or, “If every decision I make is based on my will, which is connected to a desire, which is instinctual, then how am I not absolutely determined by my instincts?”

Such questions are—to use a *semi*-technical term which Merleau-Ponty might be justified in employing—non-sense. There is no phenomenal experience which corresponds to such an absolute freedom, but this does not mean that there is no freedom—rather, this means that we must reconceive of freedom, that we must find freedom's “roots” within



phenomenal experience. In fact, a phenomenal understanding of our experience of being in the world reveals that in order for there to be freedom, freedom—because it is an aspect of existence—must necessarily feed off acquisitions that I did not constitute. Merleau-Ponty writes, “A consciousness for which the world is present even within consciousness itself, *absolutely* chooses neither its being nor its manner of being.”<sup>1</sup> I did not choose my own birth, my being, nor did I choose these perceptual powers which I seize in the manner of my being. Nonetheless, this lack of choice is precisely what connects me to a world in the first place, and this world is precisely where I find my freedom: things in the world solicit me, offer me possibilities, and I take these possibilities up in free existence. Thus “[t]he world is always already constituted, but also never completely constituted. In the first relation we are solicited, in the second we are open to an infinity of possibilities. There is never a determinism and never an absolute choice.”<sup>2</sup> In actuality, there is always an ambiguity to choice: it is simultaneously engaged in what solicits my being and in what my being desires.

In fact, it is necessary to choose that it have something offered to it *to choose*. Such things are precisely the pre-existing givens that we seize: “our actions must come from the outside” because we are not “constituting consciousness” but rather beings born into a world; thus freedom is this “encounter between the exterior and the interior.”<sup>3</sup> Because we are *situated* in a world and *committed* to certain things at all times, *because* we are always engaged in certain particular relations, even in their most trivial form, there is no “absolute freedom at the origin of our commitments, and, for that matter, at their end.”<sup>4</sup>

One might claim here that Merleau-Ponty ends up with an unproductive concept of freedom: I am not determined by my habits or my situation, but neither can I absolutely change them. Thus freedom seems to simply be found in every moment of action. In this sense, one might consider freedom to be universally present, and one would be hard-pressed to find an act of consciousness that could not be identified as free. Yet if freedom is simply the act of consciousness, then we have worked out a decidedly

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1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 480/517.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 481/519.

4. Ibid., 481/519

unproductive account of freedom, since, for instance, the tortured person is still free to not speak, and the imprisoned person may still be free in their thoughts. If we are to carry forward Merleau-Ponty’s concept of freedom and make it effective, we will need to examine more closely how one give an account of being unfree according to Merleau-Ponty’s logic.

To this end, Merleau-Ponty offers us a small clue in the final paragraph of *Phenomenology of Perception*: “The only way I can fail to be free is if I attempt to transcend [*dépasser*] my natural and social situation by refusing to take it up at first, rather than meeting up with the natural and human world through it.”<sup>5</sup> Here, I think the English word “transcend” carries with it some unhelpful resonance<sup>6</sup>; what Merleau-Ponty really means is that I fail if I refuse to go beyond (*dépasser*), in the sense of exceeding what is expected, in “outdoing oneself.” Importantly, distinguishing “going beyond” here from “transcendence” allows Merleau-Ponty to distance his concept of human transcendence from a more “theological” and traditional account, which one might identify in Platonic or Christian understandings of transcendence that sharply delineate an absolutely transcendent realm from a realm which is not transcendent. One could consider Merleau-Ponty here attempting to return “transcendence” to its originary, phenomenal meaning. Thus proper human transcendence for Merleau-Ponty begins and ends in the *mélange*<sup>7</sup> [mixture] or *engrené* [gearing-into, enmeshing] of the involved body and the world, elements which could never absolutely be distilled from each other. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “We are mixed up with the world and with others in an inextricable confusion”<sup>8</sup> (here, as usual for Merleau-Ponty, confusion means being “fused together,” rather than simply connoting a kind of disorientation).

Merleau-Ponty clarifies this sense of “going beyond” in an earlier passage where he again uses the verb *dépasser*:

‘Transcendence’ [*transcendance*] is the name we shall give to this movement by which existence takes up for itself and transforms a *de facto* situation. Existence, precisely because

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5. Ibid., 483/520

6. And indeed with the translation of *dépasser* as “to transcend” throughout, the thrust of Merleau-Ponty’s conceptual difference is often obscure to the English reader.

7. I was originally drawn to this term (*le mélange*) by way of Leonard Lawlor’s “*Un écart infime*” series of essays, which can be found in his book *The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life*.

8. Ibid., 481/519.

it is transcendence [*transcendance*], never definitively leaves anything behind [*ne dépasse jamais rien définitivement*, my emphasis], for then the tension that defines it would disappear.

It never abandons itself.<sup>9</sup>

Existence never definitively goes beyond, it never abandons itself—of course for Merleau-Ponty there is no “union” with the immaterial transcendental which would dissipate this sensuous materiality in which we are stuck. Thus, in hearing the “transcendence” of *dépasser*, one should not hear a kind of divine, supratemporal implication. Existence never definitively or absolutely goes beyond the “tension” which defines its inherence in the world—it is always fused with the world. Existence only *relatively* goes beyond this tension, it only moves *beyond* a situation to find itself in a *new* situation. Practically, this means that “whatever I think or decide, it is always against the background of what I have previously believed or done.”<sup>10</sup>

As Merleau-Ponty writes of the “hero” at the end of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, which I take to be a description of the archetypal ethical actor: “*car seul le héros vit jusqu’au bout sa relation aux hommes et au monde.*”<sup>11</sup> Yet what happens, here, when the hero “lives his relation with men and with the world to the end?” (my translation). There is no final “end” to freedom, no limit one could finally cross. The hero does not *completely* nor *fully* live his relations, because this would contradict the incompleteness of existence: existence is never something which can be completed or fulfilled. Freedom is not “absolute within the limits of this field and nothing outside of it (for just like the perceptual field, this one too has no linear limits).”<sup>12</sup> Rather, this “living to the end” of the hero’s relations means that the hero will pass beyond the relations given to him, that he will pass beyond the standards of his situation: he will exceed the situation. This living to the end does not constitute a completion but rather an extension. The hero *dépasse* (goes beyond) his relations by living them further than they had previously allowed. In exceeding one’s situation, an authentically new situation is created—through living his relations to the end, the hero has begun a new situation in the shape of a new possibility.

This heroic existence which opens one’s situation to new possibilities

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9. Ibid., 173/208.

10. Ibid., 417/456.

11. Ibid., 483/521.

12. Ibid., 481/518.

would reveal “the tacit decisions by which we have articulated the field of possibilities around ourselves”<sup>13</sup> because it shows us all something new, because even our expectations are destroyed as they are exceeded by the hero. Insofar as a new field of possibilities is revealed, one thus catches sight of the contingency of all possibility and all supposed necessity. This commitment which I have staked my life on, this law which has emerged perhaps is not the only possibility; it is merely one possibility among others. This existence inspires the question in each of us: “Can not I, too, go beyond my situation, the limits which I take to be necessary?”

In light of this question, my tacit decisions emerge as that which has birthed my supposed “essence.” My *decisions* are revealed as articulating my possibilities, and insofar as I understand my essence in terms of these possibilities, I understand that I can change my essence by transforming my decisions and way of life. This revelation of the contingency of possibility achieved through a heroic existence brings the other into their own freedom: it amounts to “willing freedom *in general.*”<sup>14</sup> Insofar as “nothing is done so long as we maintain these fixations [as in habits, both social and cultural, which form the foundation of our lives], and everything is easy once we have weighed these anchors,”<sup>15</sup> the heroic “going beyond” reveals *fixations* in their places so that each may clearly evaluate their own *fixations* in terms of their actual value, in revealed light.

We can say this “going beyond” one’s situation is an accomplishment of the movement of existence. In going beyond, it amounts to creation, because it reveals new possibilities. Merleau-Ponty implies that freedom consists of “truly a choice, a conversion of our existence, but in this case it assumes a preexisting acquisition that it sets out to modify and it establishes a new tradition.”<sup>16</sup> I consider this conversion of existence, the assumption of an acquisition which, once modified, becomes a new tradition, to be the definition of the primordially creative movement of authentic existence. This movement manifests in the very movement of human existence, in which we are continuously “starting over,” in which we continuously “turn toward another future.”<sup>17</sup> This movement is apparent in the flow of generalized time: I am always promised and receive something new, I

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13. Ibid., 463/501-502.

14. Ibid., 483/521.

15. Ibid., 463/502.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 479/517.

am always tracing out “the style of what is about to arrive” but likewise “forever expect[ing], probably until death, to see *something else* appear.”<sup>18</sup> Thus we can say that existence is already accomplishing the power of creation, though it is up to us to seize it—we can be authentic, but it is up to us. In this respect, insofar as we might say that “responsibility” is “taking charge for what one is already doing,” we can say that this kind of creation is a responsibility of each. “[W]e carry with us—from the mere fact that we are . . . not merely in the world, like things—all that is necessary for transcending [*dépasser*] ourselves.”<sup>19</sup>

In order to secure a productive distinction between freedom and unfreedom in terms of creative existence, however, we would also need to untangle Merleau-Ponty’s use of “existence,” employed in at least two ways throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty writes, “Everything that exists, exists as either a thing or a consciousness, and there is no in between.”<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty implies that conscious existence is “the taking of a *de facto* situation.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense, it seems certainly uncontroversial to say that every conscious human being, and perhaps even most animals, exist. On the other hand, clearly things like chairs and trees do not exist in this way.

Merleau-Ponty also uses transcendence in two distinct ways, which I think correlate respectively with the two modes of existence, of consciousness and of the thing. First, Merleau-Ponty uses transcendence to imply a kind of pre-existence. He says, “If the past and the world exist, then they must have . . . an actual transcendence [*transcendance*]—they exist in my life before appearing as objects of my explicit acts.”<sup>22</sup> This is a pre-existence in the sense of objects which exist behind my back or which exist as placed in a container that I have not yet opened. On the other hand, he sometimes does equate *transcender* with *dépasser*, which implies an entirely different meaning than this kind of pre-existence. For example, he writes that existence is “precisely” transcendence and then immediately defines transcendence as “the movement by which existence takes up for itself and transforms a *de facto* situation,” which is what I want to call creative existence.<sup>23</sup> This movement of taking up a situation

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18. *Ibid.*, 439/478.

19. *Ibid.*, 483/520.

20. *Ibid.*, 26/49.

21. *Ibid.*, 173/208.

22. *Ibid.*, 381/422.

23. *Ibid.*, 173/208.

and transforming it is the definition of *dépasser*. For example, Merleau-Ponty associates *dépasser* with expression, which allows the subject “to transcend [*dépasser*] what he had previously thought,”<sup>24</sup> resulting in the original thought’s modification, similar to the modification of tradition which he associates with free existence. Thus we see here how the English translation of *dépasser* as to transcend, etc., covers up a crucial distinction.

Insofar as Merleau-Ponty associates transcendence with things, he means transcendence in the sense of pre-objective dormancy in the world. The thing cannot go beyond, but quite the opposite—it is contained in the horizon, it is defined. Unable to pass beyond, the thing is not free. With respect to the thing’s mode of existence, to transcend (*transcender*) is to be unable to pass beyond since it is always contained, and in this way the thing simply awaits our perception. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “The thing is in a place, but perception is nowhere, for if it were situated it could not make other things *exist for itself*, since it would remain in itself in the manner of things.”<sup>25</sup> Consciousness resides “nowhere” because it is free to establish its own situation and may pass beyond its establishments.

Thus, if we take existence in the mode of creative existence, passing beyond, then it is not so clear that every human exists. This becomes clear when we remember that Merleau-Ponty claims “the absolute positing of a single object is the death of consciousness.”<sup>26</sup> For example, one can live in the manner of an “objective thing,” which means, defined and essentialized, consequently torn from the original living movement of existence. I can posit myself as an absolute object rather than a subject founded on contingency: I may regulate my eating habits by scientific equations which I take to be objectively and universally true; I may act as if all morality were determined by physiological factors; I can negate true love because it is a manifestation of biological instincts. Yet insofar as these conceptual, objective truths are all “ideas” accessible because my phenomenal body precedes them, in living as if the objective truths supercede phenomenality I cover up the phenomenal body’s lived originality and live as a “dead” consciousness. Insofar as I live as an ideal thing, I take myself to be *defined* by an ideal. As I am “at home in the things,” I am likewise “unaware” of myself because I consider myself an absolute universality as opposed to a perspectival contingency. I therefore

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24. *Ibid.*, 408-409/449.

25. *Ibid.*, 40/63.

26. *Ibid.*, 74/100.

lose sight of my actual freedom because I self-contain my existence with respect to certain laws which I take to be necessary and universal.<sup>27</sup>

In considering myself a thing, I cease to exist as a consciousness because I am no longer *aware* of my ability to go beyond my situation and the ideas which I find in it and take to be laws. Thus, the distinction between freedom and unfreedom can be made based on an *awareness*: I am free insofar as I am aware of my ability to go beyond my situation, insofar as I reject the absolute definition of my situation, insofar as I reject absolute necessity. I am unfree insofar as I resign myself to the definition which my situation has given me and insofar as I refuse to take up my situation with the goal of transforming it. Thus the “individual alone in his prison who reanimates . . . phantoms each day” is still free because he believes in his ability to go beyond his situation.<sup>28</sup>

To clarify this distinction, we can supplement it further with a distinction between action and existence. I mean action in the sense of acting in a performance, as in the way that one acts when they “perform a script” or “act out a play.” This is not creative, yet surely at least every consciousness does it. Action is done according to certain criteria, according to the limits of a situation. Existence, however, while also done according to the criteria or the limits of a situation, is done *with the goal* of transforming such criteria and of transforming the situation. It does not tarry in its situation, but rather always seeks the “sort of escape” that Merleau-Ponty ascribes to “human existence.”<sup>29</sup>

Thus, action is scripted, and, unfree, remains so. On the other hand, free authentic existence takes up the situational script in order to continue writing it. Existence *scripts*, it inscribes new possibilities in the world as a creative gesture. It reveals new possibilities and in this way deposits new roles and new lines for others to take up and subsequently rewrite on their own terms. One who merely “acts out” according to the script, but does not himself create, is unfree. He is determined by the laws which have been written for him to repeat like lines. A bad actor does not dare go beyond the movements which the director expects him to play; he will never give a performance in which he “exceeds all expectations.” Thus we see how this account of authentic existence in Merleau-Ponty relates to his account

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27. Ibid., 24/47.

28. Ibid., 480/518.

29. Ibid., 174/209.

of history<sup>30</sup>: the unfree actor acts according to “stable forms” according to action which follows a “historical *a priori*,” while the creative actor “shatters” forms and in doing so provides such a powerful performance that the audience, society, is likewise transformed in the process. The audience, in witnessing this act of creation, leaves the theater in awe. They feel again an authentic sense of their humanity because they had their own freedom revealed to them.

I do not want to point out merely the creative capacity of “art,” however, but want to stress that the structure of existence is the structure of creativity as such. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty writes of “the function revealed through language,” so too must we say of the creative function revealed through existence, “like a wave [it] gathers itself together and steadies itself in order to once again throw itself beyond itself [*projeter au-de là d’elle-même*].”<sup>31</sup> This creative movement or gesture of existence would be accomplished when “the gesture—if it is an initiating gesture—gives a human sense to the object for the first time.”<sup>32</sup> Thus not only do “traditional art forms” display the creative power of existence, but so also does one’s style of life, the particular behavioral orientation of one’s existence. Available cultural significations are taken up in this style of existence and “suddenly intertwine according to an unknown law, and once and for all a new cultural being has begun to exist.”<sup>33</sup> Another’s style of existence “sketches out the first signs of an intentional object” which “invites me to join it there.”<sup>34</sup> This act of communication “opens a new field or a new dimension to our existence”<sup>35</sup> and results in a “transformation of my being”<sup>36</sup> because I am turned toward a new field of possibility.

This creative gesture brings us to the open and unlimited horizon of existence. Possibility, which has become crystallized or sedimented over time in the form of supposed necessity, is shattered. The creative gesture of existence revives consciousness insofar as it has experienced its death in the positing of an absolute object: it shows that the absolute object is only a name. The creative gesture would return us to a field prior to “the

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30. Ibid., 90/118.

31. Ibid., 203/239.

32. Ibid., 200/236.

33. Ibid., 189/223.

34. Ibid., 191/225.

35. Ibid., 188/222-223.

36. Ibid., 189/224.

act of subsuming under a category,<sup>37</sup> to a field prior to the act of naming. Thus the creative gesture returns us to the original, lived phenomenal experience, “the primordial silence beneath the noise of words.”<sup>38</sup> Here, one would find oneself again in the open, pre-objective landscape that had been closed off and defined by the *fixation* of the object, habit, cultural objects, or social form.<sup>39</sup>

Insofar as ethics is understood as a relation to myself or to another, existence as a creative gesture—which opens up the pre-objective landscape—therefore opens the space for ethics, which must be a practice free from objectification. In this respect, it must be said that only an existence in the form of *dépasser*, that is, creative existence, is ethical, because it opens one up to difference and to something other than fixed self-identity that contains the subject rather than allowing him to be free. As Merleau-Ponty writes: “Subjectivity is not an immobile self-identity . . . it is essential to subjectivity—in order for it to be subjectivity—to open up to an Other and to emerge from itself.”<sup>40</sup> This openness is first seen in the movement of creative existence. Therefore what is precisely unethical is any action under the banner of a universal imperative, any “naming” of the subject as a universal, fixed form, which thereby tears the subject from their individual and unique properties and treats them as a mere thing with a script to play out. In other words, to name the subject as a universal form is to treat him like a pre-existing object placed in a container, as a thing.

It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty concludes *Phenomenology of Perception* with the claim that “it is precisely here that we must remain silent” since “it is hardly fitting for another to speak in [the hero’s] name.”<sup>41</sup> It is hardly fitting in the sense that to speak for the hero destroys her possibility to be a hero: in speaking the hero’s name, one objectifies her, defines her, and contains her, which cuts her from her ethical movement. Once defined, the hero struggles to go beyond the definition imposed upon her. Of course, I take the hero to be an ideal type, though because she cannot be named, because she is anonymous, Merleau-Ponty implies that each of us must strive to take on her name. After all, as an ideal type, the hero is never embodied absolutely: one never *could* say that they have

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37. Ibid., 130/161  
38. Ibid., 190/224.  
39. Ibid., 70/95.  
40. Ibid., 450/489.  
41. Ibid., 483/521.

gone absolutely beyond their situation. Precisely because of this “tension” or inherence to being which defines existence,<sup>42</sup> freedom is never resolved. It is inexhaustible and therefore always incomplete. Consequently, there can never be enough done with respect to freedom—to bring oneself into freedom and to bring others into freedom is an endless task. If to create is to go beyond one’s situation, one’s “hold,” and this going beyond signifies an authentic existence, then authentic existence would consist of a continuous self-transformation and would be a perpetually aesthetic practice.

Because creation gives rise to its own objects which may themselves become fixed and posited as necessary, creative existence must never falter. Merleau-Ponty picks up on this theme in his essay “Cézanne’s Doubt,” published in 1945, which explores Paul Cézanne’s insatiable, feverish drive to create. Merleau-Ponty describes Cézanne’s perpetual “uncertainty” over his talents and claims they are expressed as a “way of life.”<sup>43</sup> Cézanne’s goal is described by Merleau-Ponty as “continually to question tradition, . . . to depict . . . the birth of order through spontaneous organization, . . . to paint this primordial world.”<sup>44</sup>

The painting of Cézanne “suspends . . . habits of thought” which are apparent insofar as thought tends to believe “that all this exists necessarily and unshakably.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, his paintings counter perception’s habitual tendencies which result in posited forms supposedly static, universal, and defining. Cézanne’s work returns us to the primordial site of freedom, the space of all possibility, a space prior to necessity and limitations. Cézanne can only feel “the continual rebirth of existence” and his paintings return us “to the source of silent and solitary experience on which culture and the exchange of ideas have been built.”<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, meditating on the relationship between Cézanne’s creativity and his freedom, Merleau-Ponty writes: “If there is a true liberty, it can only come about in the course of our life by our going beyond [*dépassement*] our original situation and yet not ceasing to be the same: this is the problem.”<sup>47</sup>

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42. Ibid., 173/208.  
43. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Le Doute de Cézanne” *Sens et Non-sens* (Paris: Nagel, 1948), 273. (p. 21).  
44. Ibid., 279.  
45. Ibid., 280.  
46. Ibid., 282-283.  
47. Ibid., 285/40.

Thus authentic freedom is a never-ending process, a practice which we must continuously live out. Here we see the full paradox, the precise problem: one is “condemned to being.”<sup>48</sup> Our roots are in this world and always will be. There is no freedom other than this phenomenal freedom, which requires continuous creative effort. If we want to live freely we are condemned to create and to debase static forms. We may fail to be free, should we consider ourselves “enclosed in [our] situation like an object in a box,”<sup>49</sup> but simultaneously we will also never absolutely succeed at being free so long as we do exist. If we are not truly enclosed in our situation like a thing, then we are open toward a situation, open toward a world of possible situations, and our “being is synonymous with being situated.”<sup>50</sup> On the question of success regarding this task of freedom, there are “no theoretical responses.”<sup>51</sup>

Thus Merleau-Ponty writes:

That is the reason [Cézanne] questioned the picture emerging beneath his hand, why he hung on the glances of other people directed toward his canvas. That is the reason he never finished working. We never get away from our life. We never see our ideas or our freedom face to face.<sup>52</sup>

We never experience freedom in the form of a final meeting, recognition, or achievement. Yet we must insist, as Merleau-Ponty insists with respect to speech, on a kind of authentic existence which, like authentic speech, “gives rise to a new sense”<sup>53</sup> and brings a “thought” into being.<sup>54</sup> It is only *through* a steadfast commitment to this kind of creation, to rendering transparent and visible a world beneath the opacity of sedimented historical definition, that we may be free to “see the world anew.”<sup>55</sup>

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48. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 169/204.

49. *Ibid.*, 377/418.

50. *Ibid.*, 263/300.

51. *Ibid.*, 483/521.

52. Merleau-Ponty, “*Le Doute de Cézanne*” *Sens et Non-sens*, 289.

53. *Ibid.*, 200/236.

54. *Ibid.*, 409/450.

55. *Ibid.*, lxxxv/21.

## Kierkegaard and the Passionate Non-Christian: Neighbors in the State of Spiritual Subjectivity

Stephanie Jones

**Abstract:** This paper engages with Søren Kierkegaard as he develops a subjective model of truth and applies it to religious faith. The first stage establishes what it means to have a subjective relationship with concepts; the second stage delves into what it means for this subjective relationship to be a true understanding of a concept. Throughout, subjectivity is examined with regard to Kierkegaard's central concern, a person's relationship with God, while also showing the applicability of this model of truth to other quandaries and current events. I conclude that accepting Kierkegaard's subjective model of truth could fundamentally alter how we regard people with whom we vehemently disagree. Though the fierce atheist and the passionate Christian are divided on the objective content of religious truth, they are aligned in the ardor with which they pursue it.

This paper will examine why it is that Søren Kierkegaard, who valued an individual's personal relationship with the (Christian) God above all else, made the argument that an individual who passionately embraces a pagan faith or rejects faith altogether is closer to truth than one who passively follows Christian tradition. The answer to this question is built up through Kierkegaard's writings as Johannes Climacus in *Johannes Climacus* on how a conscious relationship to concepts emerges, his continued work as Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* on what it means to have subjective truth (particularly with regard to faith), and finally his observations on how a subjective awareness changes the prospects of a person in despair as Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Ultimately, what Kierkegaard's ideal Christian and the passionate non-Christian share is an ability to form a subjective relationship with ideas, which sets off a chain of recognizing the paradox of an eternal God entering into time, taking offense at this paradox, and then continuing to engage with the paradox in a dynamic relationship of approach and retreat – the passive, unconscious Christian does not relate himself subjectively to his faith, and will therefore never begin this journey. Kierkegaard's delineation of proximity of outlook based on passion rather than objective content has fascinating implications for the turbulent religious, political, and social climate in which we currently find ourselves.

The potential for the birth of subjective thought arises when a person

has an impression and then appropriates that impression into language or thought. Whenever a person uses language to express something, Climacus views that very act as bringing reality into contact with ideality – the object the person is talking or thinking about is reality, the linguistic framework she puts it into is ideality. If such a juxtaposition causes the person to realize that a contradiction is present between the reality she is trying to describe and the ideality which she must use to describe it, she will become conscious rather than simply passively reflecting: “So long as this exchange [between reality and ideality] takes place without collision, consciousness does not actually exist, and this colossal fallacy causes no annulments. Reality is not consciousness, ideality no more so. Yet consciousness does not exist without both, and this contradiction is the coming into existence [*Tilbliven*] of consciousness and is its nature.”<sup>1</sup> Consciousness places a person in the same type of relationship to ideas that an active faith does to the paradox: a dynamic of constantly moving between two opposites and eternally striving for something that cannot be achieved.

To distinguish between whether a person is engaging with ideas objectively or subjectively, Climacus identifies the former mode as reflection and the latter as consciousness. “Before proceeding any further, he considered whether or not what he at this point called consciousness was what usually was called *reflection*. He formulated the relevant definition as follows: ‘Reflection is the *possibility of the relation*; consciousness is *the relation, the first form of which is contradiction*.’”<sup>2</sup> Because a person engaging in reflection does not regard himself as a part of the reflection (as a subject), “reflection’s categories are always *dichotomous*. For example, ideality and reality, soul and body, to know the true, to will the good, to love the beautiful, God and the world, etc. are categories of reflection. In reflection, they touch each other in such a way that a relation becomes possible.”<sup>3</sup> The person thinking sees ideality/reality, soul/body, etc. as objects of his thought, but he fails to see how they come into relation with him. For example, a student might be able to recite facts about the history of slavery in the United States without relating to them in any sort of subjective way (e.g. “I am shocked that people treated other people so inhumanely,” or “Most of these stories we learn are from the perspectives of white

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1. Johannes Climacus, *Philosophical Fragments; Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 168.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 169.

landowners, not their slaves”).

With consciousness, however, arises the ability for subjectivity: Climacus pinpoints the source of subjectivity as arising from the additional factor that enters in when consciousness begins: “The categories of consciousness [...] are *trichotomous*, as language also demonstrates, for when I say, *I am conscious of this sensory impression*, I am expressing a triad.”<sup>4</sup> The triad is between the object of the impression, the impression itself, and the person’s relationship to his own impression. This relationship may be evaluative (e.g. “I am not confident in the accuracy of my impression”), emotional (e.g. “I am glad that I am having this impression”) or simply acknowledging (e.g. “I am having an impression”). Regardless, in entering into relationship with his impressions, a person is now capable of not only having impressions but of having attitudes towards them. Climacus is particularly interested in the way this subjective perspective facilitates an attitude of doubt: “If there were nothing but dichotomies, doubt would not exist, for the possibility of doubt resides precisely in the third, which places the two in relation to each other.”<sup>5</sup>

While doubt could conceivably be considered further away from belief than indifference, Climacus makes the case that it is the other way around because doubt (and all other manifestations of consciousness) signify the presence of interest. A doubting person has formed a relationship to her impression, as skeptical and negative as the relationship may be, while an indifferent person has not yet made himself a subject and is therefore incapable of relating to the concept in any way in his current state:

“Reflection is the possibility of the relation. This can also be stated as follows: Reflection is *disinterested*. Consciousness, however, is the relation and thereby is interest, a duality that is perfectly and with pregnant double meaning expressed in the word ‘interest’ (*interesse* [being between]). Therefore, all disinterested knowledge (mathematics, esthetics, metaphysics) is only the presupposition of doubt. As soon as the interest is canceled, doubt is not conquered but is neutralized, and all such knowledge is simply a retrogression. Thus it would be a misunderstanding for someone to think that doubt can be overcome by so-called objective thinking. Doubt is a higher form than any objective thinking, for it presupposes the latter but has something more, a third, which is interest or

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4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

Climacus gives a cryptic, seemingly paradoxical explanation for how consciousness can arise from reflection if reflection is completely passive with regard to concepts: “But how does consciousness discover the contradiction? [...] Consciousness emerges precisely through the collision, just as it presupposes the collision. Immediately there is no collision, but immediately it is present.”<sup>7</sup> No collision occurs in the dichotomy of reflection – a collision is a type of relation, which is not possible without the person taking an active, subjective role. Somehow, consciousness is necessary for a collision to occur, but at the same time, the collision provides the occasion for consciousness. To understand this paradox, I refer back to Climacus’ comments about how attempting to capture reality under the framework of ideality that language necessitates causes a person to notice a difference between the two (the reality, and the language used to categorize and understand it as an impression). Recognition of this difference creates distance – contradiction – between the two, which creates the opportunity for consciousness.

The different orientations of subjective and objective thinking create different standards for when the thinker has reached a true understanding. Objective thinking, in which the thinker regards the contents of his thought to be only the impressions themselves, is evaluated according to whether the thinker’s impressions are true: “When truth is asked about objectively, reflection is directed objectively at truth as an object to which the knower relates. Reflection is not on the relation but on it being the truth, the true that he is relating to. If only this, to which he relates, is the truth, the true, then the subject is in the truth.”<sup>8</sup> For example, if a person knew that the most recent reports about the tornado in Moore, Oklahoma put the current death toll at 24, including 9 children, he would have truth in the objective sense – even if there were no difference between the way he related to this information and the latest MLB statistics.

Subjective thinking, on the other hand, includes the thinker within its scope as well, so it is not the impressions themselves which must be true, but rather his response to them: “If the truth is asked about subjectively,

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6. Ibid., 170.

7. Ibid., 171.

8. Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 167.



reflection is directed subjectively on the individual's relation; if only the how of this relation is in truth, then the individual is in truth, even if he related in this way to untruth."<sup>9</sup> A converse example using the same situation as above might look like this: a person had not seen the news updates on the tornado still believed there to be over 100 deaths, including 20 children, as was originally reported – though the content of his concept was incorrect, suppose he related to the concept subjectively, imagining how one might feel as a resident of Moore or wondering if there were connections between this and other extreme weather events. Though the information he is thinking is incorrect, the way he relates to it makes his reaction more subjectively truthful than his indifferent neighbor's failure to step back from the concepts and respond to them.

The ultimate goal of Climacus' explanation of subjective versus objective thought is to build a model for faith that operates in the subjective mode rather than the objective. Whether a person has a "true" faith is a question that will be decided differently depending on whether the question is considered from an objective or subjective perspective. Considered objectively, the evaluation hinges "on it being the true God"<sup>10</sup> that the person is worshipping – the content of his concept must be accurate for the faith to be "true." Considered subjectively, however, truth is manifested in "the individual relating to something *in such a way* that his relation is truly a God-relationship."<sup>11</sup> Note that the individual must simply be relating to "something" in the manner of a true faith – this raises important questions. What kind of qualities must a relationship have to be "truly a God-relationship?" Could this kind of relationship truly be had with any "something," or are there constraints on what/who the other party in the relationship could be? It seems based on Climacus' consistent definition of God as a paradox – the eternal entering into time – a true God-relationship would have to be between a person and something that appears to him to be a paradox that cannot be solved, but that he continually finds himself drawn to solving regardless. For example, love could be a person's god-term – he could be captivated by its unexplainable beauty and yet scared back into himself by its power to hurt deeply. His dynamic relationship with the phenomenon of love, continually holding it up as the greatest question to ponder in his life and yet never able to realize it fully and come to rest, constitutes a true "God-relationship."

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9. Ibid., 167-8.

10. Ibid., 168.

11. Ibid.

In defining a subjectively true faith as one in which the person has a true God-relationship to something, ambiguity arises as to where exactly the truth is located: "On which side now is truth to be found? Alas, are we not forced at this point to resort to mediation and say: it is on neither side, it is in the mediation? Excellently put, if only someone could explain how an existing individual sets about being in mediation."<sup>12</sup> Truth is not located within the thinker or within the God he worships, it is within the mediation – the relation, the space – between them. But an individual cannot seek a space – "to be in mediation is to be finished, to exist is to become. Nor can an existing individual be in two places at once, be subject-object. When closest to being in two places at once he is in passion; but passion is only momentary and passion, precisely, is subjectivity at its highest."<sup>13</sup> In striving to approach the God, the individual moves away from himself, but in returning to his own finitude, he yearns again for the God – through this dynamic relation, the individual is constantly becoming and thus constantly re-establishing himself as subject. The feeling of being torn between himself and that to which he relates creates an anguish in the thinker, but as Climacus states, the moment of equilibrium between the two poles is when the thinker is at the climax of passion and, therefore, the pinnacle of subjectivity.

Climacus underscores the difference between a person who is objectively in truth but subjectively in untruth, versus a person who is subjectively in truth but objectively in untruth, through a comparison featuring two such people:

If someone living in the midst of Christianity enters the house of God, the house of the true God, knowing the true conception of God, and now prays but prays untruly, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol – where then is there more truth? The one prays truly to God though he worships an idol; the other prays untruly to the true God, and therefore truly worships an idol.<sup>14</sup>

This passage clarifies somewhat what might be meant by Climacus' earlier discussion of how truth can exist in a mediation. The adverbs "truly" and "untruly" modify the verb "prays" – this indicates that the subjective approach to truth focuses on (to put it yet another way) the *how*, not the *to*, of the subject's prayer. Subjective truth is defined not in the God and not in

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12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 169-70.

the subject, but in the way the subject moves towards the God.

In identifying the subjective God-relationship, rather than the particular “God” the person is relating to, as the more vital kind of truth for religious practice, Climacus drastically reverses common conceptions of what constitutes true faith. People sometimes express a concern that if someone has been born into a society where they never even hear of the Bible, they do not have any chance of being saved through Christianity. This apparent disadvantage with regard to adopting a Christian faith applies to varying degrees in other circumstances, as a person who has grown up in a Christian household is more likely to continue adhering to the religion than someone who lived in a society where Christianity was practiced but who was never pushed to attend church in his formative years. However, such concerns are nearly irrelevant to Climacus’ definition of what it means to be a practicing Christian; mindlessly assimilating religious practices does not create any sort of subjective relationship with the paradox. He compares religious traditions getting passed along to future generations who passively receive them to a city whose inhabitants keep building on top of it, not realizing that it lacks a foundation in the underneath:

If all the generations were to entrust all the splendor of the consequences to the most recent generation as a matter of course – then the consequences are indeed a misunderstanding. Is not Venice built upon the sea, even though it was built in such a way that a generation finally came along that did not notice this at all, and would it not be a lamentable misunderstanding if this latest generation was so in error until the pilings began to rot and the city sank? But, humanly speaking, consequences built upon a paradox are built upon the abyss, and the total content of the consequences, which is handed down to the single individual only under the agreement that it is by virtue of a paradox, is not to be passed on like real estate, since the whole thing is in suspense.<sup>15</sup>

If a person goes along with the trappings of religion, assuming all along that there is some sort of logical, steady basis at the bottom of it, she will never discover the paradox, and thus never be offended, and thus never be able to respond to the paradox – whether by taking the leap of faith or by rejecting the paradox.

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15. Johannes Climacus, *Philosophical Fragments; Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 98.

One of Climacus’ chief critiques of contemporary Christianity is that many people practice their faith in the building-over-an-abyss manner described above. When they encounter faith as simple traditions and platitudes, passed down to them fully assembled by others, people lose the potential for offense at the paradox and thus lose the opportunity to make the decision to tear away the flimsy structures and enter the abyss. Climacus laments that so few people even get to the point of offense, let alone beyond it to true faith: “If in the old days the horror was that one might be offended, now the horror is that there is no horror, that one, two, three, and even before looking round, one becomes a speculator who speculates about faith. About what faith? Is it about the faith that he has, and especially about whether he has it or not? Alas no, that is too little for an objective speculator. So it is about objective faith.”<sup>16</sup> Climacus is using “speculation” as a term for the kind of disinterested thinking that arises from a reflective, rather than conscious, state. To speculate is to allow ideas to pass through the mind, but with no attachment or reaction to any of them. It is due to this detachment, this utter lack of relationship to the truths of faith, that “the speculator is perhaps at the furthest remove from Christianity, and it is perhaps far to be preferred that one be a person offended who nevertheless constantly relates to Christianity while the speculator has understood it.”<sup>17</sup> This is a step further than Climacus had yet gone in denouncing the disinterested practitioner of faith – not only would it be better to form a subjective relationship with a false God, it would be preferable to continually bump up against the offense of the paradox even if one *never* moved past the offense to faith.

Climacus finds the offense of the Christian paradox so powerful that not forming any subjective response to it serves as a litmus test of humanness:

If enthusiasm’s vision has not managed to help him break with the understanding, if love has not managed to snap him out of his bondage, then let him look at Christianity. Let him be offended, he is still a human being; let him despair of ever becoming a Christian himself, he may still be nearer than he thinks; let him fight to the last drop of his blood to eradicate Christianity, he is still a human being – but if here too he has it in him to say that it is *true to a degree*, then he is stupid. [...] [T]he one who is neither cold nor hot is an abomination. [emphasis added]<sup>18</sup>

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16. Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 181.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 192.

Climacus understands that not everyone will be able to make the leap, but if a person does not even see the grand abyss of Christianity, Climacus thinks he will not wake up his conscious, subjective mind for anything. If a person has formed an untrue belief, but it was formed based on a true subjective relationship to incorrect objective information, there is hope for the person to come fully into the truth – he has the right inner conditions, so he would simply need the right objective information. However, if a person has the correct objective information and yet does not form a true subjective relationship to it, it is much harder to see how that person might be able to find complete truth. Doing so would require her to see a contradiction that would awaken her conscious relationship to the concepts, but Climacus believes that if the paradox of Christianity is not sufficient for this, nothing will be.

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, the pseudonymous authorship shifts to Anti-Climacus, whose focus is on the different forms of despair, the most serious of which manifest in people who lack the subjective insight to notice their despair. As such, a person is not troubled by examining his inward self: “there is no delay, no difficulty with his self and its infinitizing; he is as smooth as a rolling stone, as *courant* [passable] as a circulating coin. [...] The despair that not only does not cause one any inconvenience in life but makes life cozy and comfortable is in no way, of course, regarded as despair.”<sup>19</sup> As long as things continue to go well in the finite, everyday world for such a man, he will never have any cause to recognize his despair for what it is:

An individual is furthest from being conscious of himself as spirit when he is ignorant of being in despair. But precisely this – not to be conscious of oneself as spirit – is despair, which is spiritlessness, whether the state is a thoroughgoing moribundity, a merely vegetative life, or an intense, energetic life, the secret of which is still despair.<sup>20</sup>

Even if misfortune befalls such a man and he does become conscious of his despair, he will attribute it to his external circumstances, as he lacks the inwardness to recognize that his real despair stems from his spiritlessness. A person who, while lacking in faith, possesses the subjective perspective necessary for evaluating her concepts and impressions, has much more hope of recognizing her condition and therefore also of fighting it. Though her despair will be more intensely felt, it is no more real than the ignorant

19. Anti-Climacus, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 34-5.

20. *Ibid.*, 44-45.

man’s, and it may lead her to offense at the paradox and potentially faith in response.

Kierkegaard regards the individual relationship with God to be the most important thing for a person to cultivate. However, his convictions on pursuing truth through subjectivity cause him to consider atheists and pagans who react with passionate, ongoing offense to faith’s paradox as closer to true faith than complacent Christians. While they have different concepts of objective truth, passionate Christians and non-Christians share an attitude of urgency towards questions of faith that causes them to continually revisit the paradox, maintaining an active relationship with it that always has the potential to shift. I find this focus on common levels of passion toward something, rather than common points of view on that thing, to be potentially applicable to the way we view our counterparts in debates on contemporary controversial issues. Rather than deploring a person who holds opposing views to us on an issue we care about strongly, we might recognize that he at least has the same deeply committed attitude towards it that we do, he just has a different concept of what the correct response is. Our mutual level of commitment to pursuing truth stems from our mutual level of offense at the original problem posed to us, so we will each be willing to endure much in the struggle to assuage this offense:

The degree of offense depends on how passionate a man’s admiration is. The more prosaic people, lacking in imagination and passion and thus not particularly given to admiration, are also offended, but they limit themselves to saying: Such a thing I just can’t understand; I leave it alone. They are the skeptics. But the more passion and imagination a person has – consequently, the closer he is in a certain sense (in possibility) to being able to believe, to humbling himself in adoration under the extraordinary – the more passionate is his offense, which finally cannot be satisfied with anything less than getting this rooted out, annihilated, trampled into the dirt.<sup>21</sup>

Given different objective information on the issue, one of us might realize that we were mistaken – but someone who has been exposed to an issue and not developed any relationship to it is far less likely to even follow along with updates or attempt to learn more about it, making him much less likely to become conscious of it. In building a thorough and gradual case for the importance of truly relating to a concept rather than just holding the correct concept, Kierkegaard imparts insights on faith that are just as relevant to our religious climate as they were to his.

21. *Ibid.*, 86.

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## Raining on the Absurd: Entering into Solitude with Thomas Merton

Andrew M. Belfield

**Abstract:** This essay addresses the absurdity of the human condition as identified by Albert Camus in his philosophical treatise “The Myth of Sisyphus” and presents a response from twentieth-century Christian spiritual writer Thomas Merton’s “Rain and the Rhinoceros.” In this work, Merton suggests that the world is not necessarily devoid of meaning- humans just may not be able to comprehend the world (which for Merton is not problematic). While Camus would respond that this is nothing but an example of ‘philosophical suicide,’ Merton defends himself by arguing that the human craving for meaning is nothing but the result of a modern, materialistic world obsessed with assigning utility and purpose to everything. After consulting Martin Heidegger for some philosophical grounding to Merton’s reflections, it is explained how one can escape the modern need for meaning and learn to live free of the absurd through solitude. For it is in solitude that we can experience the being of the world beyond meaning.

The “one truly serious philosophical problem,”<sup>1</sup> the question of whether life is worth living, begins Albert Camus’s philosophical treatise “The Myth of Sisyphus.” This problem arises out of Camus’s belief that the world is entirely irrational and without meaning. This lack of meaning, along with the human search for it, constitutes the absurdity of human existence: that humans cannot help but search for answers to the question posed above, but can never find any. This problem oftentimes leads to human attempts to create and impose meaning on the world, though these attempts are doomed to fail due to the complete otherness of humans from the world. For Camus, this absurdity is simply a fact of human existence and cannot be avoided. For Christian spiritual writer Thomas Merton, however, this absurdity is not so much a problem of human existence itself as it is a problem of the modern, materialistic world. He would agree with Camus that humans attempt to create and impose meaning on the world, but Merton believes that humans do this as a result of a modern world in which, seemingly, everything must have a reason for existence. In his short essay “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” Merton explains how humans came to be faced with the absurd because of the modern world, and he attempts to demonstrate how one can cast off the chains of the modern

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1. Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York, NY: Vintage-Random House, 1991), 3.

world and therefore resolve the absurdity of existence through solitude. For it is in solitude that we are able to encounter the being of the world beyond meaning.

### I. The Absurdity of Existence

Before consulting Merton, however, Camus's position deserves some greater clarification. Camus argues that the "mind's deepest desire ... is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity."<sup>2</sup> Camus says here that an inherent yearning of the human mind, and indeed that for which it yearns the most, is to make sense of the world and therefore to discern its meaning, which the mind attempts to do by ordering the world in human terms: "Understanding the world for man is reducing it to the human."<sup>3</sup> But this cannot work, for putting the world in human terms, that is, in terms other than its own, is not to understand the world in itself but only as it appears to humans. The world is in fact opaque, incomprehensible to human understanding due to its total otherness to humans, and even resists human attempts to understand and define it. Camus expresses it well when he says, "I realize that if through science I can seize phenomena and enumerate them, I cannot, for all that, apprehend the world."<sup>4</sup> The only thing about the world of which humans can actually be certain is that "it exists ... and the rest is construction."<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, not only is it impossible for humans to access the world in itself and consequently to understand its meaning, but by attempting to put the world in human terms, humans create a meaning and impose it upon the world through these constructions. In Camus's own words, his view of the absurdity of existence can be summarized as "the confrontation of this irrational [world] and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart."<sup>6</sup> The absurdity of existence is not just that the world lacks meaning, but that humans inherently and insatiably seek a meaning even though there is none to be found. It is important to highlight Camus's three-part structure here as human, world, and absurd. The absurd is first and foremost an *encounter*, arising out of the interaction between humans and the world. Without either the human or the world, the absurd cannot be, for it depends upon both human and world; indeed, the absurd is simply the contradiction between these two elements.

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2. Ibid., 17.  
3. Ibid.  
4. Ibid., 20.  
5. Ibid., 19.  
6. Ibid., 21.

For Camus there are three possible responses to the absurd, each of which is based on this character of the absurd as a "comparison."<sup>7</sup> The first response is the question with which Camus begins "The Myth of Sisyphus," that is, the question of suicide. To commit suicide is, of course, to remove the human element from the absurd. The second response is what Camus calls "philosophical suicide," and it involves a removal of the mind's demand for clarity. For Camus, philosophical suicide is generally committed by "those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning, and betray it."<sup>8</sup> To live for some ideal that goes beyond this world is to claim there is a meaning that surpasses our capacity to comprehend. Yet, to seek meaning beyond the world is to allow the world to become meaningful in a way that transcends and therefore betrays human reason, in a movement by which human reason is humiliated, even sacrificed. Both suicide and philosophical suicide, then, are inappropriate responses to the absurd because neither of them really addresses the question of the absurd directly; in effect, these two responses dissolve rather than resolve the problem of the absurdity of human existence. Each of them merely drops a variable from the equation of the absurd and therefore fails to really answer the question. In Camus's own words, "If I attempt to solve a problem, at least I must not by that very solution conjure away one of the terms of the problem."<sup>9</sup> Each of these first two responses is just a conjuring away of one of the terms and is therefore not a proper solution to the problem.

Camus's distaste for philosophical suicide arises out of his hesitance to entirely abandon human reason in favor of something supposedly transcendent to humans. For Camus, philosophical suicide requires that "the intelligence must sacrifice its pride and the reason bow down,"<sup>10</sup> demanding instead the acceptance of something unintelligible and unreasonable. Although it is true that human reason cannot understand the world (that is the problem of the absurd, after all), Camus still maintains that "if [he] recognize[s] the limits of the reason, [he does] not therefore negate it."<sup>11</sup> Instead, Camus declares, "I merely want to remain in this middle path where the intelligence can remain clear."<sup>12</sup> Thus, Humans must strike a balance between demanding complete comprehensibility

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7. Ibid., 30.  
8. Ibid., 8.  
9. Ibid., 31.  
10. Ibid., 40.  
11. Ibid.  
12. Ibid.

from the world and the total abandonment of human reason, treading this middle path on which both the capabilities and limitations of reason are respected.

A consideration of the proper response to the absurd for Camus involves three elements: conscious revolt, absurd freedom, and lucid passion. Conscious revolt is “the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.”<sup>13</sup> It is a life lived fully and without submission, despite the knowledge that there is no transcendent meaning beyond this life, no afterlife in which to place one’s hope. To consciously revolt is to live in spite of life’s lack of inherent meaning, for the sake of life itself. Absurd freedom derives from the realization that, in living as if life had meaning, one actually restricts their freedom: “To the extent to which he imagined a purpose to his life, he imagined himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became the slave of his liberty.”<sup>14</sup> Our freedom actually comes to be restricted because of the belief in an extant meaning and our attempts to conform to that meaning. However, when one realizes that there is no purpose driving life, one is able to escape the need to conform to this purpose. “Henceforth this is the reason for my inner freedom.”<sup>15</sup> Finally, lucid passion is an awareness of one’s life experiences. Camus writes, “Being aware of one’s life, one’s revolt, one’s freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum.”<sup>16</sup> If we are to live in a state of lucid passion, we must have an extreme attentiveness to our living, our refusal of a world of meaning, and our freedom from the restrictions of a purpose-driven future. Only then can life be lived to the fullest. These three elements—conscious revolt, absurd freedom, and lucid passion—are each essential to the proper response to the absurdity of existence for Camus.

It may helpful to at this point consider Camus’s commentary on the Greek myth from which his treatise takes its name, that of Sisyphus, to gain a better understanding of the proper response to the absurd. After insulting the gods, Sisyphus was condemned to an eternity of futility in Hades: each day Sisyphus must push a large boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll back down to the bottom of the mountain at the end of the day. Sisyphus would then return to the bottom of the mountain and resume his labor the

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13. Ibid., 54.

14. Ibid., 58.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 63.

next day, and every day for the rest of eternity. For Camus, Sisyphus is the ideal absurd hero because of his radical embrace of his fate, however futile it is. “At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate.”<sup>17</sup> The decision to return to the bottom and continue his fruitless labor is an embrace of the absurd and an affirmation of life in spite of its futility: only in this recognition and subsequent embrace of the absurd is one free to truly live. The absurd hero must act in the model of Sisyphus: rather than reject the world or remove one’s self from the world, the absurd hero must embrace this life in all its absurdity. In this way the absurd hero has preserved both the worldly and humanly elements of the absurd, so that the problem of the absurd is truly addressed as it deserves to be.

Ultimately, Camus is concerned with striking an appropriate balance in the application of human reason. While recognizing that human reason is limited especially when it comes to understanding the world, Camus still holds to the importance of human reason and rejects the embrace of incomprehensibility that constitutes philosophical suicide. Although Thomas Merton will agree with Camus that human reason is indeed limited, he is less hesitant to accept incomprehensibility in a so-called leap of faith. But, unlike Camus, Merton argues that the world’s incomprehensibility does not merely comprise a limit to our reason; it also marks the opening to a deeper disclosure of the world.

## II. The Myth of Meaning

First, it is worth noting that Merton would not necessarily agree with Camus that the world lacks meaning altogether. Merton writes, “The rain surrounded the whole cabin with its enormous virginal myth, *a whole world of meaning* [italics mine], of secrecy, of silence, of rumor.”<sup>18</sup> From this passage, it seems as though Merton sees the world as having a meaning, and the following three qualifications of that meaning (secrecy, silence, and rumor) imply that this is a meaning that is somehow obscured or hidden from human beings. Earlier in the essay Merton admits, “The whole world runs by rhythms I have not yet learned to recognize,”<sup>19</sup> thereby making more explicit the idea that the world does indeed have a meaning, it is just a meaning humans do not yet, and perhaps never will,

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17. Ibid., 121.

18. Thomas Merton, “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York, NY: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1964), 9-10.

19. Ibid., 9.

understand. Although the world may be incomprehensible to humans, it may not lack meaning entirely

It is at this point that Camus might stop Merton and charge him with philosophical suicide, for it appears as though Merton has ceased the rational search for meaning in the world. This represents a removal of one of the terms of the problem of the absurd, and is therefore an improper response to the absurd. Furthermore, in suspending the rational quest for natural meaning in the world, Merton has suddenly imposed upon the world a “superhuman significance of life.”<sup>20</sup> In an inexplicable leap, Merton has deified the absurd, so that “that inability to understand becomes the existence that illuminates everything.”<sup>21</sup> According to Camus, this leap is not an appropriate way to deal with the absurdity of existence, so he would reject Merton’s appeal to “secrecy, silence, and rumor” as a movement of philosophical suicide. But Merton will not be so easily silenced, for he rejects the truth of one of Camus’s foundational premises: that man inherently seeks meaning.

Merton would, however, agree with Camus that humans, when faced with an apparent meaninglessness of the world, do indeed attempt to create and impose their own meaning upon the world. His agreement with Camus is revealed in his discussion of a tree growing among an apartment complex and how those living in the apartment complex “give it a precise reason for existing,”<sup>22</sup> or to use Camus’s lexicon, a meaning. “They put a sign on it saying it is for health, beauty, perspective; that it is for peace, for prosperity; that it was planted by the mayor’s daughter.”<sup>23</sup> The tree must have a meaning or a reason comprehensible to humans, and if one cannot be readily identified, it is assigned one.

However, in Merton’s eyes, the need for and subsequent imposition of meaning is not inherent to the human condition. Rather, it is the result of the modern, materialistic world in which humans today live. In the modern world, everything must have a reason for being, and this reason is oftentimes a price tag. Merton begins his essay marveling at the rain, for it is one of the few things the modern world has not turned into a “utility that [it] can plan and distribute for money.”<sup>24</sup> He finds that those living in

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20. Camus, 32.  
21. Ibid., 33.  
22. Merton, 11.  
23. Ibid.  
24. Ibid., 9.

the modern world “think that what has no price has no value, that what cannot be sold is not real, so that the only way to make something *actual is to place it on the market.*”<sup>25</sup> According to Merton, the modern world dictates that everything must have a commercial and marketable reason for being. He even goes so far as to say that the modern world does not even recognize the reality of a thing unless it has this marketable meaning. Therefore, the need to assign (monetary) meaning to everything, and thus world itself, comes not from of the human condition itself, but from a highly commercial society, a point that Merton further emphasizes while reflecting on his Coleman lantern.

Coleman, the company that made Merton’s lantern, has given a reason to both the light the lantern produces and Merton’s reason for being in the woods: as the company tagline goes, the lantern “stretches days to give more hours of fun.”<sup>26</sup> Where God simply says light is good for no reason other than its existence,<sup>27</sup> Coleman says light is good because it enables people to have more fun by prolonging the amount of light available. Coleman has also implicitly assigned a reason to Merton’s hermitage in the woods: “They are convinced *I am having fun.*”<sup>28</sup> But Merton resists this reason, this meaning for his being in the woods, saying, “Can’t I just be in the woods without any special reason? Just being in the woods, at night, in the cabin, is something too excellent to be justified or explained! It just *is.*”<sup>29</sup> Clearly, then, Merton does not see this need for meaning and reason in the world to be an inherent condition of human existence, but instead as a result of a modern world that assigns meaning, reason, and usefulness to everything. Everything must be marketable, and those things that are unmarketable or “useless” are deemed to be without value. But what is the danger here? Is it really so bad that humans seek to make sense of the world and assign meaning to it? Martin Heidegger’s reflections on technology and how it relates to nature in “The Question Concerning Technology” will provide some insight here.

Heidegger argues that the trouble with modern technology is that it “puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be

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25. Ibid.  
26. Ibid., 13.  
27. Genesis 1:4.  
28. Merton, 13.  
29. Ibid.

extracted and stored as such.”<sup>30</sup> That is to say, modern technology causes people to view nature as primarily a resource to be exploited rather than simply another element of the world. Heidegger explores this idea further by imagining a hydroelectric plant “set into the current of the Rhine.”<sup>31</sup> Heidegger argues that by placing a hydroelectric plant in the Rhine, humans have covered over the Rhine’s original existence as “a river in the landscape,”<sup>32</sup> viewing it instead as a source of electric power. This leads to a perceived subjugation of the river itself: “even the Rhine itself appears to be something at our command.”<sup>33</sup> This technology imposes on the Rhine a new meaning, for “the river is now ... a water-power supplier.”<sup>34</sup>

Considered in light of Heidegger’s Rhine, even Merton’s rain, which prompted his reflections in “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” is not entirely free of the utilization demanded by the modern world. Reservoirs are built to collect the rain as it falls, and irrigation techniques are employed so that the rain can in fact be planned and distributed. Just as the Rhine has a double meaning as both a natural river and a supplier of hydroelectric power, so too does the rain have this double meaning: it is indeed a free and gratuitous fall of water as Merton writes, but it can also be utilized as a resource to be managed and thereby assigned a reason or meaning. The pervasiveness of the modern need for purpose and utility cannot be ignored, then, especially since even that which Merton identifies as free from the modern world is not as free as he thinks.

The resonances of Heidegger’s reflections on modern technology clearly resonate with Merton’s “Rain and the Rhinoceros.” Heidegger notes that modern technology actually changes the way in which nature reveals itself to humans and quantifies the instrumentality of nature according to the needs of humans. Merton observes a similar phenomenon and fears that the modern world imposes meaning on the world and attempts to make it useful, at the expense of the reality of nature itself: instead of allowing the tree in the apartment complex to simply *be*, the modern world must give its presence a reason for being. The danger, then, is that in assigning decidedly human meaning to the world humans betray the very being of nature itself, and cause the world to reveal itself in ways that distort and

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30. Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 320.

31. *Ibid.*, 321.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

conceal its original being.<sup>35</sup> Here it may be helpful to invoke Heidegger’s notion of ‘letting-be’ to clarify Merton’s intention, for letting-be is the way by which humans participate in the self-disclosure of the world.<sup>36</sup>

Now the question must be asked: how does Merton escape the modern world and its need for meaning? How can he accept a meaninglessness trip to the woods, or a “world run by rhythms [he has] not yet learned to recognize”?<sup>37</sup> After all, Merton has argued that “[t]he collectivity informs and shapes your will to happiness ... by presenting you with irresistible images of yourself as you would like to be ... We are prisoners of a process, a dialectic of false promises and real deceptions ending in futility.”<sup>38</sup> The collectivity of the modern world (one cannot help but think of Heidegger’s the ‘they’ here) informs one as to who one should be, what one should want, and how one should relate to the world. Furthermore, Merton sees humans as being trapped by this collectivity, slaves to the modern world and its compulsive need to assign meaning to everything. To break free of the collectivity of the modern world is therefore a daunting task and even seems impossible. However, drawing on the thoughts of Philoxenos, a sixth-century Syrian writer, Merton finds that this can in fact be accomplished in solitude and isolation from the modern world. Through solitude, one can “see that the ‘emptiness’ and ‘uselessness’ which the collective mind fears and condemns are necessary conditions for the encounter with truth.”<sup>39</sup> Rather than viewing meaninglessness and “uselessness” negatively as the modern collectivity does, Merton is instead arguing that only in the face of this meaninglessness can one truly experience the world as it ought to be experienced. Unencumbered by the modern need for meaning, one is able to stop searching for meaning and instead enjoy the meaninglessness and uselessness of the world. Another way to put it is this: one is able to enjoy the world for what it is, rather than what it is *for*.

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35. This statement begs the question as to whether there is in fact an original meaning to the world, or whether it is entirely without meaning. Merton’s position is not altogether clear in “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” as there seems to be support for both alternatives. I suspect that Merton would suggest there might indeed be an original meaning to the world, perhaps best termed as a divine meaning, which is incomprehensible to human reason.

36. This notion of ‘letting-be’ can be found throughout Heidegger’s works; see, e.g., Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 128-30.

37. Merton, 9.

38. *Ibid.*, 17.

39. *Ibid.*, 18.



### III. Of Being Beyond Meaning

The importance of purging the modern need for utility and meaning bears on our being human as well because such a utility-driven worldview also has implications for the being of humans. The modern world has trained humans to impose meaning on the entire world, including the natural world, which is bad enough for Merton. But what is even worse is how this process of imposing meaning risks damaging the dignity of not just worldly being, but also human being. It was detailed earlier in this paper how the hydroelectric plant on the Rhine covered over its true being as a river, instead causing it to be seen as a source of hydroelectric power. Does the same danger not exist for humans? When humans come to be seen primarily as things with a capability for utility (such as a source of labor), their dignity as humans is neglected and forgotten. This application of the utility worldview risks compromising the uniqueness of the being of humans in the midst of the world.

Fortunately, Thomas Merton presents us with solitude as a way to avoid that danger. Only in solitude can we experience the world free from the preconceptions of the modern world, and in doing so, we can learn to become comfortable with a potential meaninglessness of the world (or at least a meaning that we cannot come to know). This call to reject the need for meaning is also an insightful response to the problem of absurdity as presented by Albert Camus. Merton suggests that the longing for meaning upon which Camus insists is not inherent to the human condition but is once again the result of a modern world obsessed with meaning and utility. Bearing this in mind as we interact with the world and with each other, along with spending time in solitude, can help us relieve ourselves of the need for utility and consequently remain true to the original being of the world and other humans in our interactions. In such solitude lies Merton's alternative solution to the problem of absurdity posed by Camus. For it is here, in the secret silence of solitude, that one can encounter being beyond the modern imposition of meaning.

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# Simple Souls and Wise Men in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: Religious Equality and the Need for Humility

Thomas Churchill

**Abstract:** Before *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* was released, its working title was *Concluding Simple-Minded (eenfoldig) Postscript*. How could the *Postscript*, commonly considered Kierkegaard's most philosophically-laden work, possibly be *simple-minded*? This paper relies on passages in the *Postscript* that discuss the "simple soul" and the "wise man" to trace the author's argument that becoming a Christian is equally difficult for both, regardless of how much one understands. The simple soul and the wise man are both faced with a task of extreme difficulty – believing in the absurd. Since belief in Christianity is essentially belief in a paradox, the wise man's understanding of Christianity is merely the understanding *that it is* a paradox, and is thus no advantage over the man who understands little in the task of becoming a Christian.

## 1. Introduction

Up until the preparation of the final copy of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Søren Kierkegaard's working title for the book was *Concluding Simple-Minded (eenfoldig) Postscript*.<sup>1</sup> Despite the change, the emphasis placed on *simplicity* in the earlier title raises an important question: in what sense is the *Postscript* "simple-minded"? Embedded in the text is a recurring discussion of two different kinds of person. Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author, calls one kind of person "simple-minded" or "the simple soul," and the other he calls "the wise man" (somewhat ironically when referencing the "speculative philosopher"). A key distinction between the two springs from their contrasting opinions, abilities, and dispositions regarding the role of *understanding* in the task of becoming a Christian. Climacus uses them as characters to guide him through questions concerning the understanding, such as: To what extent is it important or necessary? What are its proper objects? How is it related to the paradox and to faith? And most importantly, does understanding play an important role in Christianity at all?

Climacus' juxtapositions of the simple and wise throughout the book, and subsequently his answers to the questions that they raise, all point to the

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1. Johannes Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, ed., trans. and introduction by Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xix.

same conclusion: equality. Becoming a Christian is equally difficult for *everyone*; understanding conveys no kind of assistance whatsoever, and might in fact make it more difficult. Jørgen Bukdahl writes that the "common [simple] man" is portrayed in the *Postscript* in two ways: "both as the equal of the cultivated with respect to what was of essential importance and as the person who had not been corrupted, as had the cultivated, because his capacity for action had not been sapped by reflection" (Bukdahl 80). In this paper I will trace Climacus' notion of religious equality (between the simple and the wise) back to his claims about what it means to be a human being, the nature of the truth of Christianity (the paradox), and consequently why faith (becoming a Christian) has nothing to do with understanding. Then I will argue that Climacus outlines a new way to appreciate the role of the understanding, illustrated in the "simple wise man," which calls for an extreme form of humility. This is how Climacus reconciles the pursuit of understanding with a properly Christian approach to faith.

## 2. The Simple and Wise

First I want to briefly sketch what Climacus means by the terms "simple" and "wise." Bukdahl claims that "'simplicity' is not to be understood in the intellectual-psychological sense, but evangelically, concerning the pure of heart who shall see God through sin, doubt, and repentance" (Bukdahl 30). This notion of simplicity is where we will end up; but the "simple-minded" must first be identified by their *disposition* toward intellectual pursuits. Simplicity does not refer as much to the simple man's capacity for deeper understanding as much as the level of importance they place on the activity. Climacus identifies the simple-minded as those "who, sensing the burdens of life in another way, God wishes to preserve in their lovable simplicity, which feels no further need of another kind of understanding."<sup>2</sup> The simple man either does not possess intellectual talent or *chooses* to live life simply, leaving deeper inquiry to those whom Climacus terms "wise."

Climacus uses the term "wise" in both the standard sense, to refer to those "who think they have the talent and opportunity for a deeper inquiry," as well as an ironic sense, referring to those who have become objective and dispassionate, uninterested in "simple" questions that arise within daily existence.<sup>3</sup> The latter use of the term applies to a type of individual also

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2. Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 143n.

3. Ibid.

known by Climacus as the “speculative philosopher,” one who concerns himself with objective facts and has little interest in “appropriation,” or how the individual enters into relationship with such facts.<sup>4</sup> This brings us to an absolutely crucial difference between the simple man and the wise man/speculative philosopher: according to Jacob Howland, “In his objectivity, the speculative thinker seems to have forgotten what it means to be a human being.”<sup>5</sup> Forgetting this means forgetting one’s own existence in time, and consequently one’s inherent epistemic constraints. These epistemic constraints are the beginning of Climacus’ argument that becoming a Christian is equally difficult for all.

### 3. Existence and the Paradox

Climacus calls the human being “a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal.”<sup>6</sup> Remembering that one exists temporally is absolutely necessary when searching for the pure, eternal truth of Christianity (and its promise of eternal happiness). I will explain the reason for this by examining the contradiction in which the speculative philosopher finds himself. The speculative philosopher, in devoting himself exclusively to objective, abstract thinking, forgets that he, an existing individual, is the one doing the thinking. According to Howland, the speculator is “an outsider to his humanity,” who talks about speculative thought “as if it existed independently of a human thinker.”<sup>7</sup> Climacus describes the fallacy of the speculative philosopher with this vivid metaphor:

If a dancer were able to jump very high we would admire him. But if he could jump even higher than any dancer before him, were he to give the impression of being able to fly, let laughter alone catch up with him. To jump is basically to belong to the earth and to respect the law of gravity; so that the leap is only momentary. But to fly means to be freed from telluric conditions, a privilege only reserved for winged creatures, maybe also for inhabitants of the moon, maybe – and that may be where the system finds at last its true readers.<sup>8</sup>

The metaphor is meant to show that even if the speculative philosopher forgets what it means to be a human being, he does not cease to be one. The loss of the speculative philosopher’s subjectivity simply creates an illusion of transcending the constraints placed on human beings in virtue

of their existence in time: “Since the human being is a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, the happiness to be had by the speculator will be an illusion, since he desires *in time* to be merely *eternal*. Herein lies the speculators untruth.”<sup>9</sup> The illusion attempts to ignore the inherently paradoxical nature of relating an eternal truth to one’s temporal existence.

Therefore taking into account the fact of one’s existence is absolutely essential if one is to apprehend the truth of Christianity, or any eternal truth for that matter. The simple man does not risk losing his subjectivity because he lives not in abstraction, but in immediacy. He continuously affirms his own existence by remaining an individual immediately concerned with his personal life. Climacus introduces the proper way of reflecting on the truth in the form of “subjective thinking” or a process he calls “double-reflection.”<sup>10</sup> Climacus writes:

While objective thought is indifferent to the thinking subject and his existence, the subjective thinker is, as existing, essentially interested in his own thinking, is existing in it. Therefore, his thinking has a different kind of reflection, namely the reflection of inwardness, of possession, by virtue of which it belongs to the subject and to no other.<sup>11</sup>

This process involves apprehending the eternal truth and applying it to one’s temporal existence. Howland summarizes Climacus’ point: “there is the truth, and then there is the question of how each existing human being understands or inwardly appropriates the truth.”<sup>12</sup> Because our only access to the truth is through subjective appropriation, the highest possible truth for one who exists must be in one’s relationship with the truth, i.e. in the appropriation itself.

For this reason Climacus writes, “[I]t is not the truth that is the truth but . . . the way is the truth . . . the truth is only in the becoming, in the process of appropriation . . . hence there is *no result*.”<sup>13</sup> When the truth is located not in the objective truth itself, but in the subjective appropriation of that truth, *all* positive results become uncertain. *This* is the paradox of existence that the speculative philosopher/wise man seeks to avoid with an illusion. Since the highest truth for the existing individual is a perpetual *striving* for the truth, he will never be able to know it with absolute certainty. Nonetheless,

4. Ibid., 20.

5. Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study of Philosophy and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 190.

6. Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 49.

7. Howland, 190.

8. Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 105-106.

9. Ibid., 49 (emphases added).

10. Ibid., 62.

11. Ibid.

12. Howland, 194.

13. Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 66 (emphases added).

this is the task with which the existing individual is charged: to apply this objectively uncertain truth to the “concrete particulars of his life.”<sup>14</sup> To appropriate the eternal truth with certainty would require a standpoint free from the epistemic constraints of existence – one which is only for God.

Now an important difference between the simple and wise/speculative is clear: the former is continuously aware of his subjective, temporal existence, while the latter is apt to forget this fact, failing to recognize both the objective uncertainty of the truth and the importance of striving to apprehend it. What is more important than their point of difference, however, is what they have in common. While the speculative philosopher forgets the condition that he and the simple man are in, the condition itself remains – they are *existential equals*. All men, both simple and wise, exist temporally, charged with the paradoxical task of appropriating the eternal truth of Christianity despite its objective uncertainty. This is the task of becoming a Christian. It is now established that all men are on an equal footing with regard to the starting point; now we must consider the *nature* of the truth of Christianity as well as faith in order to see why understanding cannot lend any sort of aid in becoming a Christian.

#### 4. Christianity and the Absurdity of Faith

Climacus uses the figure of Socrates throughout the *Postscript* as an example of what the appropriation of a paradox might look like in a philosophical setting. Socrates is the perfect example of what Climacus calls the “subjectively existing thinker,” one who knows what it means to exist and who integrates the fact of existence into his thinking. Instead of the eternal truth of Christianity, Socrates continually strives to apprehend eternal philosophical truth; even so, he faces the same paradoxical relationship between the existing individual and the eternal truth. Howland writes, “As Climacus puts this point, the truth is objectively uncertain, yet the individual must nonetheless subjectively appropriate this objectively uncertain truth.”<sup>15</sup> Climacus uses Socrates’ belief in the immortality of the soul as an example of the appropriate response to paradox:

But Socrates! He submits the question in what is objectively a problematic way: *if* there is an immortality. Does that mean that compared with one of the modern thinkers with three proofs he was a doubter? Not at all, he invests his entire life in this ‘if there is’. He dares to die, and with the passion of the infinite he has so ordered his entire life as to make it likely that it must be

14. Howland, 196.

15. *Ibid.*, 199-200.

so – *if* there is an immortality.<sup>16</sup>

The fact of objective uncertainty makes any belief of this sort impossible to justify according to reason; one’s conviction must instead be based on *passion*. This is how one can relate an eternal truth to his particular existence. Socrates did not *know* that the soul was immortal, but he did “prove that at least one human soul can in fact live up to the infinite and the eternal, can actualize them in its own existence and in this sense *live* immortally.”<sup>17</sup>

Passion is directly related to objective uncertainty in this way: the greater the objective uncertainty, the more passion is needed to maintain one’s grasp upon it. Climacus adds this to his definition of truth as “*the objective uncertainty maintained through appropriation in the most passionate inwardness . . . the highest truth there is for someone existing.*”<sup>18</sup> The passion that Socrates possessed in relation to the objective uncertainty of the soul’s immortality is the appropriate response to the paradox of appropriating philosophical truth, but what about the truth of Christianity? Both truths are paradoxical in relation to the existing individual and are thus appropriated through *passionate inwardness*, but their natures differ substantially. In the Socratic example, the truth is something that is “intelligible in principle, but not in practice.”<sup>19</sup> Only in appropriation does it become paradoxical. In Christianity, however, the truth is even more objectively uncertain to the point where *the truth itself* is unintelligible to reason; the truth of Christianity is “the absurd”:

So what is the absurd? The absurd is that the eternal truth has come about in time, that God has come about, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come about just as the single human being, indistinguishable from any other, since all immediate recognizability is pre-Socratic paganism and from the Jewish point of view idolatry.<sup>20</sup>

We are reminded of the question of the *Crumbs* (“Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness?”<sup>21</sup>) as well as the words of the contemporary follower addressing one who comes later: “I believe and have believed that this happened, *although it is foolishness*

16. Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 169-170.

17. Howland, 202.

18. Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 171.

19. Howland, 199.

20. Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 177.

21. Johannes Climacus, *Philosophical Fragments*; Johannes Climacus, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 1.

to the understanding and an offense to the human heart.”<sup>22</sup> The absurdity comes from the total incomprehensibility (to a human being) of the incarnation, the bridging of the absolute difference that exists between God and man.<sup>23</sup> The appropriation of not an objective uncertainty but an objective absurdity is met with a corresponding increase in passion, in fact an *infinite* increase in passion that results in what we call *faith*: “Socratic inwardness in existing is an analogue of faith, except that the inwardness of faith, corresponding as it does to the resistance not of ignorance but of the absurd, is infinitely more profound.”<sup>24</sup>

So this is what is required to become a Christian: the appropriation of an objective absurdity through the passionate inwardness called *faith*. Now the stage is set for us to address the question of whether *understanding* has anything to do with faith, and accordingly whether it has anything to do with becoming a Christian. The answer to this question is an emphatic “no,” as I will explain in the next section. We are getting closer to understanding the sense in which the task is equally difficult for both the simple man and the wise man.

Once we recognize that the truth of Christianity is an objective absurdity, the reason why the understanding cannot help one become a Christian is clear: “the absurd is equally so for everyone, the wise as well as the simple.”<sup>25</sup> What is absurd is simply beyond reason, apprehensible not by any act of the intellect but by the passionate inwardness of faith alone. Moreover, Climacus argues that trying to understand the absurdity of the paradox in fact obliterates the very possibility of faith. The speculative philosopher uses the understanding to try to *explain* the paradox, which is the equivalent of trying to prove that it was never a paradox in the first place.<sup>26</sup> By making the paradox an object of the understanding, the “Herr Professor” eliminates the need for a passionate appropriation and enters into the realm of objective results and probability. Climacus gives a wonderful example of the mutual exclusivity of faith and probability:

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22. Ibid., 102.

23. Ibid., 46-47: “Just to come to know that the god is the different, man needs the god and then comes to know that the god is absolutely different from him . . . What then, is the difference? Indeed, what else but sin, since the difference, the absolute difference, must have been caused by the individual himself.”

24. Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 173.

25. Jørgen Bukdahl, *Søren Kierkegaard and the Common Man*, ed. Bruce H. Kirrmse (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001), 79.

26. Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 185.

So, we have a man who wants to have faith; so let the comedy begin. He wants faith but also a safeguard by way of objective deliberation and approximating. What happens? With the assistance of approximating, the absurd becomes something else; it becomes probable; it becomes more probable; perhaps it becomes extremely and exceedingly probable. He is now all set to believe it, and he will go so far as to say of himself that his belief is not like that of cobblers and tailors and of simple folk but only after long deliberation. Now he is all set to believe it, but then what! It is just that now it is impossible to believe. The all-but-probable, the probable, the extremely and exceedingly probable, this is something he can all but know, or as good as know, or know extremely and exceedingly, but to *have faith* in it, that he cannot do, for it is the absurd that is the object of faith and the only thing that permits of faith.<sup>27</sup>

Climacus’ claim is that it is impossible to obtain a *safeguard* for one’s individual investment in faith. To demand a degree of probability that the truth of Christianity is *correct* before one believes is to reduce the truth of Christianity to the objective truth, and further, to declare that it is not an absurdity. The prospective believer loses himself in speculation and becomes an outsider to his own relationship with the truth, avoiding the risk that is essential to faith as well as the very difficulty of becoming a Christian. But this is only an illusion; risk is a necessary part of faith which is essential if one is to become a Christian: “Without risk, no faith.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the absurdity of the truth of Christianity must be continuously reaffirmed if one is to retain faith:

So little precious, therefore, is the probable to the believer that he fears it most of all, since with it he knows very well that he is beginning to lose his faith. Faith, you see, has two tasks: first to look out for and at every instant discover the improbability, the paradox, so as *then* to keep hold of it with the passion of inwardness.<sup>29</sup>

We can now recognize why faith and understanding (in the speculative sense) are diametrically opposed: there is no possibility for faith when certainty is even a remote prospect. Understanding what is absurd is a contradiction, and the exact opposite of faith.

If understanding is of no assistance in the task of becoming a Christian, then becoming a Christian is no more difficult for the simple man than it

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27. Ibid., 177.

28. Ibid., 171.

29. Ibid., 189.

is for the wise man. Faith is a spontaneous act of the will that has nothing to do with one's intellectual capacities, but has everything to do with the strength and sincerity of one's passion. This is what grounds Climacus' notion of religious equality: faith is equally difficult for all, regardless of how much one understands.

### 5. Religious Equality & the Simple Wise Man

We have now seen how Climacus uses the human condition (temporal existence) and the nature of the paradox of Christianity to support his argument that understanding is irrelevant to becoming a Christian. This argument terminates in a radical notion of religious equality based on the *equal difficulty* of the task. Climacus clearly summarizes the goal of establishing religious equality in the *Postscript* when he writes:

My purpose is to make it difficult to become a Christian, yet not more difficult than it is, nor make it difficult for the stupid and easy for the quick, but difficult qualitatively and essentially equally difficult for every human being to *give up his understanding and his thinking* and keep his soul fixed on the absurd, and proportionally most difficult for someone with much understanding, bearing in mind, however, that not losing one's understanding over Christianity does not prove that one has it.<sup>30</sup>

We have established that the simple man is no worse off for his lack of understanding, but this passage goes further to indicate that much understanding may in fact increase the difficulty of the task at hand. Having faith involves suppressing the temptation to try to understand, which is comparatively more difficult for the wise man. While possessing a great talent for understanding does not bar the wise man from becoming a Christian, he must be careful to avoid losing himself in speculation by keeping in mind "that life's blessing does not consist in being the one who knows."<sup>31</sup> To do this requires a self-control and humility that might appear strange and unfamiliar to the wise man. Climacus supports this claim with an example:

Understanding that a human being can do nothing of himself (the beautiful and profound expression for the God-relationship) is as difficult for a remarkably gifted king as for a poor miserable wretch, perhaps even more difficult for the king because [he is] so easily tempted by being capable of so much. So too in connection with becoming and being a Christian . . . the more

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30. Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 466-467 (emphases added).

31. *Ibid.*, 143n.

culture and knowledge, the greater difficulty in becoming a Christian.<sup>32</sup>

Being capable of speculating away the paradox tempts the wise man to deceive himself.

I have claimed that the goal of the *Postscript* is to show that becoming a Christian is equally difficult for all, but now I want to emphasize a point that Climacus makes concerning whom he is writing for:

Although it is said often, I wish to repeat here again: what is developed in these pages is of absolutely no concern to those of simpler minds . . . On the other hand, it does concern those who think they have the talent and opportunity for a deeper inquiry. And it concerns them in such a way to stop them thoughtlessly turning their hands to world history before first bearing in mind that being an existing human being is such a strenuous and yet so natural a task for everyone, that one naturally first chooses it and most likely finds in it enough for a lifetime.<sup>33</sup>

Climacus' point in showing the wise man how truly difficult it is for him to become a Christian is to assuage the temptation he feels in virtue of his intellectual gifts. What distinguishes *true* "intellectual giftedness" according to Climacus is "the ability to present ever more clearly that it [the paradox] is and remains a secret for those who exist."<sup>34</sup> That is, intellectual giftedness is nothing more than being able to show that the paradox is undeniably a paradox. This is Climacus' attempt to redirect the wise man's abilities and "love of wisdom" toward a philosophical undertaking that is compatible with faith. It is to this new understanding of the role of understanding that I now turn, focusing on the example of the "simple wise man."

Although Climacus has completely undermined the understanding's role in becoming a Christian, by no means does he condemn it as a dishonest or corrupt activity in itself. Instead Climacus redefines the role of the understanding in a way that combines the humble faith of the simple man with the thoughtful curiosity of the wise man. What results is the "simple wise man," one who enjoys the intellectual challenge of deeper inquiry while simultaneously recognizing its futility, or its inability to understand what is inexplicable. Climacus explains that the difference between the simple man and the wise man is trivial:

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32. *Ibid.*, 321-322.

33. *Ibid.*, 143n.

34. Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 180.

But I feel this need to know what I am doing, the need which, at the height of its triumph, is rewarded with that absurd little difference between the simple soul's and the wise man's knowledge of the simple thing, namely, that the simple-minded person knows it and the wise man knows that he knows it or knows that he does not know it.<sup>35</sup>

What the simple man and the wise man *know* is essentially the same: the simple man believes the paradox and the wise man “knows additionally that it must be a paradox, this paradox that he himself believes ... the wise man does not know anything else about the paradox but is aware of knowing this about the paradox.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore the *simple* wise man will concern himself with understanding the paradox *as a paradox* while the *speculative* wise man will attempt to understand the paradox *as something else*.

The pursuits of the simple wise man present a strikingly humble way of philosophizing. In all his efforts to understand he does not render Christianity any more comprehensible – it always remains an absurdity. Climacus describes what a simple wise man might say regarding the futility of his enterprise:

... I have had the opportunity to give much time to research and reflection, yet the *summa summarum* of it all comes at most to grasping that it cannot be otherwise, that it must be impossible to understand ... My advantage, when looked at as the fruit of study, is something both to laugh and weep over. You must never scorn this study, just as I myself do not regret it, since on the contrary, it pleases me the most when I smile at it and just then return with enthusiasm to the exertions of thought once again.<sup>37</sup>

The simple wise man is here depicted in the same way as Howland describes the Socratic philosopher, an enthusiastic Sisyphus “who must push his rock down the hill as well as up ... So great is the philosopher's passion for existence, however, that he confronts this endless labor with undaunted enthusiasm.”<sup>38</sup> The simple wise man is equipped with the talents for understanding, but the thing he is perpetually striving to understand is a paradox. Climacus lists numerous other topics besides the truth of Christianity that are enough to occupy the mind of the wise man for a lifetime, to keep him focused on questions of immediate relevance to his

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35. Ibid., 151.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., 191.

38. Howland, 198.

individual existence.<sup>39</sup> The *Postscript* satisfies the intellectual cravings of the wise man without giving him over to the boastful pride of speculative philosophy.

Recognizing the futility of this kind of understanding also allows the simple wise man to understand the inherent equality between him and the simple man: “[T]o grasp the equality just when most strongly conscious of one's difference, that is the simple wise man's noble piety.”<sup>40</sup> With the simple wise man, Climacus outlines a new kind of Christian thinker: intellectually ambitious and simultaneously aware “that a human being can do nothing of himself.”<sup>41</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

I began this paper by referencing the working title, *Concluding “Simple-Minded” Postscript*, asking in what sense the *Postscript* was “simple-minded.” Now it is clear that Climacus considers himself one of the simple wise men that he describes, representing a union of the two kinds of person we have considered, the simple and the wise. Grounding his discourse in the facts of human existence and the nature of the paradox, Climacus sets out to establish the claim that becoming a Christian is equally difficult for all, regardless of how much one understands. He then outlines a new way of thinking about the role of the understanding that allows one to remain faithful to the absurdity of the paradox while exercising one's talents for deeper inquiry.

Climacus sums up the misconception that he seeks to dispel in contemporary Christianity, that understanding is relevant to becoming a Christian, when he writes:

The misunderstanding is due all the time to the false notion that the incomprehensibility of the paradox must be related to the difference between more or less understanding, to the comparison between good and bad minds. The paradox *is essentially connected to being a human being*, and qualitatively with each separately, whether he has much or little understanding.<sup>42</sup>

Climacus seeks to affirm the inborn equality of all human beings in the pursuit of faith and to give rise to a new form of intellectual humility, bridging the gap between the simple and the wise.

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39. See Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 138-151.

40. Ibid., 191.

41. Ibid., 321.

42. Ibid., 474.

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