

Kierkegaard and the Funny

By

Eric Linus Kaplan

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Philosophy

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Alva Noë, co-chair
Professor Hubert Dreyfus, co-chair
Professor Sean D. Kelly
Professor Deniz Göktürk

Summer 2017

Abstract

Kierkegaard and the Funny

by

Eric Linus Kaplan

Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Alva Noë, co-chair
Professor Hubert Dreyfus, co-chair

This dissertation begins by addressing a puzzle that arises in academic analytic interpretations of Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The puzzle arises when commentators try to paraphrase the book's philosophical thesis "truth is subjectivity." I resolve this puzzle by arguing that the motto "truth is subjectivity" is like a joke, and resists and invites paraphrase just as a joke does.

The connection between joking and Kierkegaard's philosophical practice is then deepened by giving a philosophical reconstruction of Kierkegaard's definition of joking as a way of responding to contradiction that is painless precisely because it sees the way out in mind. Kierkegaard's account of joking and his account of his own philosophical project are used to mutually illuminate each other. The dissertation develops a phenomenology of retroactive temporality that explains how joking and subjective thinking work. I put forward an argument for why "existential humorism" is a valuable approach to life for Kierkegaard, but why it ultimately fails, and explain the relationship between comedy as a way of life and faith as a way of life, particularly as they both relate to risk.

In the final chapter three peculiar features of Kierkegaard's writing practice are addressed: his use of indirect communication, pseudonyms, and revocation. I explain the function of these methods to his philosophical project as I have described it in the previous chapters and conclude with a close reading of the graveyard scene in the *Postscript* and an analysis of how it serves to implicate the reader in existential thinking. Finally, I offer some reflections about the implications of Kierkegaard's account of humor and subjective thinking for human self-understanding. I argue that an implication of Kierkegaard's account is that philosophy is a risky, vulnerable, interpersonal activity, just as joking is.

Introduction

Does Kierkegaard advance a philosophical thesis? Does he have something to say that means anything? Or, by standards of analytic philosophy, is his thinking a joke? In this study I will look at the question of Kierkegaard's philosophical practice and his theory of humor and use them to illuminate each other. My conclusion is that Kierkegaard's philosophy advances a thesis in the same way that a joke advances a thesis. A joke has a point – we can miss the point of a joke for example, or we can get the point of a joke but reject it because we believe, for example, that it is a racist joke. However, if we substitute the paraphrase of a joke's point for the joke itself, we lose something critical. Our paraphrase will stop being funny.

An understanding of the comic strikes close to the heart of Kierkegaard's concerns for several related reasons.

Firstly, Kierkegaard makes bold, provocative statements about the importance of comedy in doing philosophy. For Kierkegaard, if one lacks an understanding of the comic, one has no right to make claims about philosophy. More generally, a sense of the comic ranks high among Kierkegaard's "spheres of existence" -- indeed, being an existential humorist is the second highest way of life, second only to faith.

Secondly, Kierkegaard argues that faith -- also referred to as "Religiousness B" and "paradoxical religiousness" -- has an important and complex relationship with humor. In one respect, being an existential humorist is the closest a human being can get to faith without getting there -- a sort of Penultima Thule. While that alone would make Kierkegaard's views on humor relevant for an understanding of faith, the relationship between humor and faith turns out to be hard to untangle. In particular, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard describes the relationship between humor and faith in paradoxical terms. Although existential humorism is the closest one can get to faith without getting there, Kierkegaard thinks it is also the worst mistake one can make, and, still worse, that people often get the two ways of life confused -- a symptom, no doubt, of the hash the present age has made of its categories. On the other hand, Kierkegaard also seems to think that humor is the necessary "incognito" or "constantly vanishing element" of faith. A better understanding of Kierkegaard on faith, therefore, will require us to untangle it from humor.

Thirdly, Kierkegaard's view of what it is to be a self requires that one take the right kind of stand on certain unavoidable contradictions. His explicit theory of comedy is very similar -- the comic is a particular painless, successful response to contradiction. The right response to contradiction is thus constitutive of both making a joke and being a self, a suggestive similarity that will turn out to illuminate Kierkegaard's notion of selfhood in general.

Kierkegaard's views of comedy, joking, and the funny get to the heart of what it means to do philosophy, to have faith, and to be a self. Part of the challenge (and also the fun) of this study is that these three sorts of questions interlock in interesting ways. For example, the reason Kierkegaard often presents his arguments in the form of a joke is related to what he thinks it is to be a human being or a self. According to Kierkegaard, if we turned off our sense of humor and our ability to appreciate the ridiculous, we would

fail to understand what it is to be a human being. But, one might object, how does he know that this is the right view of human beings? How does he know that we are not just detached rational cognizers? In reply, Kierkegaard would say that if we were honest with ourselves, we would discover that the traditional picture of human beings as detached rational cognizers is simply ridiculous. Developing Pascal's aphorism that "To ridicule philosophy is truly to philosophize," Kierkegaard maintains that our sense of the comic should guide our understanding of what is essentially human.

The question of comedy, joking, and the funny is so far-reaching that it comes into play in every aspect of Kierkegaard's thought. The knight of faith lives "by virtue of the absurd," and -- despite its later career in existentialism -- the absurd is at its root a synonym for the funny (*Fear and Trembling* 43). In the late work published under his own name, Kierkegaard further discusses jest when defining the crucial category of the gospel: "You lily of the field, you bird of the air! How much we owe to you! Some of our best and most blessed hours. When the Gospel appointed you as prototype and schoolmaster, the Law was abrogated and jest was assigned its place in the kingdom of heaven" (*Judge for Yourself!* 186).

No less acute a Kierkegaard commentator than Wittgenstein saw that the characteristic note of Kierkegaard's writing was humor: "Kierkegaard's writings are teasing and this is of course their intention" (Schönbaumsfeld 27). Despite his reputation for solemnity, Kierkegaard seems to agree: "The religious address may therefore just as well be slightly teasing, just as existence is; for the teasing aspect lies precisely in us humans having our heads full of ideas and then existence comes along and decrees the everyday" (*Postscript* 405naa).

To accommodate my observation that the comic touches on Kierkegaard's writing in so many places and in so many ways, I want to start this study by looking at a narrow problem in Kierkegaard exegesis, and later allow it to widen. It concerns a battle between paraphrasers and non-paraphrasers on the question of the meaning of "truth is subjectivity."

The importance of this narrowly-focused issue and my reasons for examining it are based on my views that,

1) Kierkegaard is concerned with the dangers and missteps we encounter when trying to understand ourselves. Accordingly, the dangers of misunderstanding Kierkegaard's philosophy do not threaten only a small circle of Kierkegaard interpreters; he is interested in spelling out the dangers that arise when any human misunderstands herself on the most important issues, even when she thinks she is trying hard not to.

2) Insofar as they are both spoiled by explanation, Kierkegaard's philosophy and jokes in general are prone to the same sort of problem. It would be wrong to think either is pointless and wrong to think either could be paraphrased. This similarity in structure illuminates both what Kierkegaard has to say about human beings and why he says it the way he does.

3) Although I respect the thinkers who argue that Kierkegaard cannot be paraphrased, I think they ultimately lead us to mystification. Put crudely, even the most resolute defender of the view that Kierkegaard cannot be paraphrased could be faced with a

grant proposal due tomorrow that would require him to do so. Although his paraphrase might be misleading, it would be better than nothing -- though it would include over-simplified claims like “life is about taking an existential leap of faith,” it would at least not include far less instructive claims like “life is about making as much money as possible.” Paraphrasing Kierkegaard in this way will be a crude way to proceed, but I hope to show that one can paraphrase Kierkegaard’s philosophy while doing justice to the tension between a fear of elitist mystification and a corresponding fear of simplification.

Chapter One: A Puzzle in Kierkegaard Interpretation

1. Introduction: Two Ways of Reading "Truth is Subjectivity"

At first glance, Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* seems to target "objective thinking" and propose "subjective thinking" in its stead. In this way, Kierkegaard appeals to and utilizes certain traditional philosophical concepts like "belief," "truth," and "subjectivity" to illuminate a committed "existential" way of doing philosophy and living life. Objective thinking is an attempt to understand human life from a detached, disembodied, third-person perspective using general categories, while subjective thinking stresses the necessity of passionate, partial, perspectival, bodily, historically situated engagement in understanding what life is all about. Kierkegaard even summarizes his preference for subjective over objective thinking in a pithy slogan: "truth is subjectivity" (*Postscript* 226).

Upon reflection, however, we can see that the slogan "truth is subjectivity" raises a paradoxical question: is the slogan "truth is subjectivity" itself an example of objective or subjective truth? Kierkegaard's courting of this paradox is no accident -- it goes straight to the crucial issues at the heart of his philosophical project. When we paraphrase "truth is subjectivity," as I did above, we grant that there are public standards of meaning we can appeal to in order to understand it, and public procedures of evidence we can appeal to when we evaluate it. In other words, the contention "truth is subjectivity" is part of a general set of interconnected statements that endeavor to put forward some important facts about human beings: what the critical issues of human life are, what ways of thinking help us engage with these critical issues, and what ways of thinking collude with our tendencies to evade and obfuscate them. If that were the case, it would seem that the thesis "truth is subjectivity" is itself an example of an objective truth that helps us get a grip on what is important about our lives. And if *that's* the case, then the thesis that "truth is subjectivity" -- that the most important way to understand our lives is partial, passionate, and engaged -- is false. It would seem, therefore, that it cannot be the case that "truth is subjectivity" is an example of objective truth -- that is, the thesis "truth is subjectivity" must be an example of subjective thinking. But, to grab the dilemma's other horn, if "subjective thinking" is merely subjective, then it is unclear how we can discuss it, argue for it, or come to believe that it is true, for these activities are in the purview of the objective. Pushing this train of thought further, it is also unclear whether Kierkegaard is *asserting* that "truth is subjectivity," as opposed to just *confessing* that it seems that way to him personally. If the latter, it is unclear why a personal fact about how things seem to Kierkegaard, or how his passionate, partial, engaged perspective of the world impels him to talk, would be relevant to an investigation of our own lives.

This paradox is not a consequence of sloppiness on Kierkegaard's part. Rather, he is being deliberately, avowedly paradoxical:

Subjectivity, inwardness, accordingly, is truth. Is there now a more inward expression of this? Yes, indeed; when talk of 'subjectivity, inwardness, is truth' begins as follows: 'Subjectivity is untruth.' (*Postscript* 174)

Subjectivity is truth and subjectivity is untruth. This is a paradox. Kierkegaard does not want to resolve the paradox by drawing a distinction, however, in order to clarify that in some contexts, subjectivity is truth, and in other contexts, subjectivity is untruth. Instead, he speaks of *accentuating* the paradox. Just what it could mean to accentuate a paradox is something that is at the heart of his philosophical practice, and we will return to this question from different angles in the course of this study.

For the time being, though, it is worth noting what accentuating a paradox is not. It is not offering a resolution to a paradox. So for example, Russell's paradox – the list of all lists that do not contain themselves contains itself and also does not contain itself – is resolved by proposing to change our way of speaking and thinking to a more precise form that doesn't use the word "list" without clarifying exactly what sort of items a list can contain. Accentuating a paradox is not resolving it like that. However, it is not ignoring a paradox either, or sweeping it under the rug, as one might ignore the paradox of the conflict between free will and predestination by calling it a mystery. It is also not giving up on thinking about it. So it is for the time being enough to note that Kierkegaard believes there is a way of relating to paradox which is not resolving it, ignoring it, or giving up on it. As a first stab, we can say that it is something like acknowledging the tension we find ourselves in when we acknowledge that both sides of the paradox have their draw.

In this particular case, part of what is at stake for Kierkegaard is the tension between what the truth is in itself and what the truth is for the existing individual:

[T]he objective uncertainty maintained through appropriation in the most passionate inwardness is truth, the highest truth there is for someone existing...But the above definition of truth is another way of saying faith. (*Postscript* 171)

Kierkegaard is not denying that some statements are just true, such as "salt is salty" or "there are no bears in Africa." He is drawing attention to a class of truths with the quality that each individual has to care about their truth without ever being able to know if they are true or not. So in Bernard Williams' famous example, if Gauguin leaves his family to become an artist, Gauguin is living his life by the truth of the statement, "My art is more important than my family"; and if he decides to give up on art and take care of his family, he is living his life by the truth of the statement, "My family is more important than my art" (Williams 22). By the nature of the circumstances, Gauguin will never be certain which is true. He has to take a risk.

Without risk, no faith. Faith is just this, the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and objective uncertainty. (*Postscript* 171-172)

Taking the risk on the truth of one rather than the other without ignoring the fact that he does not know which is true is the only way to live an authentic life. The person of faith never forgets that he lacks objective certainty; there is no guarantee that the art is the right choice nor is there a guarantee that the family is the right choice. But he also does not let this lack of certainty keep him from committing his entire life to what he takes to be the truth. There is a correct way of grasping the paradoxical nature of this situation –

neither ignoring the uncertainty nor using the uncertainty as an excuse for dialing back one's commitment. This correct way of grasping both sides of the situation is easy to lose and requires constant care:

If I wish to stay in my faith, I must take constant care to keep hold of the objective uncertainty, to be 'on the 70,000 fathoms deep' but still have faith."
(*Postscript* 171-172)

On this view, what is true for Gauguin, or any individual, is what he is willing to bet his life on, and what is objectively true is whether or not the gamble in fact succeeds. Truth for the existing individual -- which is to say for each of us, me writing this and you reading this -- is what Kierkegaard calls an infinite commitment to something finite. The commitment is infinite because the person committing is not holding back -- he is wagering his entire life and everything he cares about by making his choice. The commitment is to something finite because the actual choice is something real and tangible which can succeed or fail -- Gauguin's children could die and his art could turn out to be derivative and terrible, for example. However, any attempt to avoid taking such a risk is a bad idea -- in Kierkegaard's view it is to fail to be a self. So for example, if Gauguin avoided the notion that he needed to decide whether to stake his life on his art or on his family and decided to poll his friends or see what the internet had to say on the topic of leaving families to become an artist -- he would be failing to be a self, and would be living in untruth.

In other words, although it might seem like there is a risk-free way of connecting to life, and that the label "truth" should be applied to it, this seemingly risk-free way of life is itself risky. By avoiding the risk, we avoid our lives. But this statement -- the most dangerous way to live our lives is to avoid danger -- is itself a paradox, just as "truth is subjectivity" is a paradox.

When we engage with these paradoxes and try to read and understand Kierkegaard, we are pulled in two different directions. One direction draws us to restate what Kierkegaard is after in objective terms, terms that would be believable to anyone willing to look at her own life honestly; the other direction draws us to resist the pull to paraphrase in objective terms, and so to proceed with a deep examination of our subjective lives without forcing anyone else to acknowledge the importance of doing so. These two impulses -- the impulse to paraphrase in objective terms (that is, terms which can be understood and evaluated, in principle, by anyone) and the impulse to avoid any paraphrase (in favor of engaging in the therapeutic cultivation of our own subjectivity and identity) -- are not simply a hazard for the lay reader of Kierkegaard.

I will argue in this chapter that two important academic interpreters of Kierkegaard's work, Hubert Dreyfus and James Conant, despite their subtle readings, acute insights, and extensive knowledge of Kierkegaard, are each drawn in one of these opposing directions. Dreyfus tends to emphasize the paraphrasable existential lessons of Kierkegaard's thought, while Conant prefers to emphasize Kierkegaard's resistance to such objective paraphrase. On Conant's view, the theses Kierkegaard (writing as Climacus) puts forward are not theses at all, but rather nonsense posing as theses. For example, Conant claims that "truth is subjectivity" is not actually a proposition about the nature of truth, but is simply nonsensical. Conant's view helps refine the question of

what Kierkegaard is actually saying by advancing a sharp, albeit implausible interpretation of Kierkegaard's strategy of expression.

In my view, neither interpreter is wrong. Rather, both scholars are wrestling with an essential aspect of Kierkegaard's project. According to Kierkegaard, it is a symptom of correctness that the presentation of his view provides grist to the mill for both Conant and Dreyfus.

If we understand why Kierkegaard's interpretation falls apart in these two opposing directions, we have a shot at bringing them together in a new interpretation of subjective thinking, one that clarifies its relation to Kierkegaard's repeated emphasis on the comic. Before examining Conant's position and contrasting it with Dreyfus', I will first outline its roots in two other philosophical interpreters of Kierkegaard: Henry Allison and Stanley Cavell.

2. Allison Argues that "Truth is Subjectivity" is Nonsense

In his 1967 essay "Christianity and Nonsense," Henry E. Allison draws a parallel between Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. As we touched on briefly, bringing Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein together in this way makes sense. Wittgenstein regarded Kierkegaard as both the deepest thinker of the nineteenth century and as a saint, so the idea that Wittgenstein modeled his own elusive mode of conveying his views on Kierkegaard's is plausible. Allison zeroes in on the famous, self-negating conclusion of the *Tractatus*:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them -- as steps -- to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) (Allison 432)

On Allison's view it is a mistake to believe that Kierkegaard has presented an "existential analysis which points to the Christian faith as the only solution to the 'human predicament'" (Allison 432). This sort of naive paraphrase misses the self-cancelling features of Kierkegaard's argument. A glib or earnest paraphrase ignores how what Johannes Climacus -- John of the Ladder -- offers us is a ladder which, like the ladder invoked by Wittgenstein at the end of the *Tractatus*, is used only to be thrown away.

Allison argues for this provocative thesis by noting that interpreters of Kierkegaard who are interested in paraphrase end up construing Kierkegaard simply as an irrationalist. For Allison, construing "truth is subjectivity" as a doctrine makes Kierkegaard no better than Kim Jong Il, Charles Manson, the killers of Socrates, or the Party in *1984*; all say truth is whatever they say it is, and if we have a problem with that, so much the worse for us. Since that sort of bullying irrationalism cannot be what Kierkegaard has in mind (because in that case he would have no interest for us), we must instead interpret the "doctrinal content" of the *Postscript* as an "ironical jest" and a "carefully constructed parody of the *Phenomenology of Mind*" (Allison 432). The purpose of this jest or parody is "not to convince the reader of a philosophical or religious truth, but to prevent him from theorizing, even in an 'existential' sense about Christianity, and instead to help him to come to grips, in the isolation of his own subjectivity, with the

question of what it means to become a Christian” (Allison 433). It is rather a “*reductio ad absurdum*” of the notion that Christianity can be understood rather than lived.

What precisely is the *reductio*? Allison argues that Climacus maintains,

1) One cannot specify the “what” of faith but only the “how.”

But also argues that,

2) Faith is a particular form of life, namely, paradoxical Christianity or Religiousness B.

According to Allison, (1) clearly is in some sort of performative contradiction with (2). Climacus first maintains that the content of faith cannot be specified and then goes on to specify it. He seems to be claiming both that there is no objective content to faith and that the objective content of faith is Christianity, the unique embodiment of paradox. How can he have it both ways?

Allison concludes that Kierkegaard can’t have it both ways and that he knows he can’t. When he puts forward the thesis that “truth is subjectivity,” he is not putting forward a thesis at all; rather, he is using irony to show his readers how nonsensical the thesis really is:

[The *Postscript*] contends that in the ethical and religious spheres “truth is subjectivity,” that subjectivity or passion stands in a direct correlation with objective uncertainty, and finally, that as an objective absurdity, Christianity is the objective correlate of the maximum degree of inwardness, and thus, can be regarded as the “true” or ultimate form of religiousness. We further saw that despite Climacus’ protestations to the contrary, this view led to a consistent misologism, which ends with the identification of Christianity and nonsense. (Allison 459)

Allison is surely correct to face head-on the deliberate offensiveness of Kierkegaard’s views on reason. As Climacus, Kierkegaard argues that his project is to put before our consideration a form of life -- Christianity -- that is the absolute crucifixion of the understanding. Christianity is a paradox; it is believed by virtue of the absurd; and it is exemplified by the knight of faith who sees the sword hanging over the head of the beloved and loves all the more passionately for that very reason. Allison’s approach has the admirable goal of not evading these statements and asking us to substitute for Kierkegaard’s disquieting insights more palatable ones.

Allison’s argument that it is not a philosophical position, and not the sort of thing that can be glossed by commentators in the standard way, is a step towards engaging with Kierkegaard’s thesis that “the objective accent falls on what is said, the subjective on how it is said” (*Postscript* 170). For Kierkegaard,

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. (*Postscript* 169)

Allison makes a forthright attempt to engage the fact that “truth is subjectivity” is a very strange thing to say. He faces up to it by saying that it is nonsense. However, this attempt to cut the Gordian knot leaves us with a number of problems. First of all, although Allison argues that Kierkegaard is offering not an argument but a parody of an argument, he actually summarizes the argument. This makes sense because if Kierkegaard were actually offering a nonsensical parody of philosophical thought – for example if he was doing something as cognitively empty as mocking the voices and posture of philosophers – it would have no force. In reply, the objective thinkers would be correct to say, “We may talk and walk in a ridiculous way, and our lives may be fair game to your mockery, but your parody does not touch our arguments.” So Allison claims that Kierkegaard’s argument lacks sense even as he gives it sense. So for example, Allison argues that Kierkegaard employs a *reductio* of the form, “If reason is objective then consequence Q follows, but consequence Q is absurd, so reason is not objective”; in doing so, he seems to be not simply mocking or parodying reason but also employing it – specifically a *modus tollens* argument.

Just how parody and joking are supposed to lead us to realize anything, and how exactly we are supposed to distinguish between argument and parody, also remains unclear:

Thus, unless we are to view Kierkegaard as guilty of the very stupidity which he went to such great lengths to condemn, we must view the whole "argument" as a jest, as an expression of the author's artistry, the intent of which is not to "prove" the superiority of Christianity or even to show us in a theoretical way that the absolute paradox makes a kind of sense as *supra rationem* which is lacking in garden variety nonsense, but rather to help us realize existentially what it means to become a Christian. (Allison 459)

It is fair to say that Kierkegaard’s text is not a proof, but neither are many works of argument. In fact I will argue that Allison is correct that Kierkegaard’s text is a sort of “jest” and is an expression of Kierkegaard’s “artistry,” but being artistry or a jest does not exclude it from also being a philosophical argument. In fact what Allison himself says, that it helps us to realize what it is to become a Christian, suggests that it is not only a jest and certainly not “garden variety nonsense.” If a text helps us to realize what it means to become an X it seems that such a text is actually not garden-variety nonsense. Nonsense does not actually help me understand what it means to become a pacifist, or a cowboy, or a vegetarian, or a Christian.

A second problem arises from the weight Allison places on the distinction between philosophical positions and non-philosophical positions. If Religiousness B has to do with how one approaches a proposition rather than with the content of the proposition, it would seem that Religiousness B is not actually a philosophical position. Then what is it? Allison’s argument that Kierkegaard’s positions – e.g., “truth is subjectivity” – are nonsense definitely explains why “how” is more important than “what.” However we relate to nonsense, it would seem we have to relate to it differently than we do to sense, and it is impossible to relate to the “what” of nonsense because there is none – it is senseless.

We have attempted to treat as a philosophical proposition ("truth is subjectivity") what by its very nature cannot be regarded as such without contradiction. Is it any wonder then that qua philosophical proposition it reduces itself to an absurdity? (Allison 453)

However this distinction between treating something as a philosophical position and not treating it as such is critically unclear. At what point does a position become philosophical? For example, is the position that "certain positions are philosophical and others are not philosophical" a philosophical position? This question is not nitpicking or paradox-mongering for the sake of being difficult, but a crucial one for evaluating Allison's depiction of Kierkegaard's project. Although Allison argues that Kierkegaard uses irony to avoid the self-refuting paradox of offering a philosophical position, Allison then proceeds to explain Kierkegaard's irony by paraphrasing it. When he does so he then needs to answer the question – is what he is doing offering a philosophical position or not?

Allison's argument faces a dilemma. Either he is able to convey Climacus' account of faith or he is not. If he is able to paraphrase it, then it would seem on his own account that he is misunderstanding it – that he is becoming one of the town criers of inwardness.

Allison claims, for example, that philosophical positions can be treated without being existentially involved, while existential positions throw us back upon ourselves: "The absurd consequences of this consistently misologic position can now be seen to provide the repellent factor, the elusiveness necessary to indirection, which the author has artistically devised in order to avoid achieving a 'result,' and to throw his readers back upon themselves" (Allison 459). In other words, Allison believes Kierkegaard has discovered something interesting about people and philosophy: there are two kinds of positions, existential positions and philosophical positions. The former throw us back on ourselves, the latter do not. By this point in his own argument, however, Allison has unpacked Kierkegaard's irony and is advancing the distinction between existential and philosophical positions directly. Putting aside for the moment whether or not this formulation is correct, it certainly seems to be a philosophical position in some rough, not very technical sense of a position about how certain deep features of human life hang together, and which is not evidently scientific, or social scientific but is still general enough to be of interest across a broad range of cases - for example, it is not simply a thesis about where Sir Walter Raleigh cut his hair, or the price of oats in Ming dynasty China. If that is Kierkegaard's position then it is evidently not true that his position is nonsense, nor is it true that he offers a parody of proof for it—rather he seems to have a clearly defined, easily statable position, which Allison has successfully paraphrased and argued for.

Allison tries to address this problem by arguing that Kierkegaard wants us to "see that the only valid concept which we can form about Christianity is that it defies conceptualization" (Allison 459). Again we can grant for the time being that this is correct – that Kierkegaard's thesis is as thin as "Christianity defies conceptualization." Assuming that this is true it is not true that Kierkegaard advances no position, because that thesis itself has conceptual content. Christianity differs from, say,

vegetarianism, in that it falls under the concept of “defying conceptualization.” Even that seems incorrect though, depending upon just how faith “defies conceptualization.” In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant argues that judgments of taste defy conceptualization -- that is to say, there is no rule of the form, “If x has the following features then x is beautiful,” or “If x has the following features then x is free jazz.” Citing the example of Sancho Panza’s kinsman -- who was able to taste something metallic and leathery in a cask of wine that turned out to have a key on a leather thong at the bottom -- Kant argues that we can make judgments of taste that are true or false, yet these judgments do not fall under concepts. Nevertheless, someone who makes a judgment of taste that defies conceptualization -- claiming, for example, that a particular work by Ornette Coleman is free jazz -- is not thereby an example of Kierkegaard’s knight of faith. Defying conceptualization may be a necessary condition of faith for Kierkegaard, but it cannot be sufficient.

With that critical objection in mind we can also question the actual substance of the position that Allison attributes to Kierkegaard, namely, that positions divide up as he argues into the philosophical -- which do not throw us back on ourselves -- and existential -- which do. After all, one can imagine a philosophical position such as anarchism, the serious evaluation of which throws us back upon ourselves, and an existential position -- the best thing in life is to fit into your family and do as you are told -- which does not. We can also question the neat mapping of existential and philosophical positions onto indirect and direct communication. Allison argues that while philosophical positions are conveyed by serious argument and can be paraphrased, existential positions are conveyed by parody. However, one can imagine getting someone to see a philosophical position through humor and also getting someone to embrace an existential position through a heartfelt appeal. Just what the difference is between philosophical and non-philosophical positions, and why humor is important to the distinction, remains unclear.

Allison appeals to the notion of indirect communication to explain how Kierkegaard can accomplish what he seeks to accomplish. He writes of indirect communication,

Its goal is not the coercion of the recipient to a point of view, but his emancipation so that he may come to understand it inwardly, and as Climacus tells us: "The inwardness of understanding consists in each individual coming to understand it for himself" ...Such a goal, however, precisely because it is formulated in recognition of the freedom of the other cannot be achieved directly. (Allison 458)

This eludes the question of why exactly what Kierkegaard wants to say cannot be communicated directly. Is there an “it” that by its nature cannot be communicated? How could we know it? And if there is, what makes it impossible to communicate directly or impossible to learn through the good graces of another? Suppose, for example, that I am a polite host who wishes his guests to go home. Since I am polite I do not just want them to go home, I want them to feel like the party is over and that it is time to go. If I just wanted them to go home I could say, “Get out all of you,” but since I want them to realize for themselves that the party is over, I will perhaps subtly indicate my sleepiness. I simply want each person at the party to come to understand for himself that

it is time to go. The message “this party is over,” however, is not Kierkegaard’s message. Other than his conviction that there is something about faith that resists objective paraphrase, Allison lacks the resources to distinguish between these two messages.

3. Cavell on Kierkegaardian Faith as a Wittgensteinian Form of Life

Another progenitor of Conant’s view of Kierkegaard is the philosopher Stanley Cavell. In his influential essay “Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy,” which concerns Kierkegaard’s reception in the world of post-war analytic American philosophy, Cavell traces parallels between Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein greatly admired Kierkegaard, and the claim that language means what it means insofar as it is embedded in a particular form of life helps us make sense of Kierkegaard’s related notion of “spheres of existence.” In both Wittgenstein’s “form of life” and Kierkegaard’s “sphere of existence,” a holistic context of practices explains what an individual’s language and actions mean. In Kierkegaard’s account, a total gestalt switch – what he calls a “leap” – is required to transform an individual from one sphere to another. In the context of the parallel between spheres of existence and forms of life, Cavell develops an account of indirect communication:

[Kierkegaard’s] principal methodological claim in the *Postscript* is that he is forced to use what he calls “indirect communication” – and his “forced to” means something close to “logically forced to,” as if he were to say that what he wishes to communicate cannot be communicated any other way. Direct communication would be appropriate for transmitting beliefs, or presenting scientific results, etc. It is inappropriate, indeed impossible, for something else. For what else? One understands the sort of thing Kierkegaard has in mind when he says, “This can be communicated in no other way.” (“Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy” 226)

Cavell considers two possible examples of what could be communicated indirectly. The first is the line from Wallace Stevens, “Death is the mother of beauty.” Cavell says if someone does not understand this line one could gloss it by saying, “Without a knowledge of death, of real and final change and loss, there would be no knowledge of life, and no art...” (“Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy” 226). He concludes, however, that this cannot be the kind of truth that Kierkegaard wants to communicate indirectly, inasmuch as the paraphrase succeeds in communicating something of what the original line conveys, albeit not fully or not exactly. Kierkegaard’s indirect communication, by contrast, communicates something that would be lost if it were communicated directly. Cavell goes on to consider a second possible example of indirect communication, quoting another passage from Stevens: “She feels the dark/Encroachment of that old catastrophe./As a calm darkens among water-lights” (“Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy” 227). He then imagines a situation in which someone asked to explain the passage refuses, preferring instead “to leave them as touchstones of intimacy” (“Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy” 227). In this case,

the person is claiming that what Stevens said cannot be communicated in another way. Cavell argues, however, that this sort of situation cannot be what Kierkegaard means by indirect communication either, since if what is expressed logically cannot be expressed in any other way, it is meaningless to call the communication either direct or indirect. Cavell concludes that neither situation – the one in which we paraphrase and the one in which we feel we cannot paraphrase – can be what Kierkegaard intends to convey. Kierkegaard is thinking of a situation in which “there is only one vehicle of expression [but] there are two thoughts it can express, and moreover the thoughts are incompatible, mutually defeating” (“Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy” 228-229). Kierkegaard’s message conveyed in such phrases as “truth is subjectivity” “is of such a form that the words which contain its truth may be said in a way which defeats that very truth. And Kierkegaard sees modern man as fated to say them the wrong way” (“Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy” 229).

Cavell’s notion of mutually defeating interpretations is an illuminating step toward understanding Kierkegaard’s insistence on paradox. After all, Kierkegaard-as-Climacus does say that “truth is subjectivity” and, at the same time, that “untruth is subjectivity.” As we have seen, Kierkegaard cashes out faith in terms of a certain attitude toward risk, and this generates paradoxes as well, of the form, “the most dangerous way to live your life is to try to avoid risk.” There is something right about the idea that both statements -- “truth is subjectivity” and “safety is dangerous” -- can be read in a right way or a wrong way.

However, Cavell’s approach leaves many questions unanswered both about what Kierkegaard is communicating and how he communicates it. For example, if there is in fact a single expression that can communicate two different, mutually incompatible ideas, how do we know that that is the case, and how do we know what the two mutually incompatible ideas are? And, if it were true for Kierkegaard that we were “fated” to understand his message in the wrong way, what options would be open to him to deal with that fate? What is the status of Cavell’s own summary of Kierkegaard’s writing, if the fact that there are different ways of reading “truth is subjectivity” is something that can only be communicated indirectly? Cavell’s analysis ignores the fact that Kierkegaard does not simply communicate indirectly – he also communicates directly that he is communicating indirectly. He does not simply express paradoxes, but puts forward his reasons for why what he has to say is paradoxical: “[W]hoever takes it upon himself to explain the paradox, assuming he knows what he wants, will concentrate on showing that it has to be a paradox” (*Postscript* 185). These reasons, however, are not that the person who is in faith is simply engaged in a form of life that is different from what he can expect of his modern listeners. Kierkegaard compares the paradox of having and expressing faith with the paradox of having and expressing joy. He argues that there is a wrong way to use the expression unutterable joy, one in which it is simply pretentious:

To explain unutterable joy, for example; what does that mean? Does it mean explaining that it is this thing or that? But then the predicate ‘unutterable’ becomes no more than a rhetorical predicate, a forceful expression and the like. So the explaining jack-of-all-trades has everything prepared prior to the performance, and now it begins. He takes in the listener, he calls the joy

unutterable – and then a new surprise, a truly surprising surprise: he gives it utterance. (*Postscript* 185-6)

Here Kierkegaard is scathing and contemptuous about one kind of use of expressions such as “unutterable joy” or “paradoxical faith.” In these cases the person calling the joy unutterable or the faith paradoxical is just showing off, trying to use fancy philosophical vocabulary to make himself more impressive. However there is another way in which the expression “unutterable joy” can be used:

Now suppose the unutterable joy had its ground in the contradiction that an existing human being is a composite of the infinite and the finite situated in time, so that the joy of the eternal in him becomes unutterable because he is one who exists, and becomes a supreme drawing in of breath that nevertheless cannot articulate itself because the one who is existing exists. The explanation would then be: it is unutterable and cannot be otherwise. (*Postscript* 185-186)

Kierkegaard maintains that there is such a thing as unutterable joy and that it is foolish to try to utter it, but he does not leave it at that. He believes it is worthwhile to say why joy is unutterable, and so explains that it is unutterable because a human being is a “composite of the infinite and the finite situated in time.” This is not Cavell’s explanation. It is not simply that the person in unutterable joy has a different form of life, but rather the particular paradoxical situation of human beings causes us to experience things such as joy which it is impossible to utter.

We can explain this idea by referring to the notion we discussed earlier, that the best life is one that gets its shape from a life-defining, risky commitment. Such a life is made of concrete risks -- which makes it finite -- but these risks matter to our life as a whole -- which makes it infinite. On Kierkegaard’s view the only way to bring the finite and the infinite together is to take a risk that is attractive because of its very riskiness. Although in normal circumstances we would tend to hedge our bets when confronted with evidence that a project we are pursuing is risky, the Kierkegaardian knight of faith doubles down. Consequently, the prospect of winning this bet – which by its nature is intolerably risky – offers the possibility of unutterable joy. If someone is trying to take a risk that is clearly impossible to achieve, Kierkegaard thinks it is wrong to tell him that he should not do it, but also wrong to tell him that it is not impossible. It is precisely the impossibility that is attractive. Similarly, it is wrong to tell the person who is orienting his life by the possibility of an unutterable joy that he should not, and it is wrong to cut the joy down to size and explain how it can be uttered. The correct approach is to explain that given that a human being is a composite of the finite and the infinite existing in time it could not be otherwise than that we have unutterable joys and sorrows.

Cavell fails to appreciate that Kierkegaard does not simply consider faith to be another form of life. He believes that it is the unique form of life that provides human beings, constituted as we are by a need for connecting to the finite with infinite passion, to have meaning. Spheres lower than faith are not simply alternative forms of life for Kierkegaard – they are unsuccessful, self-deluded attempts to bring together finitude and infinitude. Since he fails to understand what spheres are, he is also unable to give a

satisfactory account of indirect communication, since indirect communication is for Kierkegaard the way a higher sphere is able to communicate to a lower sphere: “[A]n illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed...one must approach from behind the person who is under an illusion” (*Point of View* 24).

The limitations of Cavell’s approach to indirect communication become apparent when he connects his view of the parallel between spheres and forms with his account of indirect communication in his early essay “Kierkegaard's On Authority and Revelation”:

“To imagine a language,” says Wittgenstein in one of his best mottoes, “is to imagine a form of life.” When a form of life can no longer be imagined, its language can no longer be understood. “Speaking metaphorically” is a matter of speaking in certain ways using a definite form of language for some purpose; “speaking religiously” is not accomplished by using a given form, or set of forms, of words, and is not done for any further purpose: it is to speak from a particular perspective, as it were to mean anything you say in a special way. To understand a metaphor you must be able to interpret it; to understand an utterance religiously you have to be able to share its perspective. (In these ways, speaking religiously is like telling a dream.) (“Kierkegaard’s On Authority and Revelation” 172)

This account does justice to Kierkegaard's holism: it is true that speaking religiously is not accomplished by a particular form of words. It is also true that a religious life is “not done for any further purpose” if this means any further purpose that will not also have a religious characterization – Kierkegaard talks about being free of despair and having a self as the purposes of a life of faith, but Cavell is correct, and Kierkegaard would agree that these are themselves religious categories.

What Cavell's account misses is the contention, critical to Kierkegaard’s project, that the spheres of existence are ranked. Religiousness B or faith for Kierkegaard solves problems that the lower spheres of existence do not; it succeeds where they fail, and it succeeds at the same job, it does not simply change the subject. People in higher spheres (and faith is the highest) can understand where people in lower spheres went wrong, while people in different forms of life just do not understand each other; as Wittgenstein writes in *On Certainty*, when people in a rational form of life confront those whose form of life consists in consulting an oracle the two groups just have to fight it out. This significant disanalogy between the Kierkegaardian sphere of existence and the Wittgensteinian form of life leads Cavell to a conclusion that is deeply at odds with Kierkegaard's:

There seems no reason not to believe that, as a given person may never occupy this stage, so a given age, and all future ages, may as a whole not occupy it -- that the form will be lost from men's lives altogether. (It would be a phenomenon like everyone stopping having dreams)...It is Kierkegaard's view that this has happened to the lives of the present age. (“Kierkegaard’s On Authority and Revelation” 172)

On Cavell's account, Kierkegaard is like someone who still has the capacity to dream addressing people who have lost the capacity. However, that cannot be what Kierkegaard thinks he is doing. Kierkegaard believes his writing has some indirect way of leading those who are not yet in faith to having faith. This is not a simple matter because of the holistic considerations that Cavell adumbrates; the person with faith cannot simply talk about faith because the person without faith will interpret the faith-talk by his own faithless lights. We could call it exploding illusions from within, or as bringing them to face something that in some sense, deep down, they always knew but were afraid to deal with.

However, on Cavell's account it would be impossible. If human beings lost the capacity to dream, a description of dream life would be incomprehensible to them. Similarly, if some day there were no more horses, much of the language of equestrianism will be a dead letter to our descendants. Unless they have some analogous relationship to an animal the form of life of horseback riding will have passed from the scene, and the language that finds its home in this form of life will have become meaningless. Kierkegaard, however, cannot think this about the religious. It cannot be an objective fact about our lives that we no longer have the capacity for attaining unutterable joy, or for realizing that truth is subjectivity or that life requires a risk.

4. Conant on “Truth is Subjectivity” as Therapeutic Nonsense

We have seen that Allison and Cavell both flag something peculiar about the paraphrasability of the message of the *Postscript*. Allison argues that the only conceptual content Kierkegaard ascribes to Christianity is that it resists conceptualization, and Cavell argues that it is expressed indirectly in a way that we in the present age are fated to misunderstand. Both of these accounts leave it unclear how the philosophical argument is supposed to work or even could work. In a series of articles, James Conant develops the logic of these views and claims that these philosophical arguments, including the statement “truth is subjectivity,” are only therapeutic nonsense. They give the reader the impression of engaging with a philosophical argument only in order to bring him to realize that he was not engaging with one at all and thereby mortify his impulse to philosophize.

Conant works out his reading of Kierkegaard against the background of Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein as a philosopher interested in bringing us back to the ordinary. On Conant's reading, it is a mistake to think that Kierkegaard is putting forward a thesis about faith and its relationship to reason. Rather, the experience of reading the *Postscript* causes the reader to first engage with the notion that there could be a form of faith that is impossible to reason about. However, once the reader engages with this idea and follows Climacus through a series of more and more tortured formulations of what it could be, he ultimately reaches the absurd idea that faith could be both paradoxical and have a perfect formulation in Christianity. The reader is then dumped in the epilogue of the work where Climacus revokes (and Kierkegaard distances himself from) the entire work. This should lead him to realize that the whole journey was a wild goose chase – there never was any sense to the idea that there could be such a thing as “Religiousness B.” Rather, he should conclude that the temptation to formulate such theses ought to be resolutely resisted, and so return to the small victories and challenges

of his everyday life a sadder and a wiser man. Kierkegaard's writing allows us to do so by causing us to "imaginatively identify" with utterers of nonsense. Although we cannot understand the actual pseudo-doctrines that Climacus enunciates – e.g. that "truth is subjectivity," -- as they are nonsensical, we can understand the impulse to utter nonsense. That the work is written under a pseudonym and that it ends with a revocation are signals that Kierkegaard does not himself hold the views put forward therein. Like Allison, Conant appeals to the fact that the *Postscript* ends with a revocation, comparing it again to Wittgenstein's statement at the end of the *Tractatus* that someone who really understands him will see that his propositions are nonsense and should be thrown away. He argues of the *Tractatus* and of the *Postscript*: "[T]hese two works really mean it when they call upon us to reach a perspective from which we can in the end throw them away and classify them as nonsense. They mean throw the work *away* and by 'nonsense' they mean simple, old, garden variety *nonsense*" ("Must We Show What We Cannot Say?" 253).

Conant's reading of Wittgenstein's work grows out of the "resolute" or "non-chickening-out" reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. On this reading, the notion that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical but somehow convey meaning in a special way is considered a snare and a delusion; rather, the *Tractatus* means what it says by calling its propositions nonsense and therefore does not really put forward anything like a theory of meaning -- it only seems to. Similarly, Conant explains his claim that the *Postscript* is "garden variety" nonsense by glossing it as "old-fashioned, straightforward, garden variety, completely incomprehensible gibberish" ("Must We Show" 253). Conant argues that commentators such as Dreyfus who attribute to Kierkegaard a robust philosophical position -- e.g. the best way to live a meaningful life is through engaged commitment -- are succumbing to a temptation "to imagine, first, that there is some particular thing that these avowedly nonsensical sentences fail to say and, second, that one can comprehend what that particular thing is precisely through the way in which the sentence in question fails to succeed in saying *it*" ("Must We Show" 253). The entire structure of the *Postscript*, according to Conant, "represents an elaborate *reductio ad absurdum* of the philosophical project of clarifying and propounding what it is to be a Christian" ("Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense" 207).

Conant particularly scorns those who appeal to an ineffable meaning behind Kierkegaard's work, something that cannot be said but can only be shown. According to Conant, the proponents of ineffability believe that "Kierkegaard draws a distinction between objective truths and subjective truths. The preeminent examples of subjective truths are those of ethics and religion. These cannot be successfully embodied in the universal medium of language but rather only in the 'existential' context of an individual's life" ("Must We Show" 248). The worry for Conant is that if Kierkegaard denies that truth is objectivity, there must be a special kind of subjective truth that is necessarily incommunicable, much like the ineffable truths that certain Wittgenstein interpreters (according to Conant) mistakenly claim to find in the body of the *Tractatus*. Thus, Conant concludes that what seems like a thesis -- "truth is subjectivity" -- is a pseudo-thesis, or nonsense, which, though not itself meaningful or true, is designed to engage the reader's attention and ultimately change his approach to life. For Conant,

the claim “truth is subjectivity” can be neither true nor false, since it is just nonsense anyway.

Like Allison, Conant draws evidence for his view from the supposed weakness and incomprehensibility of Climacus’ claim to believe a maximal absurdity. The supposed *reductio* of Climacus’ position, the tip-off that we are dealing not with an actual philosophical position but with nonsense masquerading as such, is the notion of the maximally paradoxical:

Climacus’ analysis therefore commits him to a distinction between mere absurdity and “objective absurdity” – a category of deep nonsense which is supposed to be qualitatively more repellent to reason than ordinary nonsense. The Christian paradox is then proposed as the highest possible instance of such incomprehensibility – it is not merely incomprehensible but objectively incomprehensible. (“Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense” 215)

Conant wants us to be aware of how absurd it is that we are being asked to comprehend the incomprehensible. If it is incomprehensible, and Climacus knows it is incomprehensible, he cannot expect us to comprehend it. He concludes with a barrage of rhetorical questions meant to show that Climacus cannot actually mean anything at all:

Climacus’ parody on speculative philosophy reaches its climax with the following obvious problem: Why reach for the absurdity of Christian doctrine at this juncture rather than some other absurdity? Can we make sense of the idea of a maximally paradoxical belief? Can we rank incomprehensible “thoughts” by the degree of their absurdity? Does absurdity come in a spectrum of degrees? (“Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense” 215)

Conant is clearly correct that there is something funny going on when we are asked to comprehend the incomprehensible. However, his own explanation -- that Climacus pretends to mean something in order to bring us to an understanding of our own folly -- points out the hyperbolic nature of his claim that the *Postscript* is just nonsense; because, after all, how can nonsense do that? An initial response to these rhetorical questions would be to note that nonsense as such is not actually repellent to reason. “Twas brillig and the slythy toves” may not invite rational assent but it does not repel it either. Climacus is working with a diagnosis of what attracts us to objective reason. Faith and commitments are risky and paradox is repulsive because we (understandably) crave safety and success in our projects. Reason is attractive because it is a way of avoiding this risk. Thus, the answer to Conant’s rhetorical question, “Does absurdity come in a spectrum of degrees?” is that indeed it does. Acting, after all, admits of degrees of absurdity. Kierkegaard’s knight of faith acts in a maximally absurd fashion by not just accepting that life is risky but loving what he loves all the more desperately as the risk increases. While renunciation -- the sphere in which we live our lives without hope of getting what we want -- is absurd by the standards of the world, faith is more absurd still. It is attracted to risky commitment precisely because it offers the impossible payoff of getting the eternal in time. The maximally paradoxical belief is one that reflects the maximally paradoxical approach to life, which seeks out risk precisely in

virtue of how risky it is. This is a strange idea, but not a nonsensical one: it repels us in an entirely different way than Jabberwocky does or “The Dong with the Luminous Nose.”

Conant is led astray by looking at Kierkegaard through the lens of the Tractarian distinction between sense and nonsense. The *Tractatus* denies that there is a difference between degrees of nonsense, and leaves its interpreters the puzzle of whether its own statements are a special kind of nonsense that points at the ineffable, or just simple nonsense that helps us therapeutically renounce philosophizing, as Conant’s “resolute” reading would have it. Kierkegaard’s concerns are quite different. He is able to work with a notion of degrees of absurdity because he has a different notion of repellent to reason.

Another problem Conant faces is how garden variety nonsense can have the positive therapeutic effects he finds in Kierkegaard's writing. After all, he describes Kierkegaard’s texts as holding a mirror up to the reader so as to enter into his illusions and explode them from within. But if we are going to use a mirror to become aware of a defect about ourselves and correct it, we need to know that the mirror is faithful to us -- that what we think is a spot on our face is not a fleck on the mirror -- and we need to believe that what it shows us is actually a defect. Furthermore, the statement we get to by using the mirror -- “I have a spot on my face” -- is true, and not nonsensical. So if we are reflecting upon how Kierkegaard's writing works, then to say that it functions like a mirror does not imply, as Conant argues, that it does not advance truths. On the contrary, if Kierkegaard's philosophy is able to function as a mirror, that must be because it reflects the truth -- otherwise we would not be able to judge that it is a mirror and not, say, a painting of someone else. Conant is certainly correct that it is a weird, funhouse mirror that reflects us in an unflattering way, but we need to understand precisely how it is able to do that, and the notion of garden variety nonsense is not helpful here.

Conant develops Cavell’s project of reading Kierkegaard through the lens of his reading of Wittgenstein and Austin. Accordingly, this view inherits from Stanley Cavell's reading of these thinkers a fascination with the idea that philosophical errors are deep, abiding temptations of the human spirit. So, for example, the sense-datum theory is not simply an intellectual mistake, but indicates the perpetual lure of narcissism, a view of life in which we are shut off from others and must somehow deduce their presence. There is clearly something right in this approach and congenial to Kierkegaard. The philosophical stance he objects to in the *Postscript* is not, on Kierkegaard's view, simply analogous to a piece of faulty math; it is a sign of despair, fear of risk, and evasion of the deepest demands of living a life. However, it does not follow from the fact that because, for example, the sense-datum theory is a symptom of spiritual malaise, that the sense-datum theory is not also incorrect. The view’s proponents might have been tempted to embrace an incorrect theory due to their spiritual malaise.

It is difficult to know how to evaluate the question of whether Kierkegaard is putting forward a “philosophical” thesis because part of what original philosophers do is change the definition of what philosophy is. However, if we put aside the question of whether a thesis is or is not “philosophical,” it will be clear that there must be something other than nonsense in Kierkegaard’s writing for him to even do the job that Conant and

Cavell take him to be doing. Further, what he does is closer to putting forward a proposition than they believe. For example, it seems it is possible to negate what Kierkegaard puts forth. So for example, Conant believes that with his writing Kierkegaard is able to explode dangerous illusions from within. It would seem therefore that someone could disagree with him by maintaining any of the following:

- a) that his audience does not suffer from dangerous illusions; or
- b) that his audience suffers from dangerous illusions but an encounter with Kierkegaard's writing will not change them; or
- c) that his audience suffers from dangerous illusions, and that an encounter with Kierkegaard's writing will change them, but the result will be that they will enter into a state both more dangerous and more illusory.

Furthermore, it is possible to ask for evidence or, put more simply, to ask, "Why do you think that?" The answer may not -- in fact, on Kierkegaard's view, *cannot* -- be one that forces everyone to agree with it, but that does not mean he rules the "Why?" question out of court. Reason is not the judge, but it gets to testify.

Whether this is a philosophical thesis or a psychological thesis or a sociological thesis is a matter of opinion, but it is certainly possible to disagree with it and demand evidence. If Kierkegaard's texts are "modeled on a process of discovery," then Kierkegaard must believe that what the texts bring about is a "process of discovery" and not a process of deeper confusion, or simply a pleasant diversion, or illness. Conant adopts the rhetorical strategy of asking his opponents -- the paraphrasers, let's call them -- to paraphrase their views, while criticizing the attempt to paraphrase altogether. However, if he were to paraphrase his own view: "People philosophize too much, and misuse language, and this misuse of language causes them to lead disastrously inauthentic lives," then he would face the dilemma he faults his opponents with evading -- the view must be true and philosophically defensible, or else his project is pointless, but it cannot be true based on his own account of meaning.

5. Dreyfus Argues that "Truth is Subjectivity" is an Expression of a Historical Conflict in Western Culture

Having discussed and criticized the anti-paraphrasers, I now turn to the paraphrasers. In his article "The Roots of Existentialism," Hubert Dreyfus puts Kierkegaard in the context of the Western civilization's dual heritage of the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophy, specifically the legacy of Plato and Aristotle. Plato and Aristotle, on Dreyfus's view, argued that the best way for human beings to engage with life is through grasping an objective theory. This objective theory provides human beings with context-free rules for understanding "timeless, abstract, conceptual structures" (Dreyfus and Wrathall 137). We are at our best when we go "beyond personal preferences, prejudices, and desires" and seek "universal rules for right action." The Hebrew legacy takes an opposing stand on every one of these issues. For the Hebrews, the best way to engage with reality, or God, is through a covenant -- a world-defining, personal commitment to an external source of meaning. We are not at our best when coming up with universal rules, but when engaging in a passionate dialogue with God. This passionate dialogue is not a matter of seeking timeless structures or transcending our

particularity, but rather of engaging in the emotional ups and downs of a personal relationship.

On Dreyfus's view, Kierkegaard's proclamation that "truth is subjectivity" is both a diagnosis of our conflicted cultural heritage and a recommendation for a cure. Dreyfus writes, "[I]nstead of trying to understand the Judeo-Christian revelation in Greek terms, Kierkegaard highlighted the opposition. He showed that any attempt to rationalize the Christian experience resulted in claims that, to the Greeks, would have sounded absurd. According to Kierkegaard, truth is subjectivity" (Dreyfus and Wrathall 141). According to Dreyfus, Kierkegaard correctly diagnosed that we would never have a "fully meaningful life" if we attempted to square the circle of our Hebrew and Greek heritage. It is impossible to have a fully meaningful life if you pursue the Greek agenda of having general knowledge of atemporal truths, because the demands of theory -- universalizability, timelessness, and impersonality, for example -- cut directly against the requirements of meaning -- vulnerability, personality, and individual moments in time that matter.

Glossing "despair" in Kierkegaard as a life without meaning, and salvation as "bliss" (although perhaps "joy" would be more accurate), Dreyfus argues that Kierkegaard "holds that the only test of what is the right way to live is to throw yourself into many ways of life until one discovers which way gets one out of despair" (Dreyfus and Wrathall 141). Kierkegaard's conclusion is that after trying different ways of life -- or, again, different "spheres of existence," a name that calls attention to their holistic character -- we learn that the best life is one in which we experience simultaneously our relation to two sets of opposing factors.

These factors are necessity and possibility, temporality and eternity, and the finite and the infinite. Necessity and possibility deal with the tension between commitment and openness to new commitments, and between having a stable identity and responding to change. Temporality and eternity deal with the tension between the importance of single moments that can change what is meaningful to a person and the way a single commitment can define her identity for her whole life. The factors of the finite and the infinite deal with the fact that my entire life gains meaning through something specific and vulnerable. As Kierkegaard writes, existence is a matter of driving a chariot pulled by a team of horses, one of which is old and tired, the other of which is Pegasus (*Postscript* 261).

According to Dreyfus, Kierkegaard's discovery was that the Greek approach will never put the factors together in a livable way: "[T]he Greeks found that, if you define the factors from the point of view of detachment, you can't get them together. Kierkegaard tries to show that only if you define the factors in terms of a total involvement that gives you your identity as an individual can you arrive at a positive synthesis" (Dreyfus and Wrathall 144). So for Dreyfus the slogan "truth is subjectivity" means that "truth" -- the best way to live a human life, as proved by the procedure of trying different ways and seeing which ones work -- is "subjective" -- that is, it is achieved through a passionate, engaged, partial, history-based life of commitment to a particular person or cause.

Dreyfus's paraphrase and explanation of Kierkegaard certainly answers the question: why does Kierkegaard's thought have a claim on our attention? We can dispute the view Dreyfus ascribes to Kierkegaard in any number of ways. We can, for example,

attack the view that our culture is an heir to Greek and Hebrew thinking and argue (implausibly) that Kierkegaard has overlooked the Phoenicians. We can claim to have discovered a way of reconciling the factors that does not involve a life of commitment to a finite, vulnerable person or cause in time. We could pick holes in Kierkegaard's list of factors or in Dreyfus's account of the factors, arguing perhaps that he could make do with only two factors -- mind and body -- or that he needs an extra pair of factors -- perhaps concealment and revelation -- to account for all the phenomena. We could claim that we have tried Kierkegaard's recipe and it does not lead to the bliss he promises. We could argue that Kierkegaard is true up to a point but leaves out other considerations, and that with these considerations taken care of we can have a life that has everything Kierkegaard promises us and more, one of super-bliss perhaps. However, whether we agree with some, all, or none of it, Dreyfus has put forward an account of Kierkegaard that diagnoses a problem we can identify, lays out the sources of the problem that we can evaluate, and proposes a solution that we can judge.

In other words, and connecting this back with the paradox with which we began the chapter, Dreyfus's paraphrase of "truth is subjectivity" turns it into something objective -- that is, something that is, in principle, open to every human being to consider, endorse, or reject. It is a general truth of the human condition, according to Dreyfus's Kierkegaard, that anyone who tries to put the factors together in the Greek way will have a less meaningful life than anyone who puts them together in Kierkegaard's way. If so, it would seem to follow that Kierkegaard is wrong, that is, truth is not subjectivity, because there is a general way of stating the facts about what makes a human life meaningful, and we do not need to be personally engaged to evaluate these facts. So for example, I do not need to be out of despair in order to evaluate whether or not our culture has a conflicted Greek and Hebrew heritage, nor whether people who fail to get the factors together miss out on a life of bliss. On Dreyfus's account, it seems like a Chinese scholar could evaluate this theory without being engaged with either tradition on a personal level, perhaps by doing surveys. If this is a mistaken reading on Dreyfus's part, or a caricature of Dreyfus's program on my part, we still need to understand why the paraphrasability of Kierkegaard's thought does not entail its objectivity -- its, in principle, availability to *any* right-minded person. We need a better account of the relationship between an accurate paraphrase, such as the one Dreyfus seeks to provide, and Kierkegaard's thesis.

6. Hannay's Kantian Paraphrase of Kierkegaard

Another example of paraphrase is to be found in the works of Alastair Hannay. Responding to Allison's view that the *Postscript* is an elaborate parody, Hannay argues that just because faith cannot be represented doesn't mean it can't be discussed in meaningful terms:

[E]xternal circumstances are not all we can imagine. Or as Kant observed, not all our notions correspond to or are expressible in the form of representations. Conspicuous among those that cannot is the notion each one of us has of himself or herself, the 'I think', the condition of representation that cannot itself be represented. 'Imagination' (Phantasien) as used by Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, when they are not convicting philosophers of 'fantastically' forgetting that they

exist, refers to a faculty in which the self envisages, and on the basis of which it can enact, its possibilities. Among these possibilities is that of orienting itself beyond the world of finite representations. As the later pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, says: 'Imagination is in general the medium of infinitization.' (Hannay 14)

This is, in other words, a resolute refusal of Conant's resolute reading of Kierkegaard. On this account, what Climacus means when he says that Christianity is resistant to reason is that Christianity cannot be represented. However, it can be imagined, just as the self can be imagined. This is a somewhat odd way to invoke the authority of Kant since Kant argued in the first paralogism that it is a mistake to believe we have knowledge of the self in a special way other than through representation -- Kant is actually closer to Conant here than Hannay realizes. For Kant it is a paralogism, or a form of pseudo-logic, to imagine that we can draw any conclusions about ourselves from the formal unity of apperception.

Hannay continues to argue that Christianity may be something we have access to despite our inability to represent it:

How might the unity of finite and infinite be among the existing self's possibilities? To revert again to Kant, the possibility might be possessed in the form of a regulative idea that structures its actions, the 'I think' now fully extended into its properly existential 'I do.' The unity would not be real, even though the idea of it would inform action itself suitably unified in the instant of passion. But so long as one retains the idea of there being a God's point of view outside existence, as Climacus obviously does (it is part of his job), that there is such a point of view must be part of the object of faith. What can, for the existing individual, never be more than a regulative idea may for all we know be cashed in divine currency into the actual fact of unification. The thought is this: what cannot be cashed into representational form can, for that very reason, possess possibilities exceeding the bounds of what can be represented. It may strike us as a lunatic thought, but that doesn't prevent it from being one that Climacus would wish his reader to retain. (Hannay 14)

There are numerous points of unclarity here. We can wonder, for example, how an idea that is not representational is to be identified. How do we know that we have the same idea from one moment to the next? How do two people know (and why would they believe) that they are both imagining a Christian way of life, if they cannot represent it? What makes them think they are imagining any particular thing at all, as opposed to just having a headache or experiencing a reverie?

Also, we can ask how such an idea can inform practical life. We understand how ideas like "buy cheap and sell dear" or "try to be kind" can inform practical life, because they have conceptual content that can be grasped by humans. How could a human life be informed, practically or otherwise, by an idea that humans cannot think? Even if we accept on faith that God can think an idea, if we cannot, what good does it do us? If in fact the critical dimension of faith is a "how" and not a "what," why is it worth insisting that there is a "what" that cannot be thought by us?

The three salient questions for Hannay's reading of faith as a regulative idea that can be imagined but not represented are:

- i) is it an accurate account of Kant?
- ii) is it an accurate account of Kierkegaard? and
- iii) is it true?

Of these I will put the first aside as beyond the purview of this study. The second and third I will return to implicitly and answer "no" by putting forward an account of Kierkegaard's view of faith that does not appeal to Hannay's Kantian machinery. At this point, though, it is only necessary to note that Hannay denies that the *Postscript* is to be viewed humorously and then feels duty-bound to give a paraphrase of what faith could be using the apparatus of regulative ideas, practical reason, and the imagination.

7. Can "Truth is Subjectivity" be Paraphrased or Not?

We saw in our discussion of Cavell and indirect communication that Cavell both notices and exemplifies a two-way pull in interpreting Kierkegaard. Upon facing a statement like "truth is subjectivity" we feel an urge to paraphrase it and to confess that it cannot be paraphrased. Cavell, in discussing the statement "what I have to say can only be communicated indirectly" finds two opposing senses of what can only be communicated indirectly: the sense in which a line in a poem can be glossed and the sense in which a line in a poem cannot be glossed. He reaches the conclusion that Kierkegaard is dealing with a special class of statements, ones in which the normal, conventional way of reading them blocks the true way of reading them. But this leaves us with a number of puzzles. If there is such a special class of statements, once Cavell has identified them and said what the two ways are, it would seem that he has now communicated that directly, and therefore shown that Kierkegaard was incorrect that they can only be communicated indirectly. On the other hand, if he is not able to let us understand Kierkegaard's statements -- of which we are using "truth is subjectivity" as a convenient example of many that have this special feature, normal meaning blocking true meaning -- then how has he or Kierkegaard communicated anything, indirectly or directly?

Kierkegaard himself raises deliberate warning flags in the direction of paraphrasing his thought. In a footnote responding to a review of *Philosophical Fragments*, the work of the pseudonym Johannes Climacus to which the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is the postscript, Kierkegaard writes that the scholar's review of his previous work is a) entirely accurate and b) completely misses the point:

His account is accurate and on the whole dialectically reliable, but now comes the hitch: in spite of the account being correct, anyone reading it by itself is bound to get an altogether wrong impression of the book. Not, of course, such a great mishap; on the other hand always a little unfortunate where the precise point of a review is the distinctive character of the book. The account is didactic, purely and simply didactic; the reader will therefore gain the impression that the piece itself

is didactic. This in my view is the most mistaken impression one can have of it.
(*Postscript* 230nn)

Kierkegaard, writing as Climacus, seems to be arguing that even an accurate objective summary of his views is untrue. This is a paradoxical claim: would he prefer an *inaccurate* summary? However, it is worth taking seriously because, paradoxical as it sounds, it is consistent, after all, with Kierkegaard's claim that "truth is subjectivity."

We have been investigating what Kierkegaard means by "truth is subjectivity" and found ourselves pulled in two interpretive directions. These two directions are exemplified in the secondary literature. On one side are interpreters who emphasize indirect communication and paradox. For these interpreters – Allison, Cavell, and Conant – to paraphrase Kierkegaard on faith is to betray his most crucial insight. On the other side are interpreters who argue that Kierkegaard is putting forward an important thesis about the limitations of reason and the importance of faith or commitment. One example was Dreyfus's account of the tension between the Hebrew and Greek approaches to life and thought, and another was Hannay's Kantian restatement.

Cavell, Conant, and Allison are all in a sense advocating for a different appropriation of Kant, one that takes care not to talk about the non-representational as if it were another class of facts that just happen not to be represented. However, taking a step back from the particulars of their view, Dreyfus and Hannay share the idea that there is something about "truth is subjectivity" that can be paraphrased, while Allison, Cavell, and Conant argue that there is something critical that paraphrase misses.

The paraphrasing impulse seeks to put the insight in other words that can be grasped by any clear-thinking reader, and the anti-paraphrasing impulse worries that this restatement betrays the insight because it bypasses the supposed therapy involved in thinking through the text itself. This two-pronged impulse -- which, if we can call a paradox or, highlighting Kierkegaard's debt to Socrates, an *aporia* -- occurs not only when we take a cursory dip into the text, but, as we have seen, just as much with very deep influential and acute academic interpreters. This is evidence that the temptation towards paraphrase and away from paraphrase is not an accidental or superficial feature of Kierkegaard's writing and thought. If we can come to an understanding of why his writing pulls us in these two directions, it ought to help us understand what subjective thinking is, and whether it is something we want to be engaging with.

A possible way into the puzzle might be to notice that what is special about Kierkegaard's message is not its content but a relationship between the content and the correct way to receive it. So, for example, a bribe has to be given by hints because to say it directly is illegal. The content "please give me a bribe" is not intrinsically difficult to paraphrase – one can just as easily say, "Please give me an illegal monetary inducement" – but the situation is such that it goes against my purposes to state it directly. So instead of stating my desire directly, I might circle around the subject indirectly until you hit upon the idea that I am looking for a bribe. Or to take a less illegal example, and one invoked by Conant's own analogy to therapy, it could be that I am a therapist and I think that you suffer a neurosis, a symptom of which is that you rely on others for your authority. If I tell you that directly, it will simply exacerbate the problem because it will reinforce your neurosis, so I can hint at it in order to bring you to the point of realizing it on your own. An appropriate analogy here would be the guessing game "Password." A

tries to get B to guess the word "Denmark" and is able to make hints – “It's a country in Northern Europe,” “Kierkegaard was from there,” “Rhymes with ‘hen mark.’” On this view the paraphrasing impulse is correct -- there is a perfectly clear answer -- and the anti-paraphrasing impulse is correct as well -- there is a reason that the paraphraser's paraphrase is against the rules. He is, on the example of the bribe, breaking the law, or on the example of the psychotherapist, interfering with the therapy.

Although the suggestion that "truth is subjectivity" is a hint to a puzzle is a tempting interpretation, inasmuch as it does justice to both the paraphrasing and anti-paraphrasing impulses, it still fails. If Kierkegaard were simply offering hints to a puzzle, the paraphraser would end the game. Once we know that the solution to the puzzle is “Denmark,” we can't play anymore. Even if we imagine that we *should* play, and that solving the puzzles will be good for us in some way, on the model of therapy, we still would not be able to, unless we somehow shielded ourselves from the answer. On this view, publishers would print Dreyfus's commentary upside down at the end of an edition of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* so readers could get the psychological or ethical benefits of working out the puzzle before turning to the answer.

Additionally, and more seriously, a puzzle in this sense requires an external puzzle-maker to enforce the rules of the game and it's not clear, in the case of philosophy, what could play this role. The game of Password has rules -- you're allowed to say "sounds like Henmark," for example, but not "sounds like Henmark but begins with a D," because that would be too easy. But Kierkegaard is just writing philosophy to help himself and his reader understand certain things, or grasp certain issues, and so it is not clear what could possibly serve the role as the game show judge. It is also not clear how he could come to the view that it is better for us to solve puzzles and what his argument is for that. Perhaps Kierkegaard knows that, in fact, people will be happier or perhaps better people if they figure things out for themselves, so he judges that the best way to achieve this goal is to give people the challenging task of figuring out his indirect communication. How does he know this? Why doesn't he put forward evidence for it? If the burden of Kierkegaard's writing is to convey a secret for those who understand the secret, it could be stated clearly and he would be able to recognize it. Society could then be split into two groups: people who can give signs that they understand the secret, and so could be spoken to in one way, and people who still need to go through the discipline of puzzling Kierkegaard out for themselves, who could be understood another way. There could be an objective test of who belongs to which camp. That there is such an objective test of who understands Christianity and who does not is something Kierkegaard takes great pains to deny.

If Kierkegaard's writing is like a game of Password, it is something like a game of password that everyone has to guess himself all the time, the solution to which cannot be conveyed in any other way, and which is somehow given directly by what it is to be a human being, rather than by some external source of authority.

8. Subjective Thinking is a Kind of Joking

We began this discussion by asking about the status of the statement "truth is subjectivity." This abuts on the related question: what is the subjective thinker and *why* is he or she a thinker? It's hard to grasp both ends of the idea -- make the thinker too

much of a thinker and it's hard to understand why she is subjective, but make the thinker too subjective and it is hard to understand why what she is doing qualifies as thought. How does subjective thinking work? Why is it any more significant than a subjective report of a preference such as "I like apples more than rutabaga?" What we need is an example of subjective thinking, one that will clarify why it counts as thought, how it can be both subjective and demand any sort of response from the listener, and why it both requires and resists paraphrase.

Kierkegaard writes that what the subjective thinker does is closer to art than to scholarship: "The subjective thinker is not a scholar, he is an artist. To exist is an art. The subjective thinker is aesthetic enough for his life to have aesthetic content, ethical enough to regulate it, and dialectical enough to master it in thought. The subjective thinker's task is to understand himself in existence" (*Postscript* 294). Kierkegaard-as-Climacus is very specific about what counts as subjective thinking: comedy. In a funny passage, he writes that at various points in his career he was ready to put forward an idea only to find that he had been beaten to it by a variety of other authors. These authors, of course, are Kierkegaard himself writing under other pseudonyms. For those who did not get the joke, Kierkegaard writes that at the time he was reading these authors he was also reading an essay by Plutarch called "On Praising Oneself Inoffensively" -- neither Kierkegaard nor Climacus is one for false humility when it comes to his own writing. The sign Kierkegaard holds up as the indication of his own writing's authority is precisely his skill at comedy:

That subjectivity, inwardness, is the truth is my thesis; that the pseudonymous authors relate to it is easy enough to see, if from nothing else than their eye for the comic. The comic is always the mark of maturity; and the only thing is that in this maturity the new shoot should appear, and the vis comica not stifle pathos but simply indicate the beginning of a new pathos. The power of comedy is something I regard as an indispensable legitimation for anyone who is to be regarded today as authorized in the world of the spirit. (*Postscript* 235)

He puts this point elsewhere when speaking about the authority of comedy:

Power in the comic is the police badge, the badge of authority which today every agent must bear who really is an agent. (*Postscript* 236)

That is to say, in order to be able to speak on Kierkegaard's subject one must be able to know what is funny. If you are unable to be funny and respond to what is funny you are not a subjective thinker. Furthermore, it is not only a necessary condition for authority on the subject. The actual work of philosophical thinking about human existence is something like being funny; achieving faith, which Kierkegaard also refers to as the "second immediacy," is a comic task -- it requires some of the same skills and capacities that comedy does:

But this is not hot-tempered or vehement comedy, its laughter shrill; on the contrary, it attends with care to the immediacy that it sets aside. The reaper's scythe is equipped with some wooden slats that run parallel to the sharp blade;

and while the scythe cuts the grain, the grain sinks down almost luxuriantly on to the supporting cradle, to be laid neatly and beautifully on the stubble. So it is with legitimate comedy in respect of matured immediacy. The task of cutting is a solemn act, the cutter is not a grim reaper; yet it is to the sharp blade of the comic and its biting edge that the immediate yields, not unbecomingly, and even in its falling supported by the cutting. This comedy is essentially humour. If the comedy is cold and comfortless, it is a sign that no new immediacy is sprouting, and then there is no harvest, only the empty passion of a barren wind raging over the naked fields. (*Postscript* 236)

Comedy done in the right way gives us the capacity to set aside the immediate thing we are drawn to do or say and to give us the ability to “sprout” some new way of doing and talking, one which will actually help us. This is an admirable description of the sort of awareness that people seek in philosophy. In the next chapter we will go into this relationship between Kierkegaard's philosophical practice and joking in more depth, using each to illuminate the other. For the nonce, though, let us notice for a start that joking has the same relationship to paraphrase that I have argued is to be found in Kierkegaard's writing. If you do not have enough understanding of the point of a joke, you will not get it. A listener who is unable to paraphrase it at all simply displays a lack of understanding. Yet a listener who can only paraphrase a joke and does not laugh at it either, also *does not get it*. In fact, in certain contexts paraphrasing a joke is precisely to spoil it. One can resist the point of a joke, or laugh at it against one's better judgment. One can hope that a joke will succeed, have every reason of believing it will succeed and still watch it fall flat. One need not demand that every single rational agent find one's jokes funny -- that would be a sign of unusual hubris -- but if someone you care about does not find your joke funny, you are disappointed. Jokes fit the bill of being both subjective in the right way and a form of thinking in the right way, or so I will argue.

Climacus is explicit in many places that he is a humorist and if there is anything he is an expert about, it is the comic. This has been noticed by commentators, including Dreyfus, who points out that there is something amusingly absurd about the knight of faith's finding of eternity in time, as well as Conant, who writes: "The humorist's vocation lies therefore in bringing contradictions to the surface. The role of humor in his activity is to bring out the ludicrousness of certain contradictions" ("Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense" 203). However, this view of humor -- that it brings out "ludicrousness" -- is a bit too thin to be helpful. What sorts of contradictions are funny? Ludicrous ones. How do we know they are funny? When their ludicrousness is brought to the surface. I will argue in the following that something more interesting and important is going on.

I will argue in the following chapter that the joking thinker is an example of the subjective thinker. Not that his intention is simply to amuse or that his most serious writing is funny, but that certain features of how jokes work apply to how Kierkegaard is able to communicate his philosophical theses. Just as we are able to paraphrase a joke without making a joke, Dreyfus is able to summarize Kierkegaard's philosophy accurately without actually bringing out an experience of faith or Religiousness B in the reader. However, we are able to summarize the point of a joke in many cases, and that explains why Conant's view is incorrect

Chapter Two: Humor, Contradiction and Paraphrase: The Postscript Joke Footnote

1. Introduction

Allison, Conant, and Cavell all appeal to the role of humor in the *Postscript* as a way of supporting the idea that he does not advance a philosophical thesis. Kierkegaard's philosophy, or what is taken to be his philosophy by Dreyfus, is "just a joke" one might say. In the following chapter I will argue that they are correct to note the deep connection between humor and Kierkegaard's philosophical practice, but incorrect to draw the conclusion that this means he is not advancing a philosophical thesis that can be engaged with, argued for, agreed with or disagreed with. Kierkegaard's thesis that "truth is subjectivity" is a joke, but it is not nonsense. In fact, it is worth taking seriously.

Conant's suggestion that the hard-to-paraphrase ideas we have been considering -- especially the phrase "truth is subjectivity" -- might be nonsense is raised and explicitly rejected by Kierkegaard himself, who writes in his journals:

...the concept of the absurd is precisely to grasp the fact that it cannot and must not be grasped. The absurd, the paradox, is composed in such a way that reason has no power at all to dissolve it in nonsense and prove that it is nonsense; no, it is a symbol, a riddle, a compounded riddle about which reason must say: I cannot solve it, it cannot be understood, but it does not follow thereby that it is nonsense. But if faith is completely abolished, the whole sphere is dropped, and then reason becomes conceited and perhaps concludes that, ergo, the paradox is nonsense. (*Journals and Papers* 5)

Here Kierkegaard argues that a paradox -- again, let's take as our example "truth is subjectivity" -- is not nonsense, and in fact to view it as nonsense is to "dissolve" it and "drop" the whole sphere of faith. Since the whole point of Kierkegaard's writing, as Cavell notes, is to give us the tools for entering into the form of life (or sphere of existence) Kierkegaard calls faith, to "completely abolish" faith and "drop" its "whole sphere" would be a massive failure for Kierkegaard. Viewing paradox as nonsense or proving that it is nonsense therefore would obviate his entire philosophical practice, rendering it a waste of time and effort.

Kierkegaard's distinction between paradox and nonsense does justice to the way we use these words. "Nonsense" means gibberish that more or less closely resembles something meaningful in form such as Lewis Carroll's "Twas brillig and the slythy toves." A nonsensical phrase is chaotic, and a nonsensical order -- "Flazap the snagalaga, and make it snappy!" -- just leaves us stymied. A paradoxical phrase or concept, by contrast, is not chaotic. It pulls us in different directions, but we know what those directions are. The notion that God knows everything but we have free will is regarded by theologians as a paradox, but not nonsense. It pulls us in two distinct directions -- towards viewing ourselves as free to do what we want to do next and towards viewing ourselves as not free to do what we want to do next. A paradoxical order is not "Flazap

the snagalaga!” but “You need to remember to forget!” which is hard to follow in a very different way. We understand “You need to remember to forget!” wants us to do two different things -- remember and forget. We just do not know how to do it, and if we try we run into a very particular kind of problem – the closer we get to obeying one prong of the order – remember! – the further we get from obeying the other prong – forget! Another sign that paradoxes are not nonsensical is that there are different paradoxes that mean different things. “Try not to try so hard!” our jazz teacher tells us, and we recognize that as a different paradox than the paradox of remembering not to forget, or the paradox of free will and determinism, or Oscar Wilde’s “approval of what is approved of is as false as a well-kept vow.”

“Truth is subjectivity” is not nonsense, but Conant and his cohort are right to suggest it may be a joke. Irony, humor and the comic are critical terms in Kierkegaard’s philosophical practice; to an amazing and unique extent, Kierkegaard emphasizes that to be good at humor is a *sine qua non* for understanding him:

That subjectivity, inwardness, is the truth is my thesis; that the pseudonymous authors relate to it is easy enough to see, if from nothing else than their eye for the comic. The comic is always the mark of maturity; and the only thing is that in this maturity the new shoot should appear, and the *vis comica* not stifle pathos but simply indicate the beginning of a new pathos. The power of comedy is something I regard as an indispensable legitimation for anyone who is to be regarded today as authorized in the world of the spirit. (*Postscript* 235)

The proof that an author relates to the thesis “truth is subjectivity” is an “eye for the comic.” Skill at understanding what is funny and what is not is required to understand “truth is subjectivity,” and without it one cannot be a legitimate authority in the “world of the spirit,” which means the realm of things that are distinctively human. Kierkegaard believes, in other words, that if one lacks a sense of humor, one does not have the authority to make general statements about human life, or to understand his take on things in particular. So one cannot be a legitimate philosopher in general, or particularly understand what Kierkegaard means by “truth is subjectivity,” if one is unable to appreciate what is funny.

This is a remarkable and counter-intuitive claim. On the face of it, one might think that it is the philosopher’s job to say how things are, and then it will be a matter for each individual’s idiosyncratic taste to find them funny or not. Jokers might laugh at Spinoza’s account of human life and their more serious cousins might remain stony-faced, but both understand him equally well. We could even imagine a great philosopher with no sense of humor at all. Kierkegaard denies that this is the case, and this is of course because he wants to question the distinction between “saying how things are” and having a personal take and stake on how things are. “Truth is subjectivity” means that we think about *how* things are and what our take is on how things are -- funny or tragic or boring or interesting -- as part of the same activity. This explains why Kierkegaard believes that his mockery of the objective thinker is a legitimate philosophical move. A philosopher who knows how things are but is unable to respond in the right way in fact does not know how things are. A philosopher who claims to be aware of the monstrous

contradictions at the heart of life but who does not find anything funny about them thereby shows that she does not really understand them. Further, failing to point out what is ridiculous about a certain “objective” way of doing philosophy is failing to see what is wrong with it.

Kierkegaard is not the first philosopher to raise the issue of whether we can do philosophy by means of comedy. The question of the epistemic role of humor was already a controversy in the eighteenth century, one joined, on opposite sides by the Earl of Shaftesbury and Bishop Berkeley. Shaftesbury was influenced by a statement of the sophist Gorgias quoted by Aristotle: “Gorgias said it was necessary to spoil the seriousness of opponents by jest and their jest by seriousness” (Amir 63). Shaftesbury interprets this as saying, “For a subject which should not bear raillery was suspicious; and a jest which would not bear a serious examination was certainly false wit” (Amir 63). He argues that ridicule and humor are a test of what is worth believing:

Nothing is ridiculous except what is deformed; nor is anything proof against raillery except what is handsome and just...A man must be soundly ridiculous who, with all the wit imaginable, would go about to ridicule wisdom, or laugh at honesty, or good manners. (Amir 46)

In response, Bishop Berkeley pointed out that at the time it was proposed the heliocentric would have been the butt of ridicule, but it was nonetheless true.

Kierkegaard takes Shaftesbury’s side, although his conception of humor – what it is and how it works – is considerably more interesting and accurate than Shaftesbury’s. In the following, I will argue that Kierkegaard’s conception of the comic and the funny explains why he would pursue his philosophical agenda by ridiculing his opponents, because they are failing to do what a philosopher ought to do – namely, bring about the correct relationship in thought and life between the factors. Comedy, because of its sensitivity to what Kierkegaard calls contradiction, is well-suited for the task of bringing out a failure to get the factors together in the right way, while humorless abstract argument, by contrast, is fated to miss the issue.

2. Humor as Painless Contradiction with the Way Out In Mind: The Position of the “Jokebook” Footnote

To understand Kierkegaard’s view of humor, the best place to turn is the lengthy footnote in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that argues for a definition of humor by means of analyzing a series of jokes. Like Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Kierkegaard does his theorizing by assembling a joke book. The definition he proposes is that humor is a response to painless contradiction because it holds the way out in mind. In this section I will try to unpack the connections he draws among the notions of contradiction, painlessness, and having a way out in mind. To provide some initial orientation, though, it is worth noting that Kierkegaard distinguishes being aware of a contradiction, knowing what to do about the contradiction, and how we feel about this fact. Comedy is a response in which we are aware of a contradiction, do not know what to do about it, but this impasse does not torment us. This is what he means by

having the way out “in mind” -- we are open to the possibility that someday we will have a way out, but we do not yet have the tools to achieve it.

To get to this claim -- that comedy is the painless contradiction that has the way out in mind -- Kierkegaard begins by citing Aristotle’s definition of the laughable: “...the laughable may be defined as a mistake or a deformity not productive of pain or harm to others” (*Postscript* 431nii). Kierkegaard’s first move is to point out that painless deformity is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition of something being funny. There are comical things that are not deformed and deformed things that are not funny -- for example, “an ugly and distorted face” might cause you to feel sorry for the ugly person. In Kierkegaard’s words, the example “lacks reflection...in that it conceives the laughable as a something, instead of recognizing that the comic is a relation, the misrelation of contradiction, but free from pain” (*Postscript* 431nii). In other words, to call something comical is not just to say something about the thing but also to say something about other contextual elements including our relationship to it. Kierkegaard provides the example, “I would stake my life on there being fully four shillings’ worth of gold in the binding of this book.” He explains, “...the contradiction is between the highest pathos (staking his life) and the object; it is teasingly sharpened by the word ‘fully’ opening a prospect of there possibly being four and a half shillings’ worth, as though that were less contradictory” (*Postscript* 431nii).

This is not a logical contradiction. The joke here is a fragment of a comic monologue, and by interpreting it, we can flesh out an actual character. The character is caught between two approaches to life. One is the highest pathos, being willing to bet one’s entire life. The other is a perspective from which one wants to know how much money the gold in the binding of a book costs. In what sense are these contradictory? The relatively trivial cost of the binding of a book simply does not seem like the kind of thing a sensible person would stake his life on, and so something is askew.

Another feature of Kierkegaard’s account is that contradictions can be sharper or duller, and a joke serves to make us feel a contradiction more sharply. To see what this means, imagine that the same person starts talking about betting his life and about getting good bargains in thrift stores, but not at precisely the same time and not in the same context. He spends his weekends as a freedom fighter, risking his life to overthrow the government, but spends the weekdays hunting for bargains. Such a person has a contradiction between the two regions of his life and how he talks in these two different contexts and perhaps social environments -- his insurrection colleagues and his bargain hunting colleagues -- but the contradiction has not been sharpened. If, as in Kierkegaard’s example, he is shopping for a book but simply says, “That is a well-bound book,” there is still a contradiction between that and his practice as an insurrectionary soldier. However, if in the same interaction he wagers his life that there are “four shillings worth of gold” in the binding of the book -- he says it at the same time to the same person -- the contradiction between his revolutionary and frugal identity is sharper. If he says “fully four shillings,” then it is even sharper.

Kierkegaard builds his phenomenology of humor by way of accumulated examples. He continues, “Holophernes...is said to be four and a half metres tall. The contradiction rests essentially in the latter part. The four metres are fantastic, but fantasy

is not in the habit of speaking of halves; the half metre brings one down to Earth. Whoever laughs at the four metres does not laugh appropriately, but anyone who laughs at the four and a half metres knows what he is laughing at” (*Postscript* 431nii). In this example, as in the previous one, two different approaches to life collide -- the approach of fantasy and the approach of precise measurement. Interestingly, Kierkegaard does not believe that simply telling a story about a giant is funny. In fact, it is inappropriate to laugh at fantasy -- there is nothing ridiculous, according to Kierkegaard, about telling stories about giants. The ridiculous aspect of the joke is the fact that it brings together the attitude of precise measurement, which characterizes the world of science or business, and the attitude of childlike wonder, which characterizes the world of fantasy. Fantasy writing has acquired a different texture since Kierkegaard’s time, but we can rephrase his joke to make the contradiction sharper or more pointed: Holophernes was exactly four meters and 208 centimeters tall and was prudently invested in a low-load mutual fund. For someone who cares about both fantasy and exact measurement, such a collision would be funny.

The concept of an “existential contradiction” is best invoked by examples rather than by a definition, because for different readers the same objective set of circumstances may or may not seem contradictory. We have to fill out a description imaginatively in order to get a joke, and it is always possible to imagine a scenario in which a contradiction is not funny. In another example, Kierkegaard writes that a priest who behaves like an actor is comical because he mixes contradictory spheres -- the aesthetic and the religious. A priest deals with issues of sin and salvation -- whether or not human beings are spending their limited time on Earth in the right way. An actor is involved in the aesthetic -- experiencing each moment of life fully so as to drain the greatest pleasure out of it. The comical situation Kierkegaard imagines is a priest who, for example, before comforting a man whose child has died at a funeral, practices his lines in front of a mirror: “God is with you in your loss. God is with you in your great loss. In your great loss, God is with you.” The example works if you think of it in a funny way -- which, according to Kierkegaard’s definition, means feeling a keen, if painless contradiction.

We will return to the “painlessness” requirement, since it raises its own set of questions -- painless for who? Suffice it to say at this point in our discussion that humor is a particular response to a contradiction, and that there are other ones available -- painful ones for example -- that are not funny. When we identify something as funny, therefore, we need to recognize that there is a contradiction present, but we also need to contextualize it in a particular way. If we imagine the situation such that the contradiction between the two ways of life cancels out, the humor vanishes. So for example, if you are genuinely committed to the aesthetic and believe in all contexts that religion is nothing more than a form of entertainment, there should be nothing funny about a priest practicing his lines in front of a mirror. If you are religious, and believe that the ability to incarnate a moment of grace through word and gesture is a gift from God, then seeing this at the child’s funeral would be no different than seeing it at a performance of *Lear*. We could also take a therapeutic perspective. Imagine that the priest genuinely wants to bring comfort to the bereaved but, because he has autism, is unable to do so. Now imagine that the priest starts studying with an actor so that he can comfort people more effectively. This would no longer be funny because the

contradiction would disappear -- the perspective of therapy lets us view his inability to perform from a non-aesthetic point of view, one that invites us to sympathize with the priest.

Just as we can retell these jokes so as to make them serious, one can also retell the jokes to make them little tragedies. *The Jazz Singer* essentially tells the story of a man who is torn between his commitments to art and religion and is disowned by his father as a result. It is a tragedy -- or, if we want to save "tragedy" for more exalted works of art, perhaps a tearjerker. Further, the conflict between risking one's life and counting one's money carefully, which characterizes the joke about the bookbinding, is also the root of *Sophie's Choice*. Sophie is tragically destroyed by having to pick one child, and if she does not pick either child the Nazis will kill both of her children. There are two contradictory approaches to life -- one says to maximize one's good things, the other not to co-operate with the murderers of one's children -- but the contradiction is certainly no joke. If Sophie were a collector of fancy cuckoo clocks and a customs official asked her to choose between her two favorite clocks, one could imagine with the right character and the right context that it would be funny for the same reason that Sophie's choice with the children is tragic. Clock-collecting Sophie is struggling with her desire to have as many clocks as she can, and her desire not to go along with the annoying customs inspector. Insofar as we view the struggle as one that does not cause us pain, her dilemma would be funny. It depends upon how we fill out the details imaginatively -- if Sophie needs both clocks to sell them in order to get medicine for her ill children, we are back at tragedy.

To help us get a better grip on existential contradiction and how it differs from incongruity or fallacious reasoning, Kierkegaard then asks us to imagine a case in which someone says, "...calmly and indifferently, 'I will offer my life for my country,' and then [adds] with the greatest pathos, gesturing and grimacing, 'Indeed, I would do it for ten rix-dollars' (*Postscript* 431nii). There is no logical contradiction here. At first blush, this seems similar to the joke about wagering your life on the bookbinding -- it is a contrast, on the one hand, between the mood of solemnity associated with self-sacrificing patriotism and, on the other, the standpoint of an accountant. Another aspect of this interpretation is the contrast between sacrificing one's life and counting a trivial amount of money, though, as in the example above, if the person needs the money for some tragic purpose the joke vanishes. However, Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the contrast between the calm indifference of the person when he offers to die for his country and his extreme emotional gestures when he offers to sacrifice his life for ten dollars suggests another interpretation of the joke. We are thrown off balance in evaluating somebody who is calm when sacrificing his life for his country, but excited and self-dramatizing when sacrificing his life for ten dollars. There are a number of contradictions we can seize upon -- whether that between taking one's life seriously and taking one's money seriously (a la Jack Benny's "Your money or your life -- I'm thinking, I'm thinking") or the contrast between extreme emotionality and a soberer, unemotional approach to life.

Another example of humor Kierkegaard offers is that of a four-year old child being condescending to a three and a half year old child by saying, "Come now, my little lamb." Kierkegaard's interpretation of the humor here is that it is one that causes us to smile rather than laugh at the sweet comedy of the scene. Neither child is "ridiculous per

se” and one is touched. Kierkegaard then says, “But the comic rests in the relativity that the one little one seeks to establish in relation to the other little one; what is touching is the childlike manner in which it is done” (*Postscript* 432nii).

This reveals another aspect of Kierkegaard’s picture. The contradiction here is between two possible attitudes we can take toward children -- one which views them simply as younger adults and one which views them with gentle condescension. If a child says, “I’m going to kill you,” we may feel our contradictory attitude even more keenly -- do we feel safe or threatened? If the child is three, we would perhaps feel safer, but if the child is seventeen, we would feel more threatened. In Kierkegaard’s example, the contradiction is accentuated by the fact that it is a child who is displaying the gentle condescension to another child. We adults find this amusing because it causes us to see a tension implicit in our practices. Why exactly are we justified in condescending to children? Is it because children know less than we do? But then the four-year-old is justified in having that attitude toward the three-year-old. In fact, children, like animals, seem to fall between two stools of our classification system. We can view them as fellow rational beings or as innocents or fools depending upon the context. In this case, the tension with respect to how we view children is accentuated by an event that brings it to the fore: the older child, with some justice, expresses the very condescension toward the younger child that we extend to both children.

This example also suggests how there are certain hard to categorize things and phenomena that commonly cause us to respond in contradictory ways, for example: foreigners, animals, children, sexuality, excrement, members of the other gender, money, the aged, and dead bodies. We will say more about Kierkegaard’s theory of the factors and how this gives us an explanation about how certain central features of human life – death and sex, for example – are hard to respond to. For now, though, it is sufficient to observe that in many areas of life that are highly interesting and where there is a lot at stake, two or more ways of responding exist in an uneasy truce. Sentimentality, tragedy, horror and the uncanny are all responses to these uneasy, contradictory phenomena.

To understand what sort of paradox interests Kierkegaard it is helpful to compare it to a different paradox: the sorites paradox. The sorites paradox, or paradox of the heap, stems from the observation that there are collections of stones that are heaps and collections of stones that are not heaps, but there is no clear dividing line between heaps and non-heaps. One cannot say that the addition of a single stone to a non-heap will produce a heap. This paradox can be resolved by accepting that the category of “heap” is vague and that when we are dealing with a vague concept we will always be faced with borderline cases. The paradox that interests Kierkegaard has a different structure.

Consider in contrast with a heap, a kiss. A kiss is paradoxical in a different way. A kiss is an act of communication and also a physical, animalistic, sexual act, but the more it is one the more it is the other. The more primal and physical a kiss is the more deeply it can be an expression of love. We can’t draw a dividing line between spiritual and physical kisses as we can with heaps and non-heaps, saying that, say, once the tongue is involved kisses are starting to become less human and more animal. A kiss is intrinsically spiritual and animalistic at the same time -- it is not blurry and amenable to sharpening but is paradoxical, so to speak, all the way down. The uneasiness of the

combination, an uneasiness which cannot yield to a simple drawing of a line, is what makes sexuality a lively topic for the comic.

Comedy is for Kierkegaard “joining” a contradiction together in existence. He tends to explain it by pointing out how easy it is to fail to do so. It is easy when faced with a contradiction for us to slip into a sort of temporally-stacked self-deception. At times we notice that kisses are physical and at times we notice that they are communicative, but we do not, Kierkegaard believes, usually face both facts head on and live in a way that owns up to the contradictions in our lives. We evade them in slippery fashion by looking at one face of life at one time and another face of life at another. He thinks we can do better, but it is difficult:

The painless way out is not denying either set of factors but joining them in existence:

To abstract from existence is to remove the difficulty, but to stay on in existence in such a way as to understand one thing at one moment, another at another moment, is not to understand oneself. Yet, to understand the greatest opposites together and understand oneself existing in them is very hard. Just pay attention to yourself, and to what people say, and you will see how seldom it succeeds.
(*Postscript* 297)

He continues this passage by listing many contradictions which characterize human life: being good and being shrewd, laughing and weeping, being contrite about sin but also happy and carefree. In all cases it is hard to come up with a response, or a way of life that does justice to both sides at the same time. Comedy is one such response that allows us to engage fully and emotionally with both sides of a contradiction. The children in Kierkegaard’s example are hard to categorize because we are pulled in two different directions, and each direction causes us to put something at stake. Either we treat the child as a little adult and take his condescension to the younger child at face value, or we treat the child as something other than an adult -- without responsibility. In concrete cases, of which Kierkegaard gives the example of the child condescending to the younger child, the act is not simply hard to classify but there is a risk and a reward for each kind of classification. Treat the child as worthy of adult consideration and you run the risk of expecting too much and traumatizing him. Treat the child as too childish to be taken as a responsible agent and you risk denigrating his agency. In the case Kierkegaard gives, we do not need to decide but can gently smile at the fact that we are pulled in two directions. But if we change the setting and imagine a child who is testifying at the witness stand after having seen a horrible crime -- in which case we would be forced to determine whether to treat the child as an adult or a child -- then we have a potentially tragic scenario.

Kierkegaard’s examples extend the notion of contradiction from a logical category to an existential one. To tell if a situation is a contradiction does not simply require logic and definitions of words. It also calls on our resources of imagination. To quote another one of Kierkegaard’s examples, “When a man applies for a permit to establish himself as innkeeper but is turned down, that is not comic; but if the application is turned down because there are so few innkeepers, then it is comic, a reason in favour being used as a reason against” (*Postscript* 432nii). We need to imagine the situation

thoroughly to see what the joke is here. This is the comedy of the mad bureaucracy -- bureaucrats always give reasons but the reasons are so bound to the functioning of the bureaucracy that they become separated from the reason the bureaucracy was formed in the first place. If the reason was just a lie -- if the bureaucrat was claiming that the reason the inn keeper's request for a license was turned down was that there were too few innkeepers -- but really he was just saving up his license allowance to give one to his nephew -- then we would be looking at a straightforward example of corruption, and there would be no comedy. Comedy comes from the contradiction between the internal perspective of the organization, office, or bureau that for some reason says that not having enough applications is a reason to deny applicants, and our external perspective that if there are too few inns we need more innkeepers and therefore more licenses.

Kierkegaard then argues that a girl applying for permission to be a prostitute is comic: "We properly feel that it is difficult to become something respectable (e.g. when an applicant is turned down for the post of master of hounds, that is not comic), but to have an application refused for becoming something contemptible is a contradiction" (*Postscript* 432nii). Again, making the joke work requires some imagination. If we are living in a post-AIDS world in which prostitutes are called commercial sex workers and the board of health provides certain rules for safe sex -- say, requiring condom use -- and licenses for prostitution are given to those who comply with public health regulations, there is nothing comical in a girl applying for a license to be a prostitute. However, if being a prostitute is considered something contemptible and base, then there is a contradiction between the profession of prostitution and both the rules of applying for a license and the possibility of being turned down. It is similar to an undergraduate applying for permission to cheat on an exam and then failing to get the permission. Kierkegaard continues, "Of course, if she receives permission, that is also comic, but the contradiction differs, it is that, precisely in showing its power, the legal authority shows its lack of power: its power by making it legal, its lack of power by being unable to make it permissible" (*Postscript* 432nii). In our version of the example we could say that the university, by issuing its students official permission to cheat, proves its impotence. In trying to exert control over cheating it is also showing that it has no power over cheating. There are thus two incompatible perspectives we can use to make sense of the comical cheating waiver or prostitution license. One perspective holds that the authority has power over everything -- after all, it issues a license not only for taking classes or getting married but also for cheating at a class or being a prostitute. The other perspective maintains that the cheating students or prostitutes are able to do what they want to do, and the organization's authority to put its imprimatur on their activities is an impotent fig leaf. It is either a sign of the organization's power or its powerlessness, and we shuttle back and forth between the two opposing ways of understanding the situation.

Kierkegaard does appeal to the notion that something can be "inherently comic" even if we do not notice it (*Postscript* 432nii). How can this be the case, if the comic has to do with conflicting perspectives we bring to a situation, rather than the situation itself? It is more accurate to say that the opposed ways of dealing with the situation are built into the situation, but that we can miss them. So, if there ought to be two conflicting ways of dealing with a phenomenon and we only notice one, we are missing the inherent comedy of the situation. For example, you could imagine a university wherein the

cheating license has become so established that it is taken for granted; nevertheless, inherent in the practices of the university is the potential to view cheating as something that makes the hard work of the other students meaningless. If the administrators of the university never notice that a cheating license is a ridiculous idea, it would still be ridiculous -- and if someone brings it to their attention in the right way they would find it so. Kierkegaard reflects upon the issue of tiredness -- a comical situation that has become commonplace and no longer makes us laugh: "When something inherently comic has become customary and a commonplace, it does not give us pause; we laugh at it only when it appears to the second power. Knowing that a man is absent-minded, one gets used to it and does not reflect on the contradiction, until once in a while it becomes two-layered" (*Postscript* 432nii). The idea is that being absent-minded is essentially a comical thing. We can flesh this out: someone who promises to do something very solemnly but then forgets about it is funny because of the contradiction of viewing the person in two ways -- as an autonomous being worthy of respect who is able to make promises, and as a frail, unreliable, fallible human. However, once we have become used to a particular absent-minded person's quirks, we are no longer as likely to activate the former horn of the contradiction. The absent-minded behavior of Professor Smith does not amuse us when we expect it. Kierkegaard gives the following example: "An absent-minded person puts his hand into a bowl of spinach served by the waiter, and on discovering his distraction, to conceal it he says, 'Oh, I thought it was caviar,' for caviar is not eaten with the fingers either" (*Postscript* 432nii).

Kierkegaard continues, "By its involvement in contradiction something that is not inherently ridiculous may cause laughter. If a man ordinarily goes around oddly dressed but then for once, finally appears in elegant attire, we laugh at this because we recall the other" (*Postscript* 432nii). When we are looking at human beings who themselves are dealing with their environment from a certain perspective and see this perspective undercut, that is a prime area for the comic:

If a soldier stands in the street and gazes at the wonderful window display of a fancy-goods store, and comes closer for a better look, with glowing countenance and eyes fixed only on the window display failing to see the basement yard becoming unduly near, and just as he is about to have a really good look, he disappears into the basement, then the contradiction is in the movement, the direction upward of the head and gaze, and the direction down, infernally, into the basement. Had he not been gazing upwards it would not have been so ridiculous. So it is more comic for a man who walks about gazing at the stars to fall into a hole in the ground than when it happens to someone not thus elevated above the earthly... (*Postscript* 432-433nii)

After a few more examples Kierkegaard concludes that one can find the comic anywhere if one looks enough for it:

Contrast produces a comic effect through contradiction, whether the situation is that of the inherently non-risible being used to make the risible risible, or of the risible making the inherently non-risible risible, or of the risible and the risible making each other risible, or of the situation making the inherently non-risible

and the inherently non-risible become risible. If a German-Danish priest declares from the pulpit, 'The word became pork' (Fleisch) [John 1:14], that is comic. (*Postscript* 433nii)

He concludes the footnote with a joke: "Let these examples be enough, and let anyone put off by this note leave it unread" (*Postscript* 434nii). This is a joke because if we have come so far to be put off by the examples, we clearly are no longer in a position to leave it unread.

3. Joking and Subjective Thinking

Commentators who find something funny in Kierkegaard's notion of subjective thinking and his motto "truth is subjectivity" are correct. Subjective thinking is like joking: it is a response to an existential contradiction. It makes us keenly aware of a contradiction and points to, although it does not achieve, a way out. The fundamental contradiction that Kierkegaard is concerned with is that we are, as human beings, a set of opposing factors. Our existence itself is a monstrous contradiction:

...imagination, feeling and dialectics with passion in the inwardness of existing are what are required for a subjective thinker. But first and last passion, since it is impossible in existing to think about existence without becoming passionate, because existing is a monstrous contradiction which the subjective thinker has not to abstract from, which is no great trick, but to remain in. (*Postscript* 293)

The factors can be boiled down to the fact that we need to care about our lives, but what we care about is finite and vulnerable. Subjective thinking, which is expressed in paradoxical formulations such as "truth is subjectivity" and "the riskiest thing is a life without risk," heightens this monstrous contradiction.

This explains why commentators who paraphrase Kierkegaard and commentators who warn us against paraphrase both have a valid point. A joke can be paraphrased. One can ask what the point is of a joke, or miss the point. If someone makes a coy racist or sexist joke we can challenge the joke by restating it and making the offensive underlying assumptions explicit. However a paraphrase of a joke is not funny. When we are enjoying a joke we are responding to it in a special way, that paraphrase misses. This is exactly the same phenomenon that has split commentators on the issue of Kierkegaard's paraphrasability. When subjective thinking is "working" -- when we are engaged in it -- it resists paraphrase. Yet it is also true that we are able to paraphrase it.

Why are both things true? In the following chapter I will argue that this is because both joking and subjective thinking are rooted in a peculiar form of temporality. It is to this we now turn.

Chapter Three: Humor, Subjective Thinking and Retroactive Temporality

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, we argued that both joking and subjective thinking are examples of keenly facing a contradiction that we care about. However, Kierkegaard is aware that not every keenly felt contradiction is comic. Sophie's choice of which child to allow the Nazis to murder is a contradiction between two perspectives: the perspective that a mother should do whatever she can to save her children, and the perspective that a mother should never give up one of her children to be killed. This is a tragic and unfunny contradiction. Kierkegaard addresses this issue by bringing in the temporal part of his formula. Comedy is not simply a response to a contradiction; it is a contradiction that stands in a peculiar relationship to time. Kierkegaard writes, "The difference between the tragic and the comic rests in the relation of the contradiction to the idea. The comic grasp brings out the contradiction, or lets it become manifest, by having the way out in mind; that is why the contradiction is painless" (*Postscript* 432-433).

Having the way out "in mind" is in contrast, one could say, to having the way out "in hand." That is, the joke -- and I have been arguing, a Kierkegaardian philosophical formulation, such as "truth is subjectivity" -- makes us keenly aware of a contradiction, and points us towards moving forward, but does not actually move us forward. It is for this reason that we are able to be aware of the contradiction, but it does not cause us pain. It suggests, hearkening back to Aristotle's distinction between comedy and tragedy, that contradiction will have a happy ending.

A joke makes us aware of a contradiction without resolving it. It is neither denying a side of the contradiction, nor is it explaining that one side or the other or both should be abandoned in favor of a new reframing of the problem. The prostitute who applies successfully for a prostitution license makes us aware of the contradiction between a perspective where the right thing to do is what is socially approved and a perspective where the right thing to do doesn't depend upon things like licenses. The joke makes us aware of both sides and in this respect it is like the heroine of this joke is like Sophie. However, the joke has a way out in mind although it does not explain the way out. We become aware that the prostitute in the joke has gotten on with the business of living successfully with her license, even though we do not have a clear, comprehensive account of morality that explains how that is possible. Harkening back to Aristotelian categories, the prostitute differs from Sophie because her story has a happy ending, while Sophie in Styron's novel commits suicide. The joke is a vehicle for us achieving self-knowledge -- after we enjoy the joke we cannot be in denial about the strange relationship of morality and social convention -- but it is not a path towards a settled self-knowledge that can give a satisfactory account of itself. The joke has the way out "in mind" in the sense that it is pointed optimistically towards a rapprochement, but it does not have the way out "in mind" in the sense that it has a clear account of what the way out is. The joke is painless because although it is not yet a successful response to contradiction it makes us feel that we are pointed in the direction of moving forward with success.

2. Retroactive Temporality, Joking and Paraphrase

The intimate importance of timing to joking is a cliché. A joke is stretched out in time -- there is a set-up and then a punch line. After a tragedy a joke may seem inappropriate, and the joker may inquire: "Too soon?" Comedy is tragedy plus time. All these observations point to an intimate connection between joking and temporality. So, does, if we unpack it a little, Kierkegaard's claim that joking has the "way out" "in mind." If a joke has the way out "in mind" it has not taken the way out yet. It points towards it but has not yet achieved it.

In this chapter I will argue that Kierkegaard's subjective thinking and joking are both rooted in a distinctive kind of temporality which I will call "retroactive temporality." This distinctive kind of temporality, I will now go on to argue, explains why the insights of subjective thinking, such as "truth is subjectivity," both invite and resist paraphrase. I will argue that although our path into subjective thinking has been academic and intellectual, the actual phenomenon is something much more basic to our embodied lives.

A path to understanding the phenomenon of retroactive temporality is to reflect on the fact that once a joke is thoroughly understood, it is no longer funny. Our understanding of humor oscillates between these two perspectives -- the "time during the joke" during which it is actually funny, and the time that arises once we thoroughly understand it and it is no longer funny.

Kierkegaard explores this kind of retroactive temporality in *The Concept of Anxiety* by a penetrating reflection on the Christian doctrine of original sin. At some point in time, human beings lost their innocence. To lose innocence requires an act of sin. But an act of sin can only be performed by someone who knows what good and evil are, something an innocent person (by definition) does not know:

That the time of dogmatics and ethics, as well as one's own time, has often been wasted by pondering what might have happened had Adam not sinned merely proves that one brings along an incorrect mood, and consequently an incorrect concept. It would never occur to the innocent person to ask such a question, and when the guilty asks it, he sins, for in his esthetic curiosity he ignores that he himself brought guiltiness into the world and that he himself lost innocence by guilt. (*Concept of Anxiety* 36)

To begin to unpack this difficult passage, consider the following train of thought. The problem of thinking about innocence is like the problem of thinking about what it is like never to have learned to read when we can read. There was a time when I could not read, but now that I can read I cannot look at the letters of a language I understand without reading them. If I try to remember the alphabet blocks I played with when I was an illiterate three-year-old, I can conjure up an image of blocks with letters that I can read. I remember my state of illiteracy in the past as a reader now, because now, I can read. Finding this same pattern in the situation of original sin, Kierkegaard writes: "Innocence is not a perfection that one should wish to regain, for as soon as one wishes for it, it is lost, and then it is a new guilt to waste one's time on wishes" (*Concept of*

Anxiety 37). There may have been something good about not being able to read, however I cannot now aspire to that state because I can no longer imagine it. I could undergo a brain operation that renders me unable to read, but as I slip under anesthesia I have no idea what the world will be like when I wake up. All I can imagine is what losing literacy will be like for a literate person; I cannot imagine what never having been literate is like because the illiterate person is not giving up a possibility that he has already. Now that I can read, I regard the time that I could not read as a state of illiteracy, but that was not how it seemed to me when I could not read. As Kierkegaard makes this point with respect to ignorance (which is like illiteracy in my example) and knowledge (which is like literacy in my example): “The fact that ignorance when viewed from without is regarded as something defined in the direction of knowledge is of no concern whatever to ignorance” (*Concept of Anxiety* 37).

An illiterate person cannot fully understand the state of illiteracy, because he does not really know what he is missing. In another sense, a literate person cannot fully understand the state of illiteracy either, because he cannot imagine an alphabet block without reading its letters. If this is the case, neither literate nor illiterate people fully understand the state of illiteracy, and so nobody does. Yet we know that literacy is a real thing -- people are born not knowing how to read and then over time they can learn how to do so. If we try to get a grip on the experience of illiteracy, we find ourselves waffling back and forth between two perspectives, or using makeshifts -- comparing our relationship to an alphabet we do not know (Arabic, say) to the illiterate’s relationship to written language. None of these makeshifts really do the job, and yet we cannot deny the truth of the overall picture that many people are born not knowing how to read and then learn how to do so.

Similarly, the concept of “losing innocence” only belongs to the conceptual repertoire of a person who is no longer innocent. Yet we know that according to Christian doctrine there was a time before sin was operative in the world and also a time when it was. Kierkegaard concludes that there is no way out of this particular puzzle, because the attempt to think about the topic in this particular way is itself a sin. In Christian terms, although the concepts of sin and innocence came into the world at a particular time, in another sense right now they structure how we think about the past, even the past that precedes the emergence of this very distinction between sin and innocence. As Kierkegaard explains in *The Concept of Anxiety* about Adam and Eve, these two had been innocently naked together without paying any attention to it, but once they got knowledge of “nakedness” and how shameful that state it, they realized that not only were they naked *now* but that they were *always* naked. They cannot look back on their past without seeing it as a past of shameful nakedness. Their past is retroactively transformed into a past of nakedness. It is such a strain of thought that leads Kierkegaard to claim that even attempting to imaginatively put ourselves in the shoes of a Garden of Eden Innocent Adam and Eve is itself a sin. Right now, if we are Christian we have always already been sinners, and our attempt to understand what it is like never to have sinned is itself therefore a sin. We are in strange temporal waters -- although from one point of view sin or literacy had a definite beginning in time, from another point of view once they emerged it is impossible for us not to see ourselves and the world as though they were always already there, which means that we as sinners (or literate people)

cannot imagine an earlier state of ourselves during which we did not sin, or could not read.

To cite an example of Ian Hacking's, suppose we ask whether sex between an adult and a child was child abuse in ancient times (Hacking 125). There must have been a time in the past when such an act would not have been considered child abuse -- say, ancient Rome -- but in the present age if an adult has sex with a child it is undeniably child abuse. How do we think about the transition? It is very difficult because the more we imagine the case -- of a child in the grotto of the Emperor Tiberius, for example -- the more we feel that it was clearly child abuse. We are pulled in two conflicting directions -- one where we apply our ethical category of "child abuse" without questioning it, and one where as historians we are loath to apply our current categories to ancient Rome.

When we think about a joke, we are in the same position as the historian puzzling over whether to apply our concept of "child abuse" to the Roman case and of the intellectualist evading his sin by trying to figure out how sin could possibly have come into the world. After the historian has decided that what Tiberius was up to in the grottoes was child abuse, he will not be puzzled. After the sinner has decided that in all relevant senses he himself brought and is bringing sin into the world, he will no longer be baffled.

As we saw above, Kierkegaard believes a joke shows us a painless way out of a contradiction. In other words, we start in a state of conceptual logjam and the joke lets us become aware of the logjam and move forward. Whether or not we can paraphrase a joke depends upon whether we imagine ourselves at the stage of the joke when we feel the contradiction keenly, or whether we imagine ourselves having already achieved the way out that the joke makes possible. In the first case the joke is not paraphrasable, but in the second case it is. This is an easy point to be confused by because the peculiar temporality of a joke is such that once it is successful the earlier state of confusion is invisible and so is the joke.

All these examples of retroactive temporality -- literacy, innocence, and child abuse -- exhibit an uneasy shifting between two perspectives, the perspective in which the change has been resolved and the perspective in which the change is in motion. This is very evident in the case of joking. In a sense, we can think that jokes are a way of powerfully experiencing and resolving a contradiction only when we are thinking post-joke about a joke that we no longer find funny. We believe that this is what is happening in a joke that is currently funny to us, but if we think about it too hard we will resolve the joke and no longer find it funny. While we are in the middle of the joke it is hard to describe -- the two perspectives and their ultimate resolution all attract us, but we do not land anywhere.

This can seem more mysterious than it is. Let me clarify by providing two analogies, the first from the realm of law, the second from a simple office procedure. Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. suggested that Ms. Bonauto, in seeking the legal right for same-sex marriage, was asking the court to do something radical. As he said, "You're not seeking to join the institution. You're seeking to change what the institution is" ("What the Supreme Court Justices Said on Gay Marriage"). How do we evaluate the issue between Bonauto and Roberts? Is Bonauto asking to join an institution or change it? Bonauto believes she is asking for two women to marry, not for the

institution of marriage to be changed. While this issue is up for grabs, it resists paraphrase in a very particular way -- an attempt to paraphrase it takes a side on the issue at hand. Suppose her claim is that "two women should be allowed to marry." Although the word "women" can be paraphrased as "female adults," the word "marriage" cannot. If we attempt to paraphrase her claim -- "two women should be allowed to marry" as "two women should be allowed to have a binding union" or "two women should be allowed to have a romantic contract recognized by the state," our paraphrase fails as long as the situation is in flux. In 2017, there is no agreement between Roberts and Bonauto or within American society as a whole as to whether marriage equality constitutes joining the institution of marriage or changing the institution of marriage. Just as in the joke about the woman applying for the prostitution license, where there is no agreement as to whether prostitution is something that can be allowed or cannot be allowed, so in this case there is no agreement as to whether an institution is being joined or changed.

Imagine now that marriage equality becomes widely accepted. The generation for whom it was a live issue passes from the scene and is replaced by one who views it as unproblematic that same-sex couples get married. To this generation Roberts' argument will seem mysterious. They will wonder how, in the dark ages of 2015, a sitting member of the Supreme Court could regard the logical extension of an institution's protection to an unfairly discriminated-against minority as a change in the institution. Bonauto's argument, in 2030, will then have been so successful that it will be hard to see why it existed or what it meant. In 2030 it will, in one sense, be easy to provide a paraphrase of what was at issue in 2015. We could say, "The society did not extend protection to all forms of marriage," "Society's marriage laws discriminated against same-sex marriages," or "Husbands and their husbands were stigmatized." However, in another sense these paraphrases will all miss the point of how things looked in 2015, when it was up for grabs whether or not the change that was being considered was joining an institution or changing it. All the paraphrases are possible because the work of social change has already been accomplished. At the time that the social change is still going on, paraphrase is not paraphrase -- it is a contentious move in an ongoing legal fight. What is the answer to the question "Can 'two women should be allowed to marry' be paraphrased?" There is no answer -- it oscillates as long as the situation is in flux. Straightforward cases from the past can be paraphrased, but contentious ones both can and cannot be paraphrased. There is no answer to the question "Is Bonauto joining or changing?" and therefore no answer to the question "Can her language be paraphrased?" As we saw, in a society where commercial sex work is a shame-free, legal activity the joke about the prostitute applying for a prostitution license ceases to be funny. The joke allows us to feel our way around in a situation of conceptual flux. In fact at a gay wedding I attended, the officiating judge got a laugh by saying, "I now pronounce you wife and..." and then pausing before finally saying "wife." The participants in the wedding were not sure of the language and this uncertainty provoked laughter. For young people who grow up in an environment in which two women marry as a matter of course, "wife and wife" will not be funny in the least.

Consider another example of the interaction of retroactive temporality and paraphrase. Let's say you and I are clerical workers in an office and have been tasked

with sorting unsorted papers into two boxes: one for long ones and one for short ones. I reach into the box of unsorted documents and hold them up one by one and we say, "Short. Short. Short. Long. Short."

Suppose now that all of the documents we have encountered are written on eight and a half inch by eleven-inch sheets of paper in eleven or twelve-point type, and that we have been classifying documents as either "short" or "long" based on number of pages. This need not be an explicit rule -- we could just eyeball them and see how hefty they are -- but we could say "short" is anything shorter than ten pages. Now suppose we take out of the box a single big piece of paper -- two feet by two feet -- covered with tiny handwriting, and we are puzzled by what to do with it. (Maybe one of the lawyers for the firm needed to draw up a will and only had wrapping paper handy.) We look at each other for a moment, thrown off our game. It is only one page long -- that's a quality of documents that are short -- but it has a lot of words in it -- that's a quality of documents that are long. We don't know the purpose of our activity beyond what I've told you -- it could be that the documents will be transcribed, which would make you think word-count is important, but it could also be that they will be stored in crates at a storage facility, which might make you think that what's important is actual physical page count. You look to me for guidance -- maybe I have worked there longer or I just seem like the sort of person to defer to and I say, "Let's call that 'long.'"

As in the case of Roberts' argument with Bonauto, the act of saying "Let's call that 'long'" can be described in two different ways depending upon where we are in the process. If we are face to face with the weird, hard-to-sort document, we could have called it a weird, hard-to-sort document. But if we describe what we did the next day, we don't have to call it weird or hard-to-sort anymore, unless we want to relive the crisis. If I called it a "long" document yesterday and that worked -- I didn't lose my job, nobody got in trouble, nobody got confused -- it just was, we can now say, a long document. My act of naming in retrospect is simply an act of sorting. Acts of naming, if they do their job well, disappear. I don't call it a weird document in retrospect -- I call it a long document.

The point of all this is to show how practice of paraphrase displays a form of the peculiar temporality we were discussing above. Paraphrase functions very differently based upon where and when we imagine ourselves to stand in the process. Paraphrase is an unproblematic feature of our normal sorting practice. If I want to vary the monotony, I can always call the long documents "lengthy" or get you to put the long documents in the right place by saying "put it in the box by the window" (if that is where we have been putting the long documents). But at the moment I am naming the problematic document "long" I had better not paraphrase -- I had better use the exact expression "long" so as not to confuse anyone. If I say it's "lengthy" just to relieve the monotony, I will get in trouble -- it will seem to you that I'm proposing a third category of "lengthy" documents. However, once the moment of crisis has past and I am looking back on the events of the day, I can employ paraphrase about the giant document written on wrapping paper by saying, "We had a really lengthy one from the Smith case." While I am currently in the thick of it, as it were, I can't paraphrase what to call a label for the weird document because that would be making a suggestion about what to call it, and what to call it is precisely what is at issue. Paraphrase is an innocent diversion when we are

sorting, but when we are naming, it is critically important -- a misstep in paraphrase could lead to misfiling which could cause us to lose our jobs as file clerks.

The more successful we are in our naming, the more it stops seeming like an act of naming and the more it seems like an act of sorting, and the more we are able to paraphrase it. The more nervous we are the riskier it seems, and the more its naming-aspect comes to the fore, the more resistant we are to paraphrase. People can get quite emotional in these situations: "I did not say 'lengthy,' I did not say 'wordy,' I said 'long!'" These are situations in which authority is exerted and also challenged. In a rule-based office there may be appeals to the efficiency of the office. In a tradition-based office you could say, "That's how old Mr. Bates would have classified it." In an office based on your personal force of character you could say, "Trust me. That's long and we won't get fired." The point is this: if naming is successful it looks like a successful act of sorting. It becomes difficult to imagine how we could see it as anything else.

The same-sex marriage example and the office clerk example exhibit a similar structure. In each case the users of language are confronted with a difficult logjam, and it is not clear how to proceed. In one case the society is at odds about whether to call the romantic union of two men a marriage, and in the other case a pair of workers are not sure whether to call a huge piece of wrapping paper covered with handwriting a long document. In both cases if the group of speakers manages to go on, they are able to paraphrase what the issue was; they are not, however, able to paraphrase the issue at the moment of crisis. At the moment of crisis language-use is risky and exciting, and every move is fraught with promise and danger. When the crisis is over, the issues that previously seemed lively have become banal.

This has shown that the difficulty of paraphrasing Kierkegaard's thought and the difficulty in paraphrasing a joke both stem from a particular temporal situation in which how we look at the world is in flux. We have the ability to imagine ourselves on the far side of this conceptual flux and to paraphrase how things will look then, but were not there yet, and this gives us a doubled or split perspective. I have argued that both subjective thinking and joking have the same peculiar temporal structure and the same ambivalent relationship to paraphrase. We can't say of subjective thought whether it can be paraphrased or not. We can't say of a joke either what the point is or that it has no point. In both cases, the act we are looking at transforms the way we talk about the situation so that, in the case of success, it becomes hard to imagine it had ever been different. This self-cancelling form of temporality explains the ambivalent nature of paraphrase, which we first noted in our discussion of the dueling perspectives of Dreyfus and Conant on Kierkegaard's thought.

3. Joking, Retroactive Temporality and the Phenomenology of Losing and Regaining Poise

In the preceding I have argued that retroactive temporality explains the ambiguous relationship to paraphrase found in joking and Kierkegaard's subjective thinking. In the following section I will argue that this sort of temporality does not only come up when we are looking at intellectual issues. In fact it is rooted in certain basic phenomena of engaged, bodily coping. A consideration of the phenomenon of poise, as described by Samuel Todes, will explain how laughing involves a fall out of our basic

human capacity to be drawn into a situation and a subsequent reorientation. This basic ability, to have poise, lose it, and regain it, underlies our ability to do something as sophisticated as subjective thinking. It is the deeper explanation of the phenomenon that Kierkegaard describes, and shares with it a peculiar retroactive temporality as well as an ambiguous relationship to paraphrase.

To see how this works, we need to pay attention to how judgments are not instantaneous, punctual events, but are part of an evolving situation full of feedback loops. I do not just judge at a moment what is worth paying attention to and what is not worth paying attention to. As I respond to a situation, I pay more attention to some things and less to others. Some things show up focally and some recede to the margins or into the background.

Let's say I am carrying a big pile of laundry from the laundry room. As I pile the laundry into the basket, I am paying attention to how to get it in the basket. As I go up the stairs, I am paying attention to whether or not the socks at the top are going to fall out. I am not explicitly or cognitively noting what I pay attention to as I go up the stairs. Rather, my body is achieving a maximal grip on the situation because, from years of growing up and using these common items -- laundry, baskets, stairs -- and years of learning to balance in gravity and move my limbs, I have become a skillful human being with a maximal grip on situations such as these. It's not a strictly cognitive grip, however. It's not as if I'm consciously judging where to put my feet or how to balance the basket to keep the socks from tumbling out. I'm attentive without being able to enumerate the list of facts that I'm paying attention to and, as we've seen, if I do enumerate some of them, I thereby change what I am paying attention to, from the laundry basket to my own act of attention. My skillful coping is not obviously either voluntary or involuntary. The way I shift my weight in response to the heaviness of the laundry basket is not something I decide to do; rather, it seems in some sense to be *evoked* by the situation. However, you would not want to say that my journey from the laundry room up the stairs is mindless; there is sense to how my attention shifts from one aspect of the situation to another as it unfolds. Successful copers do not respond like automata, but they also do not on pain of regress have rules for what is worth putting in the foreground as the situation unfolds. Rather, they respond to the solicitations of the situation more or less skillfully.

On this picture of skillful embodied coping, time has a very different phenomenology than it does in the classical cognitivist account, according to which a conscious subject moves in a temporally linear sequence from a state where it has not yet judged through the act of judging to a state where it has judged either truly or falsely. If I'm walking up the stairs carrying a laundry basket and responding to the slope of the stairs, I don't first encounter the slope of the stairs and then decide what to do about them in a judgment that linearly follows from my perception of them. A continuous flow of activity allowing me to use the stairs is just what intelligent responding-to-stairs looks like. Viewing the stairs in a certain way and using them in a certain way merge into a seamless whole. Someone who, by contrast, is unable to use the stairs for walking up them isn't even encountering stairs. As Todes writes, "Poise is lost as soon as anticipations cease being met as rapidly as they are made. *There is no time interval between the having and the meeting of the anticipation of poise*" (Todes 72).

Todes uses the language of the determinate and the indeterminate, which shares features with the language of “the funny.” As we speak about or attend to the indeterminate, it morphs under our gaze into the determinate. As Todes writes, “The retroactive determination of needs by their being met covers up the fact that they first become determinate by being met. The meeting of a need first fixes it; but it is fixed retroactively as having been that determinate need all along” (Todes 178).

But -- and this is crucial -- what happens if I don’t pay enough attention to my surroundings, or if I don’t pay attention to the right aspects of the situation? What if, as I’m carrying the laundry up the stairs, a puppy emerges from the basket and starts licking my face? Would I weep? Gasp in horror? No. I would laugh. And if the laughing causes me to stop paying attention to the stairs and fall to the bottom -- and I was okay, even if I was in pain -- I would laugh quite a lot.

Laughter results when we are carried from a state of absorption to a state of confusion and then land in a new state of absorption that feels good. If we get shocked or surprised out of our state of absorption into one that feels bad, the response is grief or horror. If we get shocked out of our state of absorption and never land anywhere, the response is bewilderment or bafflement, like the breakdown situation Heidegger describes in *Being and Time* when the head of the hammer goes flying off.

The funny, however, is not the end state that we get into, recollected in tranquility. The funny situation is the whole journey. Just as Todes and Merleau-Ponty point out that, in a situation of absorbed coping, we need to know the whole story of an action that has reached equilibrium in maximum grip in order to specify any point of it, so in the journey of humor from familiar to strange to a new familiarity we need to track the whole journey in order to know we are dealing with something funny.

The ambiguous relationship to paraphrase and retroactive temporality are intimately related to the phenomenon of loss and regain of poise. Todes gives the example of what it is like to trip -- not after I have recovered my balance, but in the middle of the act:

Consider for example our condition while tripping, and up to but not including the point when we catch our self. In this interval we have lost our balance; in one fell swoop, our entire stock of poised responses (employable on condition that we are well balanced) is thereby rendered inoperable. For the moment, accordingly, we are not aware of knowing anything. We are not aware that we are tripping. We catch our self by an instinctive (rather than self-conscious) re-action, and only then come to realize what *did* happen to us. On our view, it is not just a familiar and seemingly insignificant fact that we cannot consciously know anything while tripping; it is a *necessary fact* because implied by the form of perceptual knowledge. (Todes 79)

This description is consistent with Kierkegaard’s view of a joke (or of subjective thinking) as tensing within a contradiction. A nonsensical phrase, as I have argued above, is by contrast essentially chaotic -- there is no particular interpretation that stands out as more likely than any other. As some interpretations of a phrase become more likely and others less so, it becomes less nonsensical. So in Lear’s “dong with a luminous nose,” we know it means somebody with some kind of nose, although not much

more. Similarly, when we are tripping we are not experiencing chaos. Our feet will not wind up on the ceiling, although our posterior may well wind up on the floor. In both cases -- interpreting a joke or tripping -- we are being rapidly drawn to a small number of different possible equilibrium points, either of standing or of interpretation. Some of these landing places may be fine but others may be painful or humiliating, and so we experience rapidly shifting emotions. Joking and subjective thinking, I submit, both bear a striking resemblance to tripping. Just as tripping disorients me such that, at least in a sense, I am no longer there -- I am too disjointed from my world and bewildered -- so too with laughter. Whether it's the low slapstick of falling, the philosophical high jinks of Sidney Morgenbesser, or word-play, humor jars us out of our normal pattern of coping and forces us to pay attention to new facts that we are not yet skillfully familiar with. If, in Merleau-Ponty's language, perception aims at giving me a maximal grip on the soccer balls of the world, when we are laughing we are holding on to that soccer ball by the tips of our fingers. In mid-trip I don't know anything. Upon recovering my balance, I retrospectively think about what happened as recovering from a fall. The temporal structure of tripping is like the temporal structure of humor. In both cases we have a grip on reality -- we lose it and then get it back, but during the moment of vertigo in between, we experience a loss of self-consciousness and a loss of the body. When we land, we retrospectively define what happened as a loss of equilibrium that we soon regained.

When we have recovered our equilibrium such that we can restate the point of the joke in sober terms, it is no longer funny. But while we were laughing we were in the process of shifting our attention to new things and coming to see things in a new way. That was the point of the experience. This approach works for many different types of humor, from biting mockery to convivial chuckling. Take a pun for example. Please. That requires a reparsing of the original grammar, and a moment of being at sea followed by a new equilibrium, where you catch my drift, but still feel a little of the vertigo of how easy it was to lose it. Or take Harpo's draping of his leg over the arm of someone shaking his hand. For a moment you are simply stunned. You didn't expect this bizarre child-man's leg on your arm -- you just wanted to shake his hand. But then you get a flash of insight -- wow, shaking hands really is putting your bodily limb in contact with this other person's bodily limb. It is intimate and weirdly sexual -- you just never noticed it before.

Tickling is a simple but visceral switch of focus from being attacked to being fine. The tickler goes for the most vulnerable parts of the ticklee's body and scores a hit that would be enough to cause damage if damage had been intended. But the ticklee realizes that no harm is done. Intellectual humor often occurs when it reminds us of features of human life that an intellectual formulation has neglected: often money, the body, sex or aggression. It's funny because it takes us from a tidy intellectual model to a larger context. The pompous philosopher says, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Sidney Morgenbesser's response, "If there was nothing, still you'd complain?" suddenly puts us at sea. What is he talking about? Who would complain? There's nothing! It's wrong to complain! But it's also wrong to lay guilt trips on people for being complainers in a philosophy seminar! That's not how we talk here! And why does Professor Morgenbesser sound like my Jewish grandma all of a sudden? We are at sea. We might land by formulating a theory of the importance of pragmatic indifference

to philosophical questions. We might land by deciding we don't like philosophy at all, like the narrator of Plato's *Parmenides*, who switches his love to horses. But in either case, once we land in a state of engaged coping we won't be laughing any more.

That's how joking and Kierkegaardian subjective thinking can both be acts of coming to learn something that resists paraphrase. We shift our attention to new facts and refocus our awareness, creating the possibility of a new mode of poise. Once the humorous episode is over, we can formulate our new awareness as an awareness of facts. In turn, this is how joking and Kierkegaardian subjective thinking can both be acts of coming to learn something that resists paraphrase. We shift our attention to new facts and refocus our awareness, creating the possibility of a new mode of poise. Once the humorous episode is over, we can formulate our new awareness as an awareness of facts.

4. More Examples of Retroactive Temporality: Illusion and Falling Asleep in Merleau-Ponty

I have argued in the foregoing that both joking and Kierkegaardian subjective thinking are rooted in retroactive temporality, and this in turn is to be explained by the phenomenology of the loss and regaining of poise. Once we understand retroactive temporality it can unlock other philosophical puzzles, and when we see how this works this can give us a better understanding of the phenomenon. In this section I will look at how retroactive temporality figures in two issues considered by Merleau-Ponty: illusion and falling asleep. Merleau-Ponty is a theorist of embodied consciousness and by examining how he approaches these questions we will understand how the phenomenon of poise and retroactive temporality work.

In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty discusses illusion and calls upon what I have been calling “retroactive temporality” to get the phenomenon right. He gives two examples: a patch of sunlight that I mistake for a large flat stone, and a tiny fly near my eye that I mistake for a large moving shadow. If I were a sense-datum theorist, I would attempt to say that there is something that I know I see -- a large expanse in the case of the stone, a blurry shape in the case of the fly -- and that this is certain, while the interpretation of the sense-datum, as a stone and as a shadow, is open to doubt. Merleau-Ponty wants to resist this picture, and in so doing discovers the phenomenon of retroactive temporality from another angle. For Merleau-Ponty, “Seeing, some distance away in the margin of my visual field, a large moving shadow, I look in that direction and the phantasm shrinks and takes up its due place; it was simply a fly near my eye. *I was conscious of seeing a shadow and now I am conscious of having seen nothing more than a fly*” (Merleau-Ponty 347).

Note the peculiar structure of his tense: I am now “conscious of having seen.” Although I was conscious of the shadow, I am now conscious of having seen a fly. My current consciousness of a fly causes me to redescribe my earlier experience. Now that I am locked in on the fly, it is no longer the case that I previously experienced a shadow. My awareness of the fly has changed the correct description of what I experienced in the past. We now “‘cross out’ the previous illusion and regard it as null and void” (Merleau-Ponty 347).

It is difficult to use language properly here -- we want to say, on the one hand, that I once mistakenly saw a patch of sunlight as a stone, and on the other, that I only saw a stone, because once I see it I “cross out” the previous illusion. Although the phenomenon is difficult to describe, it is not uncommon. It is difficult right now to describe what I am not paying attention to. There are numerous aspects of my environment that I am not paying attention to, but if I attempt to describe them, they vanish.

In Merleau-Ponty’s example, if I mistake a patch of sunlight for a rock and then realize my mistake, I retroactively never encountered a rock -- I always encountered a patch of sunlight. My subsequent perception of the sun-patch retroactively *cancel out* the faulty rock-perception. Does that mean Merleau-Ponty believes in time travel? No. He is expressing the peculiar non-linear temporality of ongoing coping. An act of sexual intimacy only counts as begetting a child if a child results from it, and only counts as the beginning of begetting a line of grandchildren if that child goes on to have children. The correct description requires knowing a story that may be incomplete and ongoing. Similarly, if we want to describe an episode of poise and maximal grip correctly, we need to know something about the ongoing course of the activity. An act that ends in a mistake is a different act than one that fits into an ongoing story of success.

This is also related to the phenomenon of prospective retroactive temporality. That is, I enter into a situation with the intention that if I succeed, the terms upon which I enter into the situation will be retrospectively redescribed. I flirt with an office worker with the hope of falling in love, hoping that in the future these initial forays will not be two strangers killing time, but the beginning of a love affair. Pascal recommends to the unbeliever that he go to mass. What seems like hypocrisy at first might soon be remembered as the first motions of grace.

The philosopher Jon Elster coined the term “intrinsic side benefit” to describe a goal that cannot be achieved by explicitly trying to achieve it. So for example, spontaneity perhaps cannot be achieved by keeping a to-do list of ways to achieve spontaneity; rather, we open ourselves up to the surprises of life and our response to these surprises. Nevertheless, the language of “intrinsic side benefit” is misleading; it suggests that the achievement of spontaneity can be thought of in the same way as the achievement of a college degree. Both are worthwhile goals that people reach by maximizing their utility functions, but spontaneity just has an added hidden wrinkle -- you can only achieve it by not achieving it. However, there is a clearer way of saying what is happening -- clearer and more radical. The unspontaneous man who wants to achieve spontaneity is not trying to achieve his goals, which happen to be hard to achieve, but trying to become a new person with different goals. It is not the same as a college degree at all. Rather, a person needs to change his personality so radically that when he becomes a new person he will retroactively redescribe this transformation as the step toward becoming who he is today, and thereby dropping a false, inhibited, unspontaneous self.

To see the difference between the two views of prospective retroactive temporality -- Elster’s and the one closer in spirit to Kierkegaard -- consider the example of sleep. Elster describes the example of the insomniac counting sheep to convey the notion of intrinsic side benefit. Sitting in bed and desperately trying to fall asleep will

keep us awake. Forgetting that our goal is sleep and counting sheep will allow us to achieve the intrinsic side benefit. This account raises puzzles. We must not only forget that we are trying to achieve what can only be achieved as an intrinsic side benefit, we must also forget that we must forget it, and so on. In *1984*, Orwell describes doublethink in precisely this way. The users of doublethink deliberately make themselves forget that they are using doublethink, so doublethink itself requires doublethink.

Yet it is hard to believe that something as common as falling asleep requires this complicated structure of self-effacing intentions. Merleau-Ponty describes falling asleep as follows:

I lie down in bed, on my left side, with my knees drawn up; I close my eyes and breathe slowly, putting my plans out of my mind. But the power of my will or consciousness stops there. As the faithful, in the Dionysian mysteries, invoke the god by miming scenes from his life, I call up the visitation of sleep by imitating the breathing and posture of the sleeper. The god is actually there when the faithful can no longer distinguish themselves from the part they are playing, when their body and their consciousness cease to bring in, as an obstacle, their particular opacity, and when they are totally fused in the myth. There is a moment when sleep 'comes', settling on this imitation of itself which I have been offering to it, and I succeed in becoming what I was trying to be: an unseeing and almost unthinking mass, riveted to a point in space and in the world henceforth only through the anonymous alertness of the senses. (Merleau-Ponty 189)

In this passage, Merleau-Ponty focuses on an ambiguity of perspectives regarding agency. From one point of view, the sleeper is trying to fall asleep and sleep is something he accomplishes. From another point of view, sleep is doing the acting -- sleep "comes" and while the person trying to get to sleep is offering an imitation, sleep completes the job by "settling" on the imitation of itself. To see the connection between this ambiguous agency and the ambiguous temporality we have been discussing, we need only ask the following: at what point does the switch occur? But there is no answer to the question. You can't ask the sleeping person -- he's asleep. You can't ask the person falling asleep -- if your question prompts him to focus on his activity enough to answer you coherently, he will wake up. Nevertheless, the transition from being awake to being asleep does occur. At some point the answer to the question, "What are you trying to do?" would rightly be, "Trying to fall asleep." At a later point the answer to the question, "What were you trying to do?" is silence, or perhaps a snore. To take the example of possession by the god, at some point we can ask the worshiper, "What are you trying to do?" and he will say, "I am trying to get possessed by the god Dionysus." At a later point we ask him again and he will say, "I am the god Dionysus. I was taking possession of my worshiper." The successful achievement of the change of consciousness or the change of agency, or change of categories with which we view our life, entails a retrospective interpretation of the process of coming to be in that state.

Another way to clarify this issue is to look at interruption. If I interrupt the person falling asleep, he will not fall asleep. So, given the interruption, he was not in the process of surrendering to sleep because sleep never came. This is exactly analogous to the case of the person under an illusion who is poised to interact with a patch of sunlight

as if it is a stone. The correct description requires knowing more about how the story unfolds in time. So, returning to the patch of sunlight case, imagine that at that instant Darth Vader vaporizes the sun, the earth, and the stone and teleports the man to a distant galaxy. Can we now truly say that the man was “poised to interact with a patch of sunlight as if it were a stone?” No, because the star that was emitting that sunlight was about to be destroyed. As it turns out he was not poised to interact with a patch of sunlight or a stone. In the normal case, however, he was poised to interact with a patch of sunlight as if it were a stone. Interruptions have to be exceptions for us to have lives at all; our normal lives require rhythm.

In both cases -- the sunlight-stone illusion and the person falling asleep -- the fact that we can tell a different story by imaging a scenario of interruption does not mean that we are compelled to tell that story in cases where there is no interruption. In the normal case, if the person falls asleep, the retroactive description is the correct one. The man fell asleep. In the case of the person mistaking the sunlight for a stone, the retroactive description is correct as well, he was not interacting with a stone because there was no stone.

The phenomenon of retroactive determination shows up in any case in which something that happens in the future changes how we describe or think about something in the past. Thinking about the sort of situation that would be retroactively determined before it has happened can make us lose our balance. Such cases are weird. When we try to describe them, that is, have accurate beliefs about the reality that is changing, we find ourselves drawn to express ourselves contradictorily. We say paradoxical things.

When we are interested in thinking about these cases we have a particular sort of paradoxical reaction. Do I want to be the sort of person who wants different things? How can I want something that I cannot get by wanting it? These situations are ones of *retroactive temporality viewed prospectively*. A human being is doing something now that, if it succeeds, will retroactively fall under a different description. Pascal’s atheist taking holy water is doing something that -- if it succeeds -- will retroactively be interpreted as the beginning of a religious conversion. However, if after a couple of masses he loses interest, it will be interpreted as a waste of time.

The phenomena described by Merleau-Ponty -- the correction of illusions and falling asleep -- both point out the importance of retroactive temporality to understanding the phenomena of basic, run-of-the-mill embodied human experiences. This buttresses my claim that retroactive temporality and the gaining and losing of poise explain humor as well. Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of these phenomena also adds credibility to Kierkegaard’s account of subjective thinking. The ambivalent relationship to paraphrase is what we would expect in an evolving, embodied thinker trying to understand itself.

The examples of illusion and falling asleep provide us with a phenomenology of retroactive temporality. They demonstrate that in quite ordinary circumstances we find it difficult to describe a conscious flow of experience, because we are challenged by the question of where to place our temporal perspective. Since our temporal perspective is evolving we are forced to use unusual expressions such as “it will have always have been the case” to describe them, and yet, although these expressions are unusual, the phenomena they point to are not. This temporal phenomenon, which we see also in the case of losing and regaining poise, underlies both humor and subjective thinking. Both of

these phenomena occur when our ordinary ways of dealing with a situation are conflicted or where they fail to get a comfortable grip. Consequently they are difficult to describe, for the same reason illusions and falling asleep can be difficult to describe. Kierkegaard's phenomenology of humor -- that we are confronted with a contradiction that is painless because we have the way out "in mind" -- is a description of this same sort of retroactive temporality. In a joke, or in philosophy we are faced with a difficult to categorize situation. When we discuss a joke or an episode of philosophy we face the same challenge: do we describe it from the temporal standpoint of the confusing, difficult-to-articulate moment, or as it will seem later once the contradiction has been resolved? In the former case we may find ourselves saying difficult-to-parse things, but if we take the latter choice we may gain in articulateness but lose the point. The fully explained joke is not funny, and the fully explicated episode of subjective thinking will stop seeming subjective at all.

6. Conclusion: Why Does Subjective Thinking Allow and Resist Paraphrase

We began our discussion in Chapter One by looking at two dueling interpretations of Kierkegaard's statement that "truth is subjectivity." According to Hubert Dreyfus, Kierkegaard's statement is true and follows from a contradiction in our cultural heritage, drawn as we are to the dispassionate theories of the Greek philosopher and the vulnerable emotional engagement of the Hebrew prophets. According to James Conant, Kierkegaard's statement is nonsense, and we are meant to achieve a therapeutic result by engaging with it. This left us with the question, "Why does Kierkegaard's thought both seem to invite paraphrase and resist it?" This question in turn led to the deeper questions: "What is subjective thinking?" and "Is Kierkegaard correct to value it so highly?" In Chapter Two we put forward joking as an example of subjective thinking, and argued that like joking it is a response to existential contradiction. In this chapter we rooted joking in the peculiar nature of retroactive temporality and used this in turn to explain why joking and subjective thinking resist paraphrase. Jokes, like subjective thinking, alter the terms of the game. While the alteration is still going, jokes cannot be paraphrased -- at least along the dimension that is up for grabs -- but once the situation has altered they can indeed be paraphrased, though they cease to be funny. We then rooted the temporality of joking and subjective thinking in an account of the phenomenology of poise -- what it is and what it feels like to lose it and regain it. We are now in a position to answer our initial questions.

Subjective thinking and joking are both appropriate to situations of flux. We are faced with a contradiction -- a small local one, or a huge, world-historical one. We have commitments that do not work well together and are imaginatively engaging with this fact, but we have not yet reached a point of stability. We are (in Todes's language) in the middle of a loss of poise. Like the person falling asleep, the person opening himself up to possession by the god Dionysus, or the person who trips having prepared to encounter a stone that is not there, we lose our bearings. But the joke provides an example that is closer to subjective thinking than any of these because, although we have lost our bearings, we are being drawn to the hope of a painless way out.

Subjective thinking and joking both allow paraphrase because if we imagine ourselves to have regained our poise we can state what things look like with regained

poise. Just as it is possible to state the point of a joke, Dreyfus and other paraphrasers are able to state the point of Kierkegaard's program. Although they can say it, this does not solve the problem of living it, which requires an excruciating tolerance for risk and vulnerability.

Joking and subjective thinking, I have argued, are both about helping us move forward from a situation of crisis or conceptual logjam. They are standpoints one takes up during the period of flux. If you paraphrase a joke you are on the way to no longer finding the joke funny. If you paraphrase an instance of subjective thinking, you resolve it. In the case of the joke about the woman applying for a prostitution license, the joke helps us think through contradictions about what can be allowed by the rules and what cannot. In the case of Kierkegaard's comment that "truth is subjectivity," the philosopher's work is a step towards helping us move forward from our cultural schizophrenia, caused by our dual Greek and Hebrew heritage. When we have resolved our tension about rules and prostitution, Kierkegaard's joke about the girl applying for the prostitution license will no longer be funny. When our culture has moved forward, Kierkegaard's writing will no longer be interesting.

However, both joking and subjective thinking resist paraphrase because if we imagine ourselves at a loss for poise, then we have no comfortable or reliable language to express how things look to us. Just as while we are in the middle of laughing at a joke we cannot state its point, so Conant is correct to draw our attention to an experience of reacting to Kierkegaard that we are unable to paraphrase.

Paraphrase is appropriate to practice on insights that have already become part of an intellectual bag of tricks, but not to insights that are still in the process of being formed. Subjective thinking confronts contradictions in our practices -- between our Greek and Hebrew heritage in the case of Kierkegaard, or between our treatment of animals as companions and as foodstuff in the case of the joke of the pig with the wooden leg. In Kierkegaard's image, it promises the harvest. It leads us to a painless path out of our difficulties and points towards a regaining of poise. But while we are still in the process of losing our poise we are not in a position to state how we will describe our lives when we regain it. Like a joke that is still funny, Kierkegaard's thought is still powerful and productive of conflicting interpretations because his job is not yet done. Joking and other forms of subjective thinking put us in the presence of the creation of new meaning while it is still malleable and molten. Humor is a kind of thought directed at the future, so we need to participate in forging a future to understand a joke. If it's a joke we find funny right now, that may be hard. We are, as it were, standing contemporaneously with the birth of thoughts, and don't know what they are until they have grown up.

This explains how we can resolve our initial worry that "truth is subjectivity" is somehow a self-defeating or self-cancelling insight. "Truth" is related at a deep level to the concept of "trust" -- a statement, a piece of wood or a person can all be said to be true if they are trustworthy. Kierkegaard's statement that "truth is subjectivity" at bottom then means that subjectivity is worthy of our trust. We should not place our bets on theory but on a vulnerable, particular approach to life. The statement "truth is subjectivity" is worth betting on because our best path to a meaningful life is engaged vulnerability. However, as a culture and as individuals we don't quite believe it. As long

as we are attracted to this statement but don't quite trust it, "truth is subjectivity" will seem to us a bit weird -- like a joke.

At this point we have accomplished our initial task, which was to understand what "truth is subjectivity" means and why it both invites and resists paraphrase. We answered it by arguing that Kierkegaard's thought is like a joke. This answer, however, raises a further question: why is it justified to practice philosophy by joking? In the next chapter we will turn to this question.

Chapter Four: Joking as a Model for Kierkegaard's Philosophical Practice

1. Introduction

In Chapter Two we saw that for Kierkegaard joking is a response to a contradiction that somehow engages with it and lets us move forward in a positive, successful way. Philosophy as Kierkegaard practices it – what he calls “subjective thinking” and which we have exemplified with the short, paradoxical statement “truth is subjectivity” – does the same thing. It responds to what Kierkegaard calls the “monstrous contradiction” of human life in a way that does not discount either side but provides a positive way forward.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether this response to contradiction counts as philosophy. An unsympathetic interpreter might respond “Perhaps what Kierkegaard is doing is like joking, but that is simply proof we should not take him seriously as a philosopher. Philosophy, like science, is a discipline that yields results, which we ignore on pain of abdicating our responsibility as serious thinkers. If Kierkegaard’s arguments require a sense of humor to appreciate, that disqualifies them as philosophical arguments.”

In this chapter I want to respond to this line of attack. I will first lay out the parallels between philosophy and joking, drawing on the conclusions of Chapter Two. I will then draw on the works of Stanley Cavell and Alva Noë to put forward an argument for why Kierkegaard’s use of humor in his philosophical practice is justified.

2. Parallels Between Joking and Kierkegaard's Philosophical Practice

In this section I will describe parallels between joking and Kierkegaard’s philosophical practice, taking as my jumping off point the definition of joking as a response to a contradiction that is painless because it has the way out in mind. I want to do this for two reasons: to use our understanding of joking to clarify Kierkegaard’s philosophical practice, and to use our understanding of the sort of thing philosophy is to clarify Kierkegaard’s somewhat schematic theory of humor. Ultimately these two activities share a common structure so making sense of them in tandem illuminates an important capacity human beings have for making sense of and living our lives.

The parallels between joking and subjective thinking, or Kierkegaard’s existential style of philosophizing, are:

- i. Both joking and Kierkegaard’s brand of philosophy respond to both sides of a contradiction without denying either one. In this respect they differ from denial on the one hand and from theoretical approaches that try to explain one side in terms of the other.
- ii. Both joking and existential philosophy run a risk; they are vulnerable to failure. When a comedian makes a joke he is aware that he could “die” – that is, he does not know before actually making the joke that it will succeed. In Kierkegaard’s language they “have the way out in mind,” which means they do

- not have the way out in hand – they are aiming towards a success but provide no guarantee of achieving it.
- iii. As a consequence of their vulnerability, both comedy and philosophy are ongoing. Once a discussion has reached a definitive conclusion it stops being philosophy, and once we have become masters of a topic that previously unsettled us we are no longer able to find it funny. As ongoing practices, both comedy and philosophy aim at a provisional success that provides pleasure and a way to move forward to the participants, but neither aims to be the joke that ends all joking on the topic, or the philosophical statement that would finally resolve just how it is that human beings could be both angel and beast. A joke or a philosophical contribution in Kierkegaard's sense is a risky, provisional stopping point, or a step forward in an ongoing conversation.
 - iv. The response to a joke is neither clearly voluntary nor clearly involuntary. We can laugh helplessly, but we can also do our best to help ourselves if we find ourselves amused by something cruel or bigoted. The response to a joke is not like the detection of sugar by the tongue or of light by the eye; the response to a joke calls into play our take on our lives and our acknowledged and unacknowledged fears, desires, and anxieties -- although the way it brings them to the fore may surprise us. Similarly, philosophy as Kierkegaard practices it surprises us and makes us acknowledge aspects of our lives that we may have wished to ignore; for example, he needles philosophers by asking them about their sex lives, their financial lives, and their fear of personal death and failure. He seeks a sort of "aha!" reaction where we see ourselves in his portrayal, although we are surprised by our own response. Both philosophy and humor reveal to us who we are by our (sometimes shameful) responses.
 - v. As we saw in our discussion of Conant and Dreyfus, both subjective thinking and joking have an ambiguous relationship to paraphrase. The person who is able to paraphrase jokes perfectly but doesn't laugh at them simply doesn't get them, but neither does the person who is utterly at sea about the point of a joke. The meaning of a joke resists paraphrase in the same way that subjective thinking does, and yet to say that a joke is utterly meaningless is also incorrect. This observation goes back to Cicero, who notes that it is both true that a joke has a point but that stating the point can ruin the joke.
 - vi. Joking is grounded in a concrete personal relationship between the joker and his or her audience. A positive response to a joke cements the relationship and a negative response can harm or even end the relationship. When we find someone who shares a sense of humor, we feel a bond. Often the joke works by seeming to challenge the relationship but then resolving it in a friendly way; so many jokes take the form of mock aggression, seeming like an insult at the outset but then resolving the ambiguity as non-insulting. Jokes trade on the flow from challenge to relief. As a consequence, if we try to force the joker to say clearly whether he is joking or not, we interfere with the success of the joke. A request to eliminate the inherently risky ambiguity of a joke is a refusal to engage in joking. In this sense joking is like flirting – someone who wants a definite answer to the question "Are you flirting with me?" is refusing to flirt. Similarly, subjective thinking as

- Kierkegaard practices it attempts to make a personal, risky, contextual relationship between writer and reader. If we attempt to answer the question “Is this really the way things are or just a seductive picture that tempts me to think that?” by stepping outside of the personal relationship, we ruin the book. Johannes Climacus puts himself forward as a personal, seductive, weird, individual who nevertheless seeks a personal response to his writing on the part of the reader. He emphasizes that the attempt to think “objectively” is an evasion of his point and a personal rejection of his approach.
- vii. Joking is neither clearly playing by the rules or clearly ignoring them and breaking them -- we can say it is essentially mischievous. Coming up with rules for when it is okay to joke and when it is not okay to joke is itself funny, like Kierkegaard’s example of the prostitution license, because joking is deliberately playing with the rules. Joking that is unambiguously correct and proper is not funny, but joking that is unambiguously a crime is not funny either. Jokers who insist on making sure that everything they are about to say will not offend anyone present are less funny. They are leaching the risky enjoyment out of the activity, and an old joke that is too safe is corny or a “Dad joke” – i.e. not funny for contemporary tastes. Similarly, Kierkegaard’s philosophical practice is designed to go close to breaking the rules of ordinary thinking but also to teasingly respect them. His relationship to other thinkers, like Lessing and Hegel, is neither clearly respectful nor contemptuous – it is teasing and mocking. The “objective thinker” is a necessary straight man for the subjective thinker, just as Socrates needs his more straight dialogue partners to do his job.
- viii. The relationship between humor and straight discourse, like the relationship between Kierkegaard and “straight” theorizing about human beings is ambiguous. One can with equal justice say that Kierkegaard is more sophisticated than an objective thinker -- because he is self-conscious about the activity of thinking and about its costs and benefits in a way that the objective thinker takes for granted -- but also that Kierkegaard is more mundane and grounded – he accuses the objective thinker of pretentiously floating away from his real human concerns. In the same sense a joke can both ground us, cutting through pretence, but be a more sophisticated, knowing response to the tricky terrain of life than a sentimental or straightforward response. Think of the relationship between irony and sentimentality. In one sense the sentimentalist’s response “Nothing is more touching than a puppy!” is unpretentious and the ironist’s sneer is sophisticated. From another perspective the sentimentalist is lying, pretending to feelings that he does not actually live, and the comedian is bursting his bubble and allowing true feeling to shine forth. Philosophy and comedy can cut through pretence but can also seem almost paradigmatically pretentious activities, for instance, when one makes a joke about things genuine people take seriously or raises idle questions to seem intellectual. The philosophical skeptic can try to be free of pretence -- which we might call pretentious unpretentiousness -- by claiming that we never “really see” anything; he claims to be avoiding a certain pretence in our claims to knowledge but could be accused of being pretentious

- himself. Similarly, the joker who claims to find everything a joke may be accused of a ridiculously affected attitude.
- ix. Both comedy and subjective thinking have the ability to loop around and problematize their own practice. Comedy is funny about whatever its subject matter is but is also funny about whether or not it is funny. A comedian will respond to the question “Are you kidding?” with a further joke. So for example, Beckett’s “There is nothing funnier than human unhappiness” is itself a joke, that takes for its butt our practices of humor. Similarly Kierkegaard’s philosophy problematizes itself, taking as legitimate subject matter whether anything actually is philosophy, and whether philosophy has ever actually successfully been accomplished.

This list is not intended to be exhaustive and cannot be: the nature of comedy and philosophy as self-aware holistic human responses to life means that these features connect to each other in a loose web. There are inter-relations amongst the members of this list but no one item has logical precedence. So for example, the role of comedy and philosophy in attacking pretense accounts for their ability to attack their own pretense and for their mischievous quality. The fact that comedy and philosophy seek success but are also ongoing makes each individual landing place for comedy and philosophy vulnerable.

These parallels clarify the similarities between Kierkegaard’s philosophical practice -- subjective thinking -- and joking, but they make more urgent the question of the justification of Kierkegaard’s philosophical practice. If Kierkegaard’s writing is in fact vulnerable, personal, and hard to paraphrase, why isn’t this so much the worse for claims that Kierkegaard is a philosopher? In the following sections I will turn to the justification of Kierkegaard’s philosophical practice.

In the previous section I argued that Kierkegaard’s philosophical practice is illuminated by the analogy to joking. I wish to buttress this claim now by placing it in a tradition within American analytic philosophy from Stanley Cavell to Alva Noë which explores the connection between philosophy and art. Cavell argues that the philosophical claims that ordinary language philosophy relies on are best understood on the model of aesthetic judgments. Noë argues that both art and philosophy are species of a genus of second-order practices which reorganize our basic practices. My account of Kierkegaard’s joking and subjective thinking is in the tradition of both of these thinkers.

3. Cavell on Philosophical Disagreement as Aesthetic Disagreement

Stanley Cavell begins his essay “On Some Aesthetic Problems in Modern Philosophy” by asking the question, What is the force of “we would not say” or “we would say” as used in ordinary language philosophy, and particularly by Austin and the later Wittgenstein? In exploring this question he illuminates the importance of aesthetic judgments in practicing philosophy. Although he does not connect this explicitly to Kierkegaard and humor he provides the intellectual justification for Kierkegaard’s philosophical practice. For Cavell when we evaluate a philosophical disagreement we bring to bear the same capacities that we bring to bear when we evaluate an aesthetic

disagreement. Consequently, if Cavell is correct Kierkegaard is justified in asking us to use our senses of humor when we do philosophy.

Cavell begins his investigation by asking us to consider examples, such as “We would not say that someone could be deeply in love for a single second” and how ordinary language philosophers use such claims to illuminate the “grammar” of love, and therefore, to say how we use the word “love” and what sort of thing love is. Cavell asks us to consider the question, What is the force of these statements about what “we” would say?

What are these examples supposed to show? That using a form of expression in one context is all right, and using it in another is not all right. But what I wish to focus upon is the kind of rightness and wrongness invoked: it is not a matter of factual rectitude, nor of formal indiscretion but of saying something laughable, or which would be folly. (“Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” 90)

Cavell notes that these are not empirical generalizations – we would not say that the way to tell whether love in fact could happen for a second is to conduct a survey. Yet they seem genuinely illuminating.

One hardly knows whether to call this a metaphysical or a logical difference. Kant called it a transcendental difference; Wittgenstein would call it a grammatical difference. (“Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” 90)

The claim that “this is not what we say” can be right or wrong, like a scientific assertion, but does not rely upon a law. It tells us something about our concept – of love in this case – and it tells us something about love. These are the sort of claims that Kant and Wittgenstein make, although Kant calls them transcendent and Wittgenstein calls them remarks on grammar. They have something in common with psychology and something in common with logic. So what are they?

Cavell's answer is that when we make judgments about what we would say we are making aesthetic judgments. On Kant's view as expounded in *The Critique of Judgment*, to judge something to be beautiful is not simply to claim that it pleases me; rather, it is to make a claim to universalizability, yet without the claims found in the sciences of a law. Judgments of taste are true or false -- they succeed or fail -- but there are no laws of taste. Cavell writes:

Kant's “universal voice” is, with perhaps a slight shift of accent, what we hear recorded in the philosopher's claims about “what we say”: such claims are at least as close to what Kant calls aesthetical judgments as they are to ordinary empirical hypotheses. (“Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” 94)

One way of unpacking the sense in which judgments of taste are universalizable but not lawlike is that when we make them we open ourselves up to correction in part of an ongoing critical conversation. If I say that a particular performance of Beethoven is beautiful and you respond “Too beautiful. Beethoven is not Chopin,” I need to either change my view or respond. I prove myself incompetent in the game of judgments of

taste if I simply stick to my guns and say, “Well I still think it's great.” The person who has criticized my judgment has drawn attention to a failing of the performance and it is weak for me to simply revert to how things feel to me. However, I could say “Despite his grandeur Beethoven is at heart about beautiful music and this performance brings that out.” By analogy, participating in philosophy is taking part in an ongoing, provisional conversation. In response to the point about what we would say, someone could respond by saying, “Perhaps amongst creatures who lived their lives very quickly something analogous to a second of love could take place.”

A conclusion is that if philosophical disagreement is like aesthetic disagreement then philosophical arguments and theses will become less like mathematical statements and proofs and more like tentative attempts to explore areas of human life. This, as we saw, is consonant with Kierkegaard's view that subjective thinking and joking are similar in that both are vulnerable, personal ways to respond to contradiction. Cavell agrees with Kierkegaard. A philosophical argument does not force us any more than a work of art forces us to see its point, but it causes us to see the world differently, in part by drawing on imaginative and emotional and interpersonal resources we always had but perhaps had never used or focused on before. Cavell explains the change in how philosophy works as follows:

We know of the efforts of such philosophers as Frege and Husserl to undo the “psychologizing” of logic (like Kant's undoing Hume's psychologizing of knowledge): now, the shortest way I might describe such a book as the *Philosophical Investigations* is to say that it attempts to undo the psychologizing of psychology, to show the necessity controlling our application of psychological and behavioral categories; even, one could say, show the necessities in human action and passion themselves. And at the same time it seems to turn all of philosophy into psychology— matters of what we call things, how we treat them, what their role is in our lives. (“Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” 91)

Cavell's thought here is that Hume believed, incorrectly, that causality was just a matter of how things happened to appear to the human mind, and this incorrect view amounted to a “psychologizing” of knowledge. Kant corrected Hume and undid this psychologizing when he showed that it is a necessary fact about how a consciousness could ever have a world that it connects things through causality. The move from Hume to Kant is a move from believing that a certain way we think is fortuitous and arbitrary to understanding its necessity while still holding on to the idea that it is a way *we* think. On Cavell's account, Kant is undoing Hume's “psychologizing” of our thought about causality and revealing that causal thinking is not just a fact about what our psychology happens to be. Hume notices that causality is not a logical certainty and concludes it is just the way we think. Kant responds: It is the way we think but it is not *just* the way we think – thinking in causal terms is so deeply related to the rest of our practices for making assertions about the world that if causality were not part of our thinking it would not be thinking and we would not be us.

In a similar way, Cavell argues, by investigating the grammar of the word “love” and concluding that love could not happen for only a second, Wittgenstein is illuminating the fact that the way we use the word “love” is not just arbitrary – it is deeply enmeshed

in a whole web of practices for loving, hating, believing, knowing, promising, remembering and talking about all these things, and this web is not just up for grabs. It is part of a form of life which determines who we are, how we talk, and how we think. It is necessary if we are going to be the sorts of creatures that we in fact are. Cavell's point is that in one sense Kant and Wittgenstein make everything a topic for psychology and in another sense they change psychology into something else, since they reveal how certain aspects of our lives that seem quirky, individualistic, and "all too human" are actually the best and only means we have for knowing about the world. This move, one which takes what seems to be a human quirk and explains that we actually need it to know what we really need to know, explains how Kierkegaard's "subjective thinking" can be as reliable as philosophy and still be a form of joking. By connecting a seemingly personal response -- laughing at something funny -- to a general way of thought -- philosophy -- Kierkegaard is both pointing out that laughing at something funny has more authority to determine the truth than we might initially think, but also that philosophy is more idiosyncratic and personal than we might initially think. Truth is subjectivity.

Cavell's account of philosophy as an ongoing, provisional search for an area of agreement in a discussion of how we characterize human life is in keeping with Kierkegaard's account of thinking as a kind of joking. In the account of joking I have explained Kierkegaard provides, it is precisely ongoing, vulnerable, and provisional, and provides its evidence through our responses that indicate an ability to keep going on in a particular direction. Cavell lacks Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the importance of contradiction and the phenomenology of humor that Kierkegaard is able to appeal to, but agrees as far as he goes.

Cavell's analogy of philosophical agreement and aesthetic disagreement also sheds some light on the pluses and minuses of some of the exegetical strategies and conundrums we discussed in Chapter Two above. Allison worried about how Kierkegaard's criticism of objective thinking makes him different from a "misologist" like Charles Manson, and -- seeing no difference -- concludes that Kierkegaard's advocacy of subjective thinking cannot be taken seriously. Cavell allows us to defang this worry. To ask for a general rule that tells us the difference between Charles Manson's criticism of thinking and Kierkegaard's criticism of thinking is to ask for something that philosophy never provides. However, if we realize that the question is on par with "What is the difference between Bach and Telemann given that both employ harpsichords and counterpoint," we understand that we have a lot of resources for answering it. Just listen to the humorous tone of Kierkegaard in passage A and compare it to the crazy, bullying tone of Manson in passage B. They are very different and if someone cannot hear the difference, the conversation should continue by bringing to the table more examples that let us sharpen our philosophical ear even further. On a related note, Conant compares Kierkegaard to a therapist but functions with a model of therapy in which the patient's illusions are exploded once and for all. On Cavell's model of philosophical disagreement as a form of aesthetic disagreement, we can grant the parallel to therapy but draw a different conclusion. Kierkegaard is indeed engaged in a therapeutic intervention with certain conflicts and neuroses human beings are existentially heir to. However, the therapy does not proceed by exploding these neuroses once and for all, but is an ongoing,

vulnerable interaction between therapist and client, or author and reader, as the case may be.

4. Noë on Art and Philosophy As Second-Order Organizational Practices

In *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*, Alva Noë puts forward a unified theory of art and philosophy which deepens and extends Cavell's account, and therefore also justifies Kierkegaard's linking of comedy and philosophy. For Noë, artistic works do the job of philosophy and philosophical discussions do the job of art, because both can be viewed as species of a single genus which he calls second-order organizational activities. Both activities help display, organize, and reorganize the way our first-order activities organize our lives.

Noë advances his picture of philosophy and art by first explaining a distinction between first- and second-order practices. He writes:

At level 1, we have activities like talking, moving, dancing, making pictures, singing, etc. The defining features of level-1 activities is that they are basic and involuntary modes of our organization. They are things we do by nature or second nature. (Noë 29)

When human beings dance in a level-1 manner, they dance like bees dance; when they construct houses in a level-1 manner they construct houses as beavers do. We might say they act without aspiration and without pretence; they just dance or just build a house without making a statement to anybody about what a dance should be, or what it means for a house to be a house.

However, because we are human beings and not bees or beavers, we do have the ability to reflect upon our practices, play with them, and reorganize them. When we exercise this ability we are on level-2. For example, choreography lets us be conscious of what it is to dance and make a proposal that dancing would be better if we did it in a different way. Level-2 loops back upon level-1 and makes us aware of it and also gives us an element of play and freedom. The bee dancing has to dance the way she dances; the purpose of the dance is to let other bees know the location of nectar-laden flowers. A proto-human incapable of level-1 dancing dances for whatever evolutionary biological purpose we discover dancing has – to help synchronize the hunt, or impress mates with reproductive fitness. However, once choreography arrives on the scene, humans can dance for the sake of examining and questioning what it is to dance, and further to propose new reasons for dancing. In other words, choreography enables us to live the examined life, as it comes to dancing. It is now clear why Noë argues that philosophy is a Level-2 activity:

[P]hilosophy is a level-2 reorganizational practice that stands to our level-1 cognitive undertakings -- reasoning, argument, belief formation, and crucially, the work of science--in the same kind of relation that say, choreography stands to movement and dancing. (Noë 29-30)

Noë's picture both explains and supports Cavell's interpretation that argument, claim, and counterclaim in philosophy should be viewed on the model of the discussions we have about art: whether, for example, atonal music has a key, whether non-representational sculpture is sculpture, and on a more quotidian level, whether particular works of art are good or bad. Noë writes:

My proposal is that aesthetic disagreement is a kind of philosophical disagreement (or that philosophy is, in effect, a domain of aesthetic dispute). Unlike mathematics or physics, there are no proof procedures in philosophy. But this is not because the problems aren't real. It's that the problems don't turn on new facts or mere logical consequence. Philosophical puzzlements concern getting clear about where we find ourselves and what we think given what we already know. Philosophical arguments are persuasive but also educational, and they are practical. They pertain to the question of how we should carry on (in this intellectual practical domain or that.). (Noë 139-140)

A consequence of this model of philosophical disagreement is the view that philosophical progress is always provisional and that philosophical gains are vulnerable and fragile; they are always steps forward in an ongoing conversation, rather than results that like those in science end the conversation by providing an answer. Philosophical theses are "moves in an important conversation but don't bring the conversation to a close" (Noë 136).

Noë draws the consequences of Cavell's equating of philosophical disagreement with artistic disagreement and concludes that art and philosophy are different species of the same genus of second-order, reorganizing practices. He argues that art and philosophy are ongoing, holistically organized, totalizing practices that function to play with, illuminate, and challenge the presuppositions of any realm of human practice. Rather than yielding up results, both practices live off of and require personal participation: "To read a philosophical text is to participate in the ideas and feelings and puzzlements it traces out" (Noë 137).

The explorations of Cavell and Noë into the relationship between art and philosophical practice sheds light on and buttresses my contentions about the relationship between Kierkegaard's "subjective thinking" and humor. In Cavell's formulation we can say that Kierkegaard reverses the psychologizing of humor. Kierkegaard notices that our capacity to find things funny, a capacity which we take to be not-entirely-respectable and somewhat frivolous, is actually necessarily tied to our deepest capacity as humans to respond to and make sense of the contradictions in our lives. Like our causal thinking, our humorous thinking has a kind of necessity.

Joking, like philosophy according to Noë, is also a matter of a provisional, fallible search for intra-human attunement and acknowledgment. Both art and philosophy as Noë describes them are examples of subjective thinking in Kierkegaard's sense. It is consistent with Noë's description of art that joking is also a second-order reorganizational practice, a conclusion that he himself draws explicitly:

Wittgenstein said that you could write a book of philosophy that consisted entirely of jokes. The point is not merely that you can do the work of philosophy with

jokes. The point, really, is that every joke occasions moments of knowing appreciation. We catch ourselves in the act of thinking, responding, evaluating, presuming, liking, being turned away or turned off when we enter into a joke. This is philosophical insight” (Noë 74).

5. Conclusion

Cavell and Noë both argue that philosophers are like artists. They do not end conversations but make us aware of tensions within our lives and practices and give us the tools to reorganize them, always in a contextual, provisional, vulnerable way. Kierkegaard’s view that the philosopher is like a comedian is consonant with this approach. In his joke about the prostitute applying for a license, the joke makes us aware of a contradiction between the notion that decent behavior is playing by the rules and the idea that what counts as decent cannot be a matter of following the rules. In Dreyfus’s example, Kierkegaard’s subjective thinking, like a joke, makes us keenly aware of the contradiction between viewing ourselves as human beings with engaged, meaningful lives who are passionately committed to personal relationships, and viewing ourselves as detached, disembodied knowers of a timeless, unresponsive reality. Kierkegaard’s writing is both funny and philosophical, and the philosophy is accomplished by means of the humor. When Kierkegaard asks us to imagine a Hegelian philosopher who sneezes while philosophizing, or who spends the morning imagining himself as a Universal Spirit and the afternoon hustling to get a job as an assistant professor, he makes us feel the contradiction keenly, just as a joke does. The factors -- eternity versus time, possibility versus necessity, infinity versus finitude -- can be regarded as persistent contradictions in our culturally inherited way of being, which may well, as Dreyfus supposes, stem from our dual inheritance of Greek and Hebrew traditions.

Chapter Five: Existential Humor and Faith as Contrasting Approaches to Contradiction and Risk

1. Introduction: Humor as an Approach to the Contradictions of Life

Thus far I have been arguing for Kierkegaard's relevance to the academic discipline of philosophy. I have responded to the claim that Kierkegaard's thought is a joke by accepting that this is true but denying that it follows that his approach lacks merit. Instead, I argued in Chapter Two that Kierkegaard's account of joking explains how one can philosophize by means of jokes, and in Chapter Three I endeavored to justify Kierkegaard's philosophical practice by appealing to the thoughts of Cavell and Noë on the relationship between philosophical and artistic practice.

Nevertheless there is a sense in which the estrangement between Kierkegaard's thought and philosophy viewed as a purely academic discipline is very real. Kierkegaard sees his role as not simply coming up with an interesting and accurate theory of human life, but as actually helping us to live. In this respect he hearkens back to the ancient sense of philosophy illuminated by Pierre Hadot. In this chapter I will examine Kierkegaard's position on comedy as a guide to living.

Kierkegaard devotes a lot of energy to making some profound and subtle claims about just how comedy – a painless approach to contradiction – works as a way of life. As we have seen, he makes big claims for comedy as a way of responding to contradiction. He also claims that the right way of responding to contradiction is of critical importance for doing philosophy, living life, and being a self. It would make sense, therefore, for Kierkegaard to have a high regard for comedy as an approach to life, and indeed he does: "...the more proficiently a person exists, the more he will discover the comic" (*Postscript* 388). For Kierkegaard, the comic is "indispensable legitimation for anyone who is to be regarded today as authorized in the world of the spirit," and thus, if one claims to have reflected on life "...without having become a master in the comic...it means that one is lying" (*Postscript* 235). Accordingly, Kierkegaard insists that "Power in the comic is the police badge, the badge of authority" (*Postscript* 236).

Nevertheless, the "existential humorist" -- someone who responds to life humorously, who is able to see the painful contradictions of life as in some sense ludicrous -- is at a high stage for Kierkegaard, but not the highest. In fact, to view a comical approach to life as the highest approach to life is a catastrophic error:

In our day people have been quite frequently inclined to mistake the humorous for the religious, even for the Christian-religious, which is why I keep on trying to come back to it. There is nothing really far-fetched in this, for precisely as the confinium of the religious is the humorous, it is very comprehensive. It is able to take on, especially in a sad tone of voice, a deceptive likeness to the religious in a wider sense... No one can know this better than I, who am in essence myself a humorist and, with my life in immanent categories, seek the Christian-religious. (*Postscript* 378)

To be an existential humorist is a way of living life that takes a stand on the factors. It does not ignore contradiction, but achieves the finite set of factors by caring about the minutiae of life, and the infinite set of factors by regarding them as ultimately ridiculous. However, as the passage above shows, Kierkegaard thinks that existential humorism is only deceptively similar to faith, and that it ultimately fails as a way of life. Since existential humorism is the highest stage of life before faith -- the “confinium” or borderland of faith as Kierkegaard calls it -- and is easy to confuse with faith, it provides us with a valuable contrast class.

In this chapter we will investigate two related questions about comedy as a way of life. First, “Why does Kierkegaard think existential humorism is a high sphere of existence but not the highest?” and second, “Why is existential humorism so easy to mistake for faith?” The answers to these questions will give us a better understanding of Kierkegaard’s views on humor, faith, and the correct way of mastering the “monstrous contradiction” of human existence. We will be investigating the practical counterpart of the theoretical questions we considered in the first three chapters.

2. Jonathan Lear on Irony in Kierkegaard

We are investigating Kierkegaard’s evaluation of comedy as an approach to life, and in particular, the question of why he considers it the approach that is closest to faith but still critically deficient. In his *A Case for Irony*, Jonathan Lear defends irony as an approach to life and seeks to enlist Kierkegaard as an ally; in making his case, however, Lear seems to neglect Kierkegaard’s own criticism of such an approach. It will be helpful, therefore, to engage with Lear’s version of Kierkegaard with an eye to bringing into focus what he leaves out: Kierkegaard’s problems with irony. Although Kierkegaard takes pains to distinguish between humor and irony -- irony comes from the ethical sphere of existence and criticizes the aesthetic, while humor comes from Religiousness A and criticizes the aesthetic *and* the ethical -- Lear does not, and so his comments on irony apply to Kierkegaard’s category of the humorous or comical as well.

Enlisting Kierkegaard as a witness, Lear argues that irony is a good approach to life and a critical dimension of existence. He begins by citing Kierkegaard’s claim (made in his journals) that becoming a human being is an achievement -- in his published writings he will speak of becoming a self. Lear then argues that our normal notion of the relationship between roles and norms misses a crucial aspect of what is required to become a self: “Irony is a form of existence. The contrast Kierkegaard draws is with everyone else who is ‘*perfectly sure* of being human and knowing what it means to be a human being’” (Lear 6).

Lear lays out the importance of being ironic, and thus unsure of our humanity, in a criticism of Christine Korsgaard’s discussion of the normative force of our social roles: a father doesn’t abandon his children, a teacher doesn’t take bribes, a friend doesn’t betray his friend, and so on. Lear agrees that a father ought to know that fathers do not abandon their children, but argues that a human being who only saw himself that way -- as a series of roles that he occupies with their concomitant norms -- is missing out on a critical aspect of life. Citing Kierkegaard, Lear argues that achieving a self is not just about finding roles to occupy and submitting to their norms, but also involves using irony to disrupt those norms (Lear 5-7). Kierkegaard wrote his dissertation on irony with

reference to Socrates, and Lear uses the procedures of Socrates as a touchstone in his investigation of irony as an approach to life.

Lear focuses his discussion by noting that Socrates asks questions of the form, "Among all x's, are there any x's?" So for example, a Socratic ironist could ask, "Among all these fathers, are there any fathers?" Instead of allowing his contemporaries to find some peace in knowing that they are fathers and that they are doing what they are supposed to be doing by taking care of their children, the Socratic ironist asks the unsettling question of whether what they are doing is really taking care of their children at all. The procedure of Socratic irony allowed Socrates to challenge his fellow citizens who occupied social roles and followed norms, and to ask if they *really* understood and exemplified the norms and roles they claimed to follow in their lives.

Lear connects Kierkegaardian irony to Socratic irony by noting that Kierkegaard pursues the same line of inquiry in his attacks on Christendom when he asks, "Among all Christians, is there a Christian?" Lear contrasts irony with sincere reflection and argues that irony goes deeper:

The problem is that, however thoughtful and sincere the questioning is, the reflection itself is a manifestation of the assumption that Christianity exists. It is a form of being "perfectly sure." This shows itself in my reliance on Christendom to give me the materials for my reflection. But what if Christianity does not exist? What if nothing in the world -- including this activity of reflection -- answers to the call of Christian life? Then my reflection on my practical identity via an excavation of Christendom would be mere hubbub, busyness. (Lear 7-8)

Lear thinks Kierkegaard is worried that reflective consciousness has very limited powers to help us get out of an all-encompassing illusion. Irony, by contrast, may be up to the task.

Irony grabs us in a way that disorients and disrupts our ordinary social roles, including their capacity for self-criticism. Lear gives the example of a normal Christian who goes to a sermon regarding the importance of loving one's neighbor. On his way out, the Christian passes a beggar, and -- troubled by the mismatch between the sermon and the beggar -- reaches into his wallet and takes out a dollar. The beggar says, ironically, "You must be listening to your priest" (Lear 14). For Lear, there is a normal ironic way of hearing this remark that interprets the beggar as saying, "You gave so little, and so clearly you are *not* listening to your priest." This interpretation is not terribly deep and not what Kierkegaard or Lear are interested in. Instead, Lear calls attention to a way of hearing the beggar's remark that can shake the listener at a deeper level:

[S]uppose...it occurs to me that I *have* learned from the priest *and that is my problem!*...It is as though Christianity has *come back* to show me that *everything* I have hitherto taken a Christian life to be is ersatz, a shadow...It is as though an abyss opens between our previous understanding and our dawning sense of an ideal to which we take ourselves already to be committed. This is the strangeness of irony: we seem to be called to an ideal that transcends our ordinary understanding, but to which we now experience ourselves as already committed. (Lear 15)

Irony -- for example, the teasing uncertainty that even though I am currently writing about Kierkegaard this may not actually be what counts as writing about Kierkegaard -- is thus not just a form of disruption; it is actually constitutive of earnestly engaging in a practice. As Lear explains, "...developing a capacity for ironic disruption may be a manifestation of seriousness about one's practical identity... It is constitutive of our life with the concepts with which we understand ourselves that they are subject to ironic disruption" (Lear 22). Lear references the "weird balancing act" performed by Socrates, who asks whether among the group of shepherds there are any shepherds, and whether among the group of doctors there are any doctors. This is not an Aristotelian dialectic that leads us to discover the essence of doctoring or shepherding and then uses that criterion to figure out who falls within it and who falls without it. In the Socratic dialogue, I search for a doctor or a shepherd while at the same time acknowledging my own ignorance. At the same time I am "(i) calling into question a practical identity (as socially understood), (ii) living that identity; (iii) declaring ignorance of what it consists in" (Lear 24). On Lear's analysis of such questions as "Among all Christians, is there a Christian?" there is a left hand column -- the "straight" occurrence of Christianity as a social norm -- and a right hand column -- the position achieved by the ironist, which disrupts the first in a way that goes beyond mere reflective questioning.

To see what Lear means by the contrast between irony and reflective questioning, consider the case of a group of students who have come to a meeting for a committee dedicated to helping the homeless. One student, upon noting that most of the committee members do not seem willing to put their time and energy into volunteering -- everybody wants to talk but nobody wants to spend her Saturday at a soup kitchen -- might ask the ironic question, "Is there anyone here to help the homeless really here to help the homeless?" The committee members may then reflect and admit that they really came to the meeting to socialize, or to salve their consciences, or to get rid of a public service requirement. If they realize that their role -- member of the homeless helping committee -- is not helping the homeless, they can then give up on the idea that they want to help the homeless and change their roles or institutions. When they realize a mismatch between their role as committee members and their stated concerns with the homeless, they might disband the committee and help the homeless in some other way. Suppose, for instance, that the committee members come to realize that the problem in their community is not homelessness per se, but a lack of jobs. In this case, they might stop viewing themselves as people committed to homelessness-helping as such, and reinterpret themselves as people working for economic justice in general. This would be an example of successful reflective questioning -- the participants go into it with a mismatch between their stated goals and their behavior -- and come out of it with goals, norms, and roles that fit together and make sense. Thus, the former committee members would now assent to the question, "Is there anyone here working for economic justice really here to work for economic justice?" They would answer "Yes" and put the question to rest. There would be no more need for irony.

For a Learian ironist, by contrast, simply forming the social justice committee would not be a success, but a failure. According to Lear, the question of what it means for one human being to "help" another should keep nagging at us. Even the newly formed

“Committee for Social Justice” should be ironically disrupted, just as the old “Committee to Help the Homeless” was. The ironist should continue to bug its members, gadfly-like, about whether any of them are really doing anything at all for justice. This means that what counts as success for irony is not so easy to state. Lear argues that if Luther had intended simply to question Christianity, the establishment of a Lutheran church would have been a success, but that if Luther had been an ironist, it would have been a failure. If Luther had been ironic, his only true successor would have been Kierkegaard, given his continuing ironic stance toward Christianity.

Lear’s example of the ironic Luther points out a problem with his account. On its face, it is simply incorrect. Neither Jesus Christ nor Luther was ironic. Although Kierkegaard followed the pretense-transcending path of Jesus and Luther using irony, the point of his practice was not simply more irony. For Kierkegaard, ironic disruption plays an important role, but its goal is not simply more disruption. Irony is thus not a sufficient condition of the sort of deeply human practical engagement that Kierkegaard values.

The phenomenon of snark, or reflexive irony, underlines this shortcoming. Consider, for example, the case of a child who has been taught, perhaps by watching television, to respond to every comment with a roll of the eyes and an apathetic “Yeah, right.” This automatic invocation of irony is not going to help him become a self, where becoming a self involves reconciling the monstrous contradiction of human existence. What if the child grows up, becomes an adult, and expresses the same attitude in more sophisticated language? This adult now says about any claim: “It seems that way, but I am an advocate of the critical importance of irony to cultivating a self, so I am not so sure.” The adult’s response is just a more pretentious form of the child’s reflexive eye roll. It is also not conducive to becoming a self -- if anything it is conducive to a sort of moral cowardice. Irony has gone from being the chief tool for popping the bubble of the pretentious to being pretentious itself. This is an ironic development.

Lear is faced with a dilemma. If irony simply points out a gap between pretense and realization, it is not strange enough -- it collapses into the normal reflection that he takes pains to distance it from. On the other hand, if irony is just pure disruption, it is not clear how it could bring us to a better understanding of the underlying practice -- indeed, such disruption seems to simply change the subject. Lear addresses this dilemma without solving it by employing the oxymoronic notion of *directional uncanniness*. This evocative but dark phrase tries to grasp both horns of the dilemma -- somehow irony is both weird and normal, unmooring us and at the same time pointing us in a direction:

What is peculiar to irony is that it manifests passion for a certain direction. It is because I care about teaching that I have come to a halt as a teacher. Coming to a halt in a moment of ironic uncanniness is how I manifest -- in that moment -- that teaching matters to me. (Lear 19)

How does he know it is because he cares about teaching? If the word “teaching” has truly been disrupted the ironist cannot really claim to know that. In fact, if the word “disruption” has been disrupted too then the ironist might in fact be manifesting not irony but a temper tantrum or a trance or a moment of panic or hysteria. But if the ironist doesn’t know if he is actually being ironic or just having a temper tantrum how can irony do any of the good things that Lear says it does. On the other hand, if we describe this

example to make it sound less opaque, if we say the ironist knows for a fact that what he is doing is being ironic and that what he is being ironic about is teaching, then it slides closer to simple reflection.

3. Kierkegaard on the Warrant of Comedy

We noted in Section 1 that Kierkegaard makes strong claims for comedy as an approach to life. A sense of the comic is the “police badge” in matters of the spirit, and anyone who claims to talk about human life without a sense of humor is lying. Jonathan Lear endorses this positive portrayal of comedy -- or, as he calls it, “irony” -- and enlists Kierkegaard as an ally in making his “case for irony.” However, Lear ignores Kierkegaard’s criticism of comedy as an approach to life, and his warnings that -- particularly for we moderns -- comedy is often disastrously mistaken for faith. We saw that Lear’s position has inherent problems: his account of irony seems to exclude approaches to life that seem (at least to Kierkegaard) worthwhile -- for example, the approaches of Jesus and Luther -- and to include approaches to life that do not seem worthwhile, such as our own society’s reflexive, unthinking, and endemic attitude of snark. If we delve into Kierkegaard’s discussion of the “warrant” of comedy, we will see how his approach goes beyond that of Lear’s, and also why he believes comedy -- though good, important, and necessary -- is nevertheless not the best that human beings are capable of.

We can begin by noting that although Lear offers a philosophical endorsement of irony, Kierkegaard thinks that any general endorsement is suspect. Being pro-irony in general is not an approach to life anyone could actually use to deal with the wounds and vulnerabilities of life, because it avoids the really difficult question of when to care and when not to care. Accordingly, an abstract ironist is as bad as any other sort of abstract thinker. Kierkegaard is most biting in his criticism of a blanket approval of irony in his discussion of Gorgias, the nihilistic sophist:

Therefore all that is sophistical in relation to the comic has its foothold in nothing, the realm of pure abstraction, and is expressed by Gorgias in the abstraction: to destroy [the opponents’] earnest with jest and [their] jest with earnest (cf. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* 3:18). Here the balance everything comes out as is like an uncovered cheque and the irregularity easily uncovered in the fact that a person existing has transformed himself into a fantastical *X*. (*Postscript* 438)

For Kierkegaard, simply joking in all situations shows you are pretentiously evading the actual demands of your life. Gorgias is not a hero but simply a pretentious money-grubber. He claims to be a “fantastical *x*” but this is just an evasive move. Of course we don’t know much about the real Gorgias, but the fact that he wanted a gold statue of himself put up in Athens suggests there is a grain of historical truth to this psycho-historical account.

Gorgias, like Lear, believes that when we are dealing with someone who is acting under some kind of pretense, we can employ irony to disrupt him. For Kierkegaard, the fact that one can do this any time one wants is proof that the employment of irony is without justification. The accusation that a thinker has ignored his existential situation

and transformed himself into a fantastical *X* is exactly Kierkegaard's critique of the Hegelian objective thinker. Any abstract approach is wrong, whether it advocates irony or seriousness. By employing this approach, Gorgias and Lear open themselves up to the same ironic questioning Kierkegaard levels at the objective thinker, which Kierkegaard calls "the formula of exorcism" and which asks: "May I have the honour of asking with whom I have the honour of conversing; whether a human being, etc.?" (*Postscript* 438).

If Gorgias or Lear were real human beings, they would have problems that they cared about and practices to which they were genuinely committed. Such actual, existing human beings are not in a position to make a "case for irony." If their child is sick in the emergency room, for example, they will not be likely to advocate an ironic disruption of the practice of emergency room medicine. And if they do advocate such a disruption, it will be from a standpoint of someone passionately seeking better care for her child, or passionately giving up his child's life for lost, and certainly not from the standpoint of someone merely in favor of irony. To think otherwise is to end up "...in the fantastic common pastures of pure being since, when he destroys the one with the other, there is nothing left over" (*Postscript* 438). Since Gorgias does not actually occupy a position any human being can occupy, his irony has no warrant. He is simply an ingenious "pettifogger" or a cut-rate shyster lawyer. Kierkegaard concludes with brutal contempt: "But a pettifogger is no legitimate court of appeal in respect of the comic. He will have to whistle for his warrant – and be satisfied with the profit which, as everyone knows, has been the pet result for every Sophist: money, money, money, or whatever else on that same level" (*Postscript* 438). This in fact seems a fair critique of the historical Gorgias, whose speech-making was so lucrative that he was able to endow an Athens city-temple with a golden statue of himself.

To further clarify when comedy is warranted, Kierkegaard asks us to consider two different versions of the story of Socrates. In one, Socrates lives his life just as he always had up until the last moment, when, upon being called to take the hemlock, he apologizes and asks the executioner to have mercy on him and spare his life. Such a Socrates would not have any warrant for his ironic way of life and in fact would be ridiculous:

Once an existing ironist falls out of his irony he becomes comic, just as, e.g., Socrates would have done if, on the day of his judgment, he had become a figure of pathos. (*Postscript* 436nII)

By contrast, the Socrates of Plato -- who says, "I go to death and you to life but which of us goes to a better place, God knows!" and then is willing to be killed -- has warrant, or justification, for his ironic way of life:

It is here the warrant lies, when the irony is not a malapert impulse but an existence-art, for the ironist then, precisely through the ironic mastery over himself, solves greater problems than a tragic hero. (*Postscript* 436nII)

Thus, irony is warranted when it is not an impudent and disrespectful impulse, but a way of life and a sign of self-mastery.

4. Why Faith is Higher than Humor

Our discussion of Lear has allowed us to investigate the question of comedy as an approach to the contradictions of life. We learned that, contra Lear, for Kierkegaard comedy or irony is not the highest “way of living” (a phrase Pierre Hadot uses to describe the ancient approach to philosophy). Accordingly, we are now in a position to contrast the existential humorist’s approach to contradiction with that of the person of faith. By doing so, we can get a clearer notion of Kierkegaard’s views on faith and the proper approach to the conflicting factors that make up human existence.

As we saw above, the existential humorist is the highest sphere of existence before Religiousness B. Climacus identifies himself as both an inhabitant of Religiousness A and an existential humorist:

My own opinion is that religiousness A (within whose boundaries I have my existence) is so strenuous for a human being as always to be task enough. (*Postscript* 466)

The undersigned, Johannes Climacus, who has written this work, does not make himself out to be a Christian; for he is completely preoccupied with how difficult it must be to become one; but still less is he one who, having been a Christian, ceases to be that by going further. He is a humorist. (*Postscript* 520)

So a humorist -- and Kierkegaard will sometimes say “existential humorist” or “existing humorist” to distinguish him from someone who simply writes humorous things -- can exist in Religiousness A. Existential humorism as an approach to life is a sub-type of, or a way of existing in Religiousness A. Kierkegaard then advances the thesis that a lower sphere of existence is never warranted in making fun of a higher sphere of existence, while a higher sphere of existence is warranted in making fun of a lower one:

Irony is warranted in respect of immediacy because the equilibrium – not as mere abstraction but as an existence-art – is higher than immediacy. (*Postscript* 435-436)

An existing ironist is warranted “with respect to immediacy.” This means that someone who is not aware that the commitments in his life are fragile *deserves* to be the target of ridicule from someone who is aware that her plans may fail but moves forward anyway. A higher sphere is aware of the vulnerability that a lower sphere is lying to itself about. Thus, whether or not an instance of comedy is warranted depends upon which sphere it is coming from. The higher is warranted in laughing at the lower, but the lower is not warranted in laughing at the higher:

But although I do not have much to be proud of qua author, I am nevertheless proud in the consciousness that I can hardly be accused of having misused my pen in respect of the comic, have never let it serve the interest of the moment, never applied the comic view to anyone or anything without first seeing, by comparing the categories, from which sphere the comic came... (*Postscript* 434nii)

So for example, if a tall person mocks short people because he values his height, he has not considered the fact that he would become short if he broke his leg tomorrow, or that he is just as worthy of respect as someone who happens to have been born short. For Kierkegaard, this example of humor would rank extremely low, and the tall person making the joke would be in the aesthetic sphere. An ethicist who laughs at the tall person, perhaps writing a story where he wakes up in a world of giants, ranks higher than the person in the aesthetic sphere, and his joke ranks higher than the joke about short people. However, the person in the ethical sphere is still vulnerable to justifiable mockery; a religious person could point out that the ethicist is proud of himself for being lucky enough to have the clarity and leisure to make careful choices, and that his emphasis on clear choices is both a denial of how much unclarity goes into his life, and how uncomfortable he is at acknowledging his weakness and vulnerability -- how the goal of clear, sober, rationality is a desperate attempt to tamp down feelings, and how the calmness is a mask. This joke ranks higher than the ethicist's, and comes from a higher sphere of existence, Religiousness A.

We are now ready to deal with the initial question: "Why does comedy rank lower than faith as a way of life?" We can sharpen it further. If the ranking of a sphere of existence depends upon how much it faces up to contradiction, and if comedy involves facing up to contradiction, why isn't it the highest sphere? Kierkegaard is adamant that it is not:

Quite clearly, there is enough of the comic everywhere and at any time, if only one has an eye for it. One could continue for as long as it takes, if in being clear about where to laugh one did not also know where not to laugh. (*Postscript* 434nii)

It is unclear, however, why there should be a case in which we are not entitled to laugh. If comedy involves awareness of contradiction, and if the essence of human life is to be a monstrous contradiction, then it would seem that insofar as comedy is the attitude that is maximally aware of contradiction, it should be the highest sphere of existence.

Kierkegaard argues that there is a difference between being aware of a contradiction and taking it up into one's life in the right way:

If there is anything I have studied from top to bottom it is the comic. That is precisely why, too, I know that the comic is excluded from religious suffering, that the latter is inaccessible to the comic, because the suffering is precisely the consciousness of the contradiction, which is therefore taken up pathetically and tragically into the religious person's consciousness, and it is just this that excludes the comic. (*Postscript* 405)

Kierkegaard argues here that faith or "religious suffering" is inaccessible to the comic because of how faith relates to contradiction. In particular, insofar as the person of faith takes up contradiction into consciousness, the comic is excluded. As an analogy, consider the case of a native English speaker speaking French. If his accent is poor, there will be a contradiction between how he wants to talk and how he really does talk, and this will

make him comical. However, suppose it is important for us to know exactly how a native English speaker of French sounds -- maybe we are trying to solve a terrorist plot and know the plotter speaks French with a bad English accent. The native speaker of English who speaks bad French speaks it to us to help us solve the case. The native English speaker's accent will stop being funny because he is not pretending to be speaking perfect French. He is taking up the contradiction between perfect French and accented French into his consciousness and this "excludes the comic." Someone who did not know what was going on and who just overheard the poor French might laugh, but he would be wrong to do so -- that is, it would not be warranted.

Kierkegaard of course is not concerned with our pretense to be speakers of good French, but rather the human pretense to master the "monstrous contradiction" of existence. The rock-bottom contradiction of human life is the conflict between our search for safety and our need for meaning. In his view, all attempts to have a meaningful life without taking a risk on particular commitments are self-deceptive failures. Thus, if we do not seek safety, we are -- like the person who offers up his poor French as an example of poor French -- protected against looking ridiculous.

The person of faith is responding to a monstrous contradiction but not claiming to have solved it, and since he does not claim to have solved it, the comic is excluded -- the person of faith has no pretense for the comedian to expose. The comic is excluded from suffering because the sufferer is open to catastrophic failure and is not claiming otherwise:

The different existence-stages rank according to their relation to the comic, in respect of whether they have the comic within themselves or outside, yet not in the sense that the comic is to be the highest. Immediacy has the comic outside it, for wherever there is life there is contradiction, but in immediacy there is no contradiction, so it comes from outside. Finite good sense would apprehend immediacy as comic, but in doing so it becomes comic itself; for what supposedly justifies its comic grasp is that it can be counted on to know the way out, but the way out that it knows is still more comic. This is an unwarranted comic grasp.
(*Postscript* 435)

To have the comic "outside" yourself means that somebody else can justifiably point at you and laugh; it is a bit like having a "KICK ME" sign on one's backside and not knowing it. To have the comic "within" means that the joke is on your side, and you can point at others and laugh; you know where the kick me signs are located, and they are not on your own backside.

"Immediacy has the comic outside" means that the committed snowboarder who has never considered the possibility of a devastating, life-altering injury is ridiculous, but that only someone else can appreciate such ridiculousness. Imagine, for example, that he is bragging about how great his life is going to be as we see (though he does not) that his snowboard is heading straight towards a tree. That would be a ridiculous situation, but the snowboarder himself cannot consider it. So it is not "within" his sphere of existence. If you have the comic "within" your way of life, you are responding to the monstrous contradiction at the heart of it -- i.e., the fact that you need meaning and so need to make a vulnerable commitment. The basic joke of the existential humorist is that human

beings make plans but all those plans are vulnerable to catastrophic failure. The person of faith says: "I don't claim otherwise, but commit to my life all the same." Depending upon how you look at it, you can say that he is immune to the comic or that he is aware of what the comic is aware of -- fundamental vulnerability -- but is by means of that awareness secured against it.

From this premise, Kierkegaard offers an ingenious proof that comedy cannot be the highest approach to the contradictions of life:

Someone who is religious has discovered the comic on the largest scale and yet does not consider the comic the highest, for the religious is the purest pathos. But if he does look on the comic as the highest, then the comic is for him *eo ipso* lower; for what is comic lies always in a contradiction, and when the comic itself is the highest, it lacks the contradiction in which the comic is and in which it shows itself to advantage. (*Postscript* 387)

This proof is a form of *reductio*. Suppose that the highest approach to life is to view everything as a joke, which as we have seen is defined as a painless contradiction. The humorist will therefore expect everything to be a contradiction. If a humorist expects everything to be contradictory when he encounters the contradictions of life, however, there will be no contradiction between what he expects and what he experiences. Thus, a consistent attitude of expecting humor everywhere actually undercuts the characteristic experience of humor. The existential humorist's project of seeing everything in life as funny is ultimately self-defeating.

This argument shows why comedy is a high stage but not the highest. It is an unstable border between the ways of life that avoid contradiction and the one way of life that embraces and accepts contradiction in the right way:

We are now standing at the border. The religiousness that is hidden inwardness is *eo ipso* inaccessible to a comic grasp. It cannot have the comic outside it, just because it is hidden inwardness and so cannot come in contradiction with anything. The contradiction which humour masters, the highest range of the comic, is something it has brought to consciousness itself and has within itself as something lower. In this way it is armed absolutely against the comic, or is by means of the comic secured against it. (*Postscript* 436-437)

"We are now standing at the border" means not just that the course of Kierkegaard's argument has taken us to the border as one might say, for example, "We are now ready to prove the existence of infinitely many primes" when discussing mathematics. It means that if we as humorists seek to view everything as funny, we are now existentially placed into a situation in which we need to face up to the limitations of our approach. If we imagine a person who does not claim to protect himself against loss and yet continues to get more and more involved with his commitment, we cannot actually mock it. If we cross the border to engage with the possibility of becoming such a person, we will transform into the sort of person who does not always respond to pain with humor.

5. Faith as a Way of Life and the Relationship to the Paraphrasability Problem

In previous chapters, we focused on a theoretical issue regarding Kierkegaard's philosophy: how to interpret a particular thesis he puts forward regarding truth, namely that "truth is subjectivity." In this chapter we addressed a non-theoretical issue, one closer to what Pierre Hadot in his discussion of philosophy in the ancient world calls "a way of life." For Kierkegaard (as for the thinkers in the ancient world, according to Hadot), these two questions are closely linked, or more accurately, two different ways of stating the same problem. In the remainder of this chapter I will argue for why and how this is the case.

The problem we discussed when investigating Kierkegaard's theoretical statement that "truth is subjectivity" was that it seemed to land us in a dilemma. Either "truth is subjectivity" has a paraphrasable content or it does not. If it has a paraphrasable content - - for example, that what is true depends upon a passionate commitment by an engaged, corporeal, locally situated individual -- then it would seem that it provides a counterexample to its own claim. If it is not paraphrasable, then we are unable to say what it means and thus to evaluate it as true or false, or to say why we should believe it. In order to reconcile the dilemma, I argued that "truth is subjectivity" functions in much the same way a joke does. On Kierkegaard's account, a joke brings together two contradictory ways of approaching something, allowing us to be propelled forward into a new poise regarding the subject matter. We cannot paraphrase a joke while it is doing its work, but we can state its point once we have mastered it. "Truth is subjectivity" functions in the same way -- while it is working on us in a particular arena we cannot paraphrase it, but if in a particular area of life we understand just how risk and finitude interact with our judgments we can say so.

Kierkegaard claims that the best approach to life is faith, which amounts to an attitude toward risk that increasingly embraces a commitment the more vulnerable it becomes. Just as we were faced with a dilemma in the case of "truth is subjectivity" -- that is, whether "truth is subjectivity" is true or not -- so too in the case of faith. Is thinking that the best way of life is faith a risky approach or a safe one? Is faith a good bet or not? On the one hand, faith does seem like a good bet, because, as Kierkegaard has outlined, it is the only way to bring the factors together in the right way. According to Kierkegaard, a life without faith amounts to a life without meaning. On the other hand, insofar as faith increasingly embraces a commitment the more vulnerable it becomes, it is also a very risky approach.

We could sum up Kierkegaard's practical advocacy by saying that "the safest thing is risk," so long as we bear in mind that this formulation refers to a particular kind of risk, namely, the risk to one's identity that comes from an infinite commitment to the finite. Although Kierkegaard never says this quite as succinctly as I am putting it here, he comes very close:

A little motto by *Quidam* puts one immediately in mind of the humorous double mood, while a Latin epigraph 'Periissem nisi periissem' [I had perished, had I not perished] is a suffering, humorous revoking of the whole. (*Postscript* 243nt)

To say that I would have perished if I had not perished is just to say that I would have been lost if I had played it safe.

Consider, then, how we feel when confronted with the statement “the riskiest thing is safety.” On the one hand, we might recall all the arguments Kierkegaard adduces concerning the dangers of safety. Safety drains our lives of joy, makes it harder to love or care about anything, and fails to bring the conflicting factors of human life together in a livable way. On the other hand, we might notice that if safety is risky in this particular sense – namely, it runs the risk of draining our lives of joy, making it harder to care, and so on – then safety is itself risky. Indeed, insofar as it stands to make us waste our entire lives, safety is as risky as it gets. If this were true, however, then avoiding safety would turn out to be the safest thing we could do. Recognizing that “the riskiest thing is safety” (or that the safest life is one that embraces risk) puts us in exactly the same position we were in when responding to the theoretical claim that “truth is subjectivity.” Both claims – “the riskiest thing is safety” and “truth is subjectivity” – simultaneously draw us in and repel us. They put us in a state of what Kierkegaard calls “anxiety” – an antipathetic sympathy or sympathetic antipathy.

Although we are faced with a contradiction or a paradox in both cases, Kierkegaard does not believe it is one we should put down in either case; rather, he thinks that we should accentuate the paradox. If Kierkegaard’s account of human life is correct, then the fact that we are drawn in two different directions is exactly what one should expect. We are drawn toward both meaning and safety, and so when faced with a formulation of our situation -- either one in practical terms (“the safest thing is risk”) or in theoretical terms (“truth is subjectivity”) -- we are pulled in two different directions. Kierkegaard calls this phenomenon “crucifixion”:

What makes faith recognizable is exactly the crucifixion of understanding and of imaginative intuition that cannot procure direct recognizability. (*Postscript* 505-506)

“Understanding” and “intuition” are concepts from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. According to Kant, if we have an intuition and a concept to place it under, we can know the external world and the causal relationships among objects and events. Faith, however, is riskier than that. We cannot know when we have faith or when others have faith, because if we did there would be no risk and we could rest assured that we are living the highest or most meaningful form of human life. To have such assurance would be to have no faith, which is by definition an attitude that commits us in the face of uncertainty. Nevertheless, understanding and imagination are not vaporized, but crucified. Just as Jesus Christ remains divine while his human body suffers, understanding and intuition persist in their attempts to give us knowledge while failing to do so. The paradoxical nature of the way of life Kierkegaard describes -- in which we are increasingly attracted to a commitment the more dangerous it becomes -- is reflected by the paradoxical nature of all attempts to think about or recognize this way of life. This extends to the world of theoretical formulations and the world of practical formulations. Or more precisely, Kierkegaard believes that for existing human beings, theoretical formulations and practical formulations refer to the same reality. When it comes to human existence, any attempt to formulate objective thought is an attempt to achieve security. Accordingly,

just as the attempt to seek safety is the riskiest thing one can do, the attempt to seek objectivity is the falsest thing one can do. Therefore, truth is subjectivity.

Kierkegaard provides a pithy formulation of how difficult it is to recognize faith and its related concepts:

The reader will recall: the mark of revelation is mystery, of blessedness suffering, of the certitude of faith uncertainty, of ease difficulty, of truth absurdity.
(*Postscript* 362nn)

What mystery, suffering, uncertainty, difficulty, and absurdity all have in common is that they all characterize fundamentally risky commitments. A commitment to a project that is mysterious, uncertain, and so on, is one that I can neither justify to others nor to myself. For Kierkegaard, although I cannot defend my claim that it is the right thing to do, making a risky commitment is the only way I can live a meaningful life. Yet, if I started to think that I could prove my life of commitment is safe -- insofar as I know I can avoid the risk of meaninglessness by making a risky commitment -- I would be putting myself in grave danger. Kierkegaard calls this danger "a superstitious belief in the truth":

[T]he most dangerous of superstitions...is superstitious belief in the truth, if indeed Christianity is the truth. Superstitious belief in untruth leaves open the possibility that truth may come and awaken it; but when the truth *is*, and the superstitious mode of apprehending it transforms it into a lie, no deliverance is possible. (*Postscript* 361)

Thus, if I am confident that I have received a revelation and earned a blessed life of ease, I can be confident that I have not.

For Kierkegaard, we always run the risk of falling into a superstitious belief in the truth -- that is, we always run the risk of thinking that our knowledge that the safest life is one of risky commitment actually grants us safety. Comedy, which points out the ridiculousness of this self-contradictory project, serves faith by keeping it from falling into superstition. Comedy itself, however, as we have seen, is not the highest way of life, because an attitude of reveling in contradiction is self-defeating; if we are prepared to laugh at all times, we will approach life as if we have heard the punch-line before the joke. Paradoxically, the person of faith -- who embraces a vulnerable commitment wholeheartedly -- can enjoy the joke on herself, while the existential humorist, by expecting humor, fails to encounter it.

The theoretical paradox ("truth is subjectivity") differs from the practical paradox ("the safest life is the riskiest") because, although one can live a risky life without thinking about it, one cannot think about a risky life without actually thinking about it. In other words, if our goal is to come up with clear, objective, self-contradictory statements, "truth is subjectivity" is always going to be problematic, but if our goal is to make a risky commitment, "the safest life is the riskiest" need not be problematic, because we do not have to think about what we are doing.

A person who embodies the life of faith has no business trying to sum it up in a pithy statement, because he has no business announcing it at all. Such an announcement

would only help the part of him that is trying to evade faith, the part that would say, “Since I know the safest thing is to be in danger, I guess I am safe after all.” Someone who tries to argue that he is not in danger because he knows that “the safest thing is danger” is thereby taking himself away from the approach to life that will save him. Just as someone who does not want to think about elephants is serving himself poorly by announcing that this is his project, someone who wants to achieve the safety of a meaningful life by facing up to vulnerability should not announce to others, or to himself, that this is what he is doing.

A consequence of this (para- or quasi-) logic is that faith can use humor to keep itself from slipping into its opposite, the “superstitious belief in truth.” If pursuing safety is indeed dangerous, then the person who has successfully achieved faith cannot proclaim to himself or others that he has done so successfully. Although he may have done it successfully, the moment he proclaims it he will have failed by the very act of proclamation. Yet, if he has a sense of humor, the moment he proclaims that he is safe because he knows that risk is safety, he will laugh at the painless contradiction between how he lives and how he says he lives. Similarly, if he were to attempt to put his understanding of life into an objective thesis by saying “truth is subjectivity,” he would find it funny. And this, as we have seen in previous chapters, turns out to be true of the statement “truth is subjectivity” -- it is funny. From another perspective, the person of faith is not actually ridiculous, but actually living his life the best way a human being can live it. This is not a perspective he can claim himself, however, since he is himself tempted to slip out of faith by thinking, “I’ve figured it out. I’ve achieved safety by embracing vulnerability and risk.” Instead, humor serves him and keeps him from the danger of phony faith. Thus, as Kierkegaard says, “In the religious sphere, when this is kept pure in inwardness, the comic is ministering” (*Postscript* 438).

The related argument of previous chapters and the argument of this chapter both serve to illuminate the failings of Climacus’s approach to life, which is that of the existential humorist and the theorist of existential engagement. Insofar as Climacus explicitly thematizes humor and seeks faith without actually committing to anything specific, he uses correct insights to defeat himself. What he believes – that life is funny, that truth is subjectivity – is true, but he lives these beliefs in a way that prevents him from actually embodying them in his life. Since the content of the beliefs is that he should actually live them, he suffers from an ironic, tragi-comic fate.

In the following chapter we will ask how faith could be communicated. This is a pressing issue at this point in our investigation, because the paradoxical nature of the insights we have discussed – faith is recognizable by its unrecognizability, for example – should lead us to worry whether faith can be communicated at all. As we examine this issue, we will come to see another example of Climacus’ self-defeating nature as it reveals itself around the issue of self-disclosure.

Chapter Six: Why Kierkegaard Writes the Way He Does: The Function of Indirection, Pseudonymity and Revocation

1. Introduction

In the first several chapters, I have argued for an account of Kierkegaard's thought according to which he advances several theses: that the self is a "monstrous contradiction" between factors that pull it toward safety and factors that pull it toward meaning, that the best way of life is faith or Religiousness B, and that faith is a way of life that not only embraces the centrality of risk, but views facing up to risk as, paradoxically, a sign that things are going well. Yet this interpretation raises an important question -- if the foregoing claims are true, why does Kierkegaard communicate them so strangely?

There are three features in particular that make his mode of communication so strange:

- i) It is indirect. Joking is an example of indirect communication. Rather than simply claiming that objective thinking is a bad idea, Kierkegaard caricatures the objective thinker and makes him the target of humor.
- ii) It is pseudonymous. The *Postscript* is signed by a fictional character, Johannes Climacus.
- iii) It gets revoked. Climacus ends the *Postscript* by revoking everything he has said thus far.

The fact that his methods of communication are so strange might seem to support Conant and Cavell's position, which claims that Kierkegaard is not advancing a philosophical thesis, but putting forward a sort of therapeutic nonsense intended to bring the reader to see the folly of philosophic thought. Since I am criticizing the Cavell-Conant position, I owe an account of why Kierkegaard writes as he does.

In what follows, I will argue that Kierkegaard employs indirection, revocation, and pseudonymity to bring the reader to an appreciation of the importance of risk. These three features force the reader to take a risk in evaluating Kierkegaard's form of communication, and thereby help her come to an appreciation of the importance of risky commitment in leading a meaningful life. Although Kierkegaard's claim can be expressed in clear propositions, he chooses not to express it in that form because he thinks a normal communication will thwart his ends, causing the reader to depend upon him as an authority.

2. Indirect Communication

In this section, I will seek to demonstrate that Kierkegaard communicates indirectly because he wants to make the reader sensitive to the importance of making a risky commitment. By communicating indirectly, he forces the reader to take a stand on a particular interpretation of the text. This does not mean that Kierkegaard's thesis cannot be communicated directly. One can meaningfully say, for example, "There are many unsuccessful attempts to reconcile the monstrous contradiction of human life but making

an infinitely passionate commitment to something specific and vulnerable is the only successful one.” However, communicating this idea directly would have consequences that Kierkegaard wishes to avoid.

It will help to contrast the view I am presenting here with the explanation of indirect communication in Kierkegaard advanced by Stanley Cavell. Cavell notes the paradox in Kierkegaard’s claim that “everything is lost in reverting to direct communication” and inquires commonsensically, what sort of thing could only be communicated *indirectly* (“Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy” 227)? If someone were to tell you he has something to say that can only be communicated indirectly, it would be natural for you to tell him to stop beating around the bush and to say what he has in mind. Could Kierkegaard really be saying, Cavell asks, that what he has to say can only be said by beating around the bush?

As I have already indicated, the answer is “No.” However, although Cavell grasps that the answer cannot be “yes” he does not say “no” unequivocally either. He first suggests that

[T]he thoughts he wishes to express seem easily to be expressed in familiar words – the words, say, of the Sermon on the Mount; people are always using the words and supposing themselves to know what they mean. But Kierkegaard finds that they do not know, or will not know, what the words really mean. They lose, or cover, their meaning when they are spoken apart from the (Christian) forms of life which give them their meaning. Yet they are the same words, and no others will do for the thoughts to be expressed. It is because the words can be uttered and meant in conflicting ways that Kierkegaard maintains the contrast between direct and indirect communication; it is because only one way of saying them gives the real, the Christian meaning that he says only one form of communication is possible. (“Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy” 228)

Let us tease Cavell’s claims apart and examine them. Cavell’s first claim is that a Christian message loses or covers its meaning when spoken apart from a Christian form of life. Cavell is clearly onto something because Kierkegaard believes that truly understanding a Christian claim requires inhabiting a specifically Christian sphere of existence, Religiousness B. So take, for example, Jesus Christ’s statement, “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the [earth](#).” Imagine now that this message is heard by someone who does not participate in the Christian form of life – perhaps by Julius Caesar. Clearly Caesar does not endorse this claim. He believes that it is false, and claims instead that the heroes will inherit the Earth. However, Kierkegaard maintains that Caesar only claims that heroes will inherit the Earth because he has not really thought deeply and honestly about what it means to “inherit the Earth.” Caesar believes one can conquer the Earth through forcing other people to listen, but he is wrong. He does not realize that the true way to “inherit the Earth” is to make a vulnerable commitment – to be “meek” in Jesus’s formulation. So it is true that if Caesar participated in a Christian form of life he would both understand and assent to Jesus’ formulation. However, it is not the case that Caesar does not understand the message of Jesus *because* he does not participate in the Christian form of life. If that were true it would be impossible to use language to lead anyone outside a Christian form of life into a

Christian form of life. And if *that* were true, then both Jesus and Kierkegaard would be wasting their time by (respectively) preaching and writing books.

Cavell's second claim is that there is something in the content of the Christian message that makes it impossible to paraphrase. This cannot be what Kierkegaard believes. After all, Jesus himself paraphrases the idea in the Sermon on the Mount, as do his disciples, and so does Kierkegaard. If in fact "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the Earth" could not be paraphrased, how would anybody know what it meant? How could anyone clarify it or apply it to different contexts or argue for it?

Cavell's third claim is that Kierkegaard uses indirect communication because there is something in the Christian message that makes it inherently likely to be misunderstood. This is true in one sense and false in another. Of course it is true that "blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the Earth" could be misunderstood – indeed, the fact of human weakness and perversity makes it particularly easy to misunderstand. Someone could imagine, for example, that after enough time being meek, a supernatural God will reward the meek by turning them into mighty warriors and humbling their enemies before them. But this is a feature of the emotional and existential difficulty of embracing the Christian form of life, not a linguistic feature of the Christian message. Christianity is hard to understand because it is hard to live, not because of a particularly slippery feature of Christian language. Moreover, this vulnerability to misinterpretation is not specific to Christian messages. It would be hard to imagine a message that could not be misunderstood. So, for example, P.T. Barnum's quote "There's a sucker born every minute" could be misinterpreted as meaning that most people are not suckers, or as a call for compassion towards the suckerhood of our fellow man, rather than as a cynical crack. It could be argued that "there's a sucker born every minute" can only really be understood in the context of carnival barking. If there is something special about the message "blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the Earth" that makes it particularly vulnerable to misinterpretation, Cavell does not identify it, and therefore he does not really explain why Kierkegaard communicates indirectly.

Later in the essay, Cavell suggests that Kierkegaard is concerned with the tragedy, comedy, and irony of the fact that the same words can express two meanings, one of which is helpful and the other harmful:

[W]hile there is only one vehicle of expression, there are two thoughts it can express, and moreover the thoughts are incompatible, mutually defeating...The message is of such a form that the words which contain its truth may be said in a way which defeats that very truth. And Kierkegaard sees modern man as fated to say them the wrong way. ("Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy" 228-229)

Cavell is correct to point out that Kierkegaard is using indirect communication to avoid a self-defeating situation in which what he communicates is undercut by how he communicates it. He must be wrong, however, to assert that Kierkegaard believes anyone is "fated" to misunderstand him. For Kierkegaard to believe that would be to believe that we are fated to sin, and to believe that human beings are fated to sin, is not only wrong, but also sinful. It is committing the heresy of predestination. Cavell is also incorrect to claim that what forces Kierkegaard to use indirect communication is something special about the *form* of what he wants to say. In every example of indirect

communication Kierkegaard provides, he is able to restate what is communicated indirectly using direct speech.

Kierkegaard provides an example of indirect communication in the epigraph to *Fear and Trembling* in quoting a Roman story by way of Hamann. In the story, King Tarquin wanted his son to kill the most powerful people in Rome. He instructed a messenger to visit his son in a garden and to cut off the heads of the largest poppies. As Kierkegaard writes, this was understood by his son but not by the messenger.

There is nothing in this story to suggest that there is something special about the form of what Tarquin communicates indirectly that could not be communicated directly. In fact what he communicates indirectly by cutting the heads off the tallest flowers is easy to communicate directly with the sentence, "Kill the greatest people in Rome." The King was simply avoiding the pernicious consequences of direct communication, in this case letting the messenger know his plan before the son could carry it out.

Kierkegaard's strategy in using indirect communication is consistent with the analysis of indirect speech acts advanced by John Searle in the essay "Indirect Speech Acts." In this essay, Searle explains for example that a question "Can you pass the salt?" can be an indirect command, "Pass the salt."

At the dinner table, X says to Y, "Can you pass the salt?" by way of asking Y to pass the salt. Now, how does Y know that X is requesting him to pass the salt instead of just asking a question about his abilities to pass the salt? Notice that not everything will do as a request to pass the salt. Thus, if X had said "Salt is made of sodium chloride" or "Salt is mined in the Tatra mountains," without some special stage setting, it is very unlikely that Y would take either of these utterances as a request to pass the salt. (Searle 46)

Searle argues that the listener knows that it would make no sense to inquire whether or not he is literally physically able to pass salt, and knows that it is impolite to order someone to pass the salt, so he is able to infer that what seems like a question is actually a request, viz. to pass the salt. On Searle's account, unlike Cavell's, there is nothing inherently inexpressible about what is communicated indirectly. "Pass the salt" expresses exactly what "Can you pass the salt?" does. However there is a reason why X in this example cloaks his request in the form of a question. Direct requests are impolite. Kierkegaard's example of King Tarquin and the poppies is consistent with Searle's account. King Tarquin could have said "Kill the most powerful men in Rome." There is nothing about the message that makes it inherently slippery, or ineffable, or incommunicable. However, there is a very good reason why he does not communicate it directly – he wants to keep it a secret so as not to tip off his enemies.

There are good reasons not to saddle Kierkegaard with the thesis that what is communicated indirectly could not be communicated directly, reasons adumbrated in different ways by Quine, Davidson and Wittgenstein. If someone claims that a particular act is an indirect communication but is unable to say directly what it is that is being communicated indirectly, we have no basis for believing that the act in question was a communication at all. Kierkegaard himself gives us no reason for attributing to him such a far-fetched thesis. In fact, his stated goal given in his own name on the very last page

of the *Postscript* is “to read...the original text of individual human existence relationships, the old familiar text handed down from the fathers, if possible in a more inward way” (*Postscript* 531). He never claims that what he is saying is any different from, say, the content of direct communications in the New Testament, but simply that his aim is to read them in a more inward way.

If Kierkegaard’s thesis can be communicated directly, we need to ask what Kierkegaard thinks is so problematic about direct communication. Unlike Searle’s person who asks for the salt, Kierkegaard is not afraid to be impolite. There are other dangers of direct communication that he wishes to avoid.

Just as important as the truth, and the more important of the two, is the manner in which the truth is accepted, and it would help only very little if one got millions to accept the truth if they were translated by their very manner of acceptance into untruth. (*Postscript* 207)

Here, Kierkegaard is concerned that the wrong form of communication could cause millions of people to miss living the right kind of life. So for example, if the person who says, “the best way of life is making an infinite commitment to something finite” is a famous teacher, the millions of people Kierkegaard references might be induced thereby to place their trust in the pronouncements of famous teachers. This consequence is so grave that Kierkegaard thinks that if you have a choice between saying that risk is important in a way that enables people to evade risk and saying something else in a way that induces or motivates people to actually commit, the latter is preferable. It is more important to lead the listener to the path of being able to make a risky commitment than it is to say that a risky commitment is important.

In discussing his own pseudonymous writings in the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard points to Socrates as the example of indirect communication that provided a model for his own. Rather than advancing the thesis directly -- you do not know what courage is -- Socrates according to Kierkegaard used the method of question and answer to bring his interlocutors to indirectly realize that they did not know what courage was. He writes:

...my conception of communication through books differs greatly from what I see presented otherwise on the topic, and from what people tacitly accept. Indirect communication makes communicating an art in a sense other than that ordinarily assumed in imagining the communicator as having to present the communication to a knower for him to judge it, or to a non-knower so as to give him something to know. (*Postscript* 232)

If the listener thinks Kierkegaard’s claim that the most important thing in life requires a meaningful, risky commitment is something to judge or something to learn, he will be encouraged to think that life can be handled by objective categories -- that it is a series of problems that can be solved by judging them under general categories or a stream of facts that can be assimilated. This, of course, is a feature of what Kierkegaard calls “objective thought.” However, Kierkegaard argues that to view life as a problem that can be solved by a method or a fact that can be assimilated under a previously existing category is misguided. So although his message can be communicated directly, he chooses not to do

so because it would undermine what for him is the most important aspect of what he has to say: that it can transform the reader's own existence (rather than being simply a thesis to be understood). The readers may or may not know it, but the text they have in their hands (as Kierkegaard sees it) is one of the most risky communications of which they themselves could be the addressees. This decision to come up with a way of communicating the importance of risk that is itself risky means that communication is not the transmission of facts, propositions, or information; it is an art. Just as a person may succeed or fail in living up to the demands of a particular commitment, a particular communication can succeed or fail (it may not inspire or motivate a religious turn in the person's life, in Kierkegaard's case) and there is no method of communicating that can assure success.

Kierkegaard writes:

[The problem of communicating] sets up an absolute claim on the fertility of expression, since to repeat one's own words, or repeat word for word expressions that have been felicitously chosen, is not hard. (*Postscript* 238)

An absolute claim on our fertility means that our words can either miscarry or have living offspring. This is the flip side of our interpretation of the "crucifixion of the understanding" as meaning that we can neither give up on trying to understand or triumphantly say that we have understood. We can neither say that we do not care to express ourselves or that it is a piece of cake to do so. Being faced with an absolute claim on the fertility of our expression is the flip side of the crucifixion of our understanding. We have to say something but we cannot guarantee we will be understood.

In other words, to communicate a recommendation objectively does not make such a "claim on the fertility of expression" because in such cases, where what is at stake is merely the transmission of propositions or information that are in principle equally accessible to all addressees, it is possible simply to repeat words or phrases that have worked before. To communicate the importance of risk in a way that does not thereby undercut itself, diluting itself into a mere transmission of propositions the understanding of which makes no existential demands on the addressee, is an art and requires constantly trying new ways and strategies. This is in fact what Kierkegaard does.

3. Pseudonymity

In this section, I will establish that Kierkegaard's practice of writing pseudonymously serves to lead the reader not just to a cognitive understanding of the importance of risky commitment and the dangers of a detached, objectifying approach to interpretation, but also serves as an existential invitation to the religious way of life. As with indirect communication, Kierkegaard's use of pseudonymity has misled interpreters into a view that I believe is mistaken, namely that he is not actually advancing a specific thesis but is simply putting many alternatives into play -- that he is rejoicing in the freedom of wearing many masks without being bound to any of them. Thus, to take one example from a rather voluminous literature, we can look at the following passage from *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*:

Readers such as Jean-Paul Sartre take Kierkegaard's ironic use of pseudonymity to be essential to his project as a whole...By employing pseudonyms he can advocate a particular position and retract it as soon as he speaks in another voice. We no longer have a consistent philosophical position, and we no longer have a consistent author behind the authorship. With Kierkegaard's use of irony, "he revealed himself and concealed himself at the same time. He did not refuse to communicate, but simply held on to his secrecy in the act of communication. His mania for pseudonyms was a systematic disqualification of proper names: even to assign him as an individual before the tribunal of others, a welter of mutually contradictory appellations was necessary...he ceaselessly fabricated himself by writing. (Lippitt and Pattison 349)

Kierkegaard on this view is not actually even in control of the process. He has no consistent position.

This means that he is less vulnerable than someone in a normal communicative situation. It is as if we are trying to decide to forgive or punish a friend after he has performed a terrible act, at which point Kierkegaard says, "Mickey Mouse would say let him go" but "Donald Duck would say punish him." That might be helpful, if we believed Kierkegaard were actually suffering along with us in this difficult situation. But if we discover that Kierkegaard had left the scene and had simply left behind a spam bot that generated random messages, connecting fictional characters with random phrases, then we would not be inclined to waste our time and emotional energy giving him a hearing. Nor would there be any risk or vulnerability in listening to him -- we could not worry about not understanding what he wished us to understand. It would simply be a diversion. This is not Kierkegaard's practice in using pseudonyms. In fact he tempts us to figure out what he's saying and deliberately teases us by being evasive about what his relationship is with the pseudonyms.

Like a fiery sun shooting out jets of gas, some of which congeal into planets, Kierkegaard is (according to this view) erupting pseudonyms that say a variety of fascinating and mutually contradictory things, but which do not reflect a deep master plan. Even what he says as "Kierkegaard" is no more to be attributed to the factual Soren Kierkegaard than what he says as Johannes the Seducer or Johannes Climacus. It is misguided on this view to even ask what Kierkegaard "really" thought -- instead we should just enjoy or be edified or stimulated or provoked by the variety of positions both put forward and retracted.

One problem with this view is that it undercuts itself. Kierkegaard is a distinctive author who, unlike Immanuel Kant, uses pseudonyms. When we investigate Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms and applaud his post-modernity, we have to appeal to the fact that the books we know were in fact written by Kierkegaard. We do not ascribe *The Communist Manifesto* to Kierkegaard writing under the pseudonym "Karl Marx" or believe that *Fear and Trembling* was actually written by A.A. Milne, the author of Winnie the Pooh.

Secondly, with Kierkegaard we are faced not just with an author who uses pseudonyms, but with an author who uses pseudonyms and *tells us about it*. So the difficulty in understanding his use of pseudonyms is not just in explaining why an author

would use pseudonyms. If that were the case then Sartre's interpretation -- according to which the author in question had a lot of interesting ideas and was unable or unwilling to choose which ones he stood behind and therefore wrote all of them under different names -- might well be correct. However, that is not the case with Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard used pseudonyms, explained that he was using pseudonyms, and explained why he used each one with reference to his theory of spheres of existence. So, for example, Climacus writes from the perspective of Religiousness A, Anti-Climacus writes from the perspective of Religiousness B, Justice William writes from the perspective of the ethical, and so on.

James Conant advances a related position on the matter of Kierkegaard's pseudonymity. Conant argues that one would be mistaken to believe that any opinions put forward by Climacus in the *Postscript* are Kierkegaard's own views. So, for example, Climacus believes that "truth is subjectivity," but Kierkegaard does not. In fact, Kierkegaard believes "truth is subjectivity" is nonsense. According to Conant, Climacus is negating the philosophical notion that Christianity is a form of objective knowledge, but by negating it falls into nonsense himself.

Climacus... does not remain faithful to his own claim that all he is doing is marking categorical distinctions – assembling reminders that bring to the philosopher's attention what, in some sense, he cannot help but already know... Rather than simply showing the philosopher that he has run the categories together in a fashion that has led him to speak nonsense, Climacus offers his thesis in the form of the negation of the philosopher's claim. But the attempt to negate a piece of nonsense results in another piece of nonsense. (Conant 210, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense")

Kierkegaard, according to Conant, is smart enough to grasp the Wittgensteinian point that the negation of nonsense is nonsense, but Climacus (his fictional creation) is not. Therefore, by grasping Climacus's attempt to stop doing philosophy by doing more philosophy, the reader who understands Kierkegaard's project comes to see the true foolishness of philosophizing. Conant concludes that like Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is an object lesson against the reader's temptation to do philosophy:

[W]e are not asked, at the end of these works, to understand the theses each of these authors appears to advance, but we are asked to understand what they are up to in constructing such an appearance, and the sign that we have succeeded in doing so, they tell us, is that we are no longer tempted to advance such theses ourselves – that we throw them away. (Conant 218)

While this is not exactly Sartre's version of Kierkegaard as an uncontrolled sun shooting pseudonyms out like gas, it does have something in common with it. On this view, Kierkegaard is a therapist and his pseudonyms are therapeutic masks, but what they have to say is, strictly speaking, meaningless. However, there is no risk in responding to nonsense, and no one is likely to reach healing in the hands of a therapist who literally speaks nonsense.

Conant takes as evidence for his view Kierkegaard's "first and last declaration" that concludes the *Postscript*, where Kierkegaard, writing under his own name, asks that readers do him the courtesy of realizing that he is not Johannes de Silentio any more than he is the Knight of Faith.

So in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by myself. I have no opinion about them except as third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as reader, not the remotest private relation to them, that being impossible in a doubly reflected communication. One single word by me personally, in my own name, would be a case of assumptive self-forgetfulness that in this one word, from a dialectical point of view, would essentially incur the annihilation of the pseudonyms. (*Postscript* 528)

Conant interprets Kierkegaard as follows:

All this suggests that if we wish to go into the business of interpreting one of these works, we would somehow be involved in a confusion if we were to ascribe (as in fact, most commentators do) any assertions or arguments in the work to Kierkegaard. (Conant 199-200)

To be "involved in a confusion" sounds like it is making a naive mistake, along the lines of thinking that because Nabokov wrote *Lolita* he was himself a pedophile. However, the confusion Conant takes commentators to task for is one Kierkegaard deliberately invites. Kierkegaard deliberately pulls us towards him and pushes us away from him. It is, as he says, a dance between himself and the reader. This also means that he places us in deliberate anxiety -- which he defines as an antipathic sympathy or sympathetic antipathy. We are not just confused if we ascribe Climacus's statements to Kierkegaard. We are either doing what he wants us to do or not doing what he wants us to do, and very deliberately, he does not give us the ability to know which it is. He specifically raises the question -- is this something being put forward seriously, or not? Does it have authenticity for me, or not?

Conant's Kierkegaard does not advance any philosophical theses -- he believes that to do so is foolish, or wicked. However, Climacus does advance a philosophical thesis, namely that "truth is subjectivity." For Conant, the strategy of pseudonymity allows Kierkegaard to have his cake and eat it too. In the mouth of Climacus, he is able to advance philosophical arguments against a certain way of construing Christianity, and in that respect he climbs the ladder. In his own person, as Kierkegaard, he realizes that even to make a philosophical argument against objective thought is too objective, and in that respect he throws the ladder away.

However, Conant ignores the fact that Kierkegaard's instruction here is literally impossible to follow. If the afterword to the *Postscript* signed by Soren Kierkegaard is to be believed, nothing written by Soren Kierkegaard should be taken as relevant in considering the pseudonyms. Yet if that is so, then the afterword cannot be taken as relevant regarding interpretation of the pseudonyms. Since it is impossible to follow Kierkegaard's instructions straightforwardly, we must treat his request more carefully.

First, we should note that Kierkegaard writes that his relationship to Climacus is that of an “author of the author” (*Postscript* 529). In other words, it is correct to attribute an argument written by Climacus to Kierkegaard, just as it is correct, in the case of a play written about a poet writing poems, to attribute those poems ultimately to the playwright. If somebody wondered why Climacus fails to engage with the films of Steven Spielberg it would clearly be correct to say, “Climacus does not talk about Spielberg because Climacus was created by Soren Kierkegaard, who lived in the nineteenth century and died before motion pictures were invented.” Of course, it may be that an argument in a work signed “Kierkegaard” is not one that he actually held just as it may be that an argument signed “Climacus” is not one he held either. Kierkegaard may be lying or deliberately being ironic in a work signed either “Climacus” or “Kierkegaard.” That said, we must still answer the question why Kierkegaard used pseudonyms at all. In other words, why would Kierkegaard write (i) “Truth is subjectivity” under a pseudonym, and not just write (ii) “A person who looks at life in the way characterized by Religiousness A would believe that ‘Truth is subjectivity.’”

My answer, in short, is that pseudonymous discourse assimilates to indirect discourse. (i) and (ii) mean the same thing but (i) has the potential to induce certain positive effects (associated with indirect discourse) in the reader while (ii) has the potential to induce certain negative effects.

As with indirect discourse, Kierkegaard is trying to make sure that the reception of his writing is congruent with its content, which he refers to as the “reduplication of form and content.” Kierkegaard thinks that a certain kind of attention to his own life will stand in the way of us assimilating and being properly receptive to the existential implications of his message, and he avoids this by attributing the work to Johannes Climacus.

If anybody, unfamiliar with cultivated association with a distancing ideality, has in this way perverted the impression made on him by the pseudonymous books through a misconceived importunity upon my factual personality, if he has fooled himself, actually fooled himself, by being encumbered with my personal actuality, instead of having the doubly reflected, light ideality of a poetically actualized author to dance with, if he has with paralogistic importunity deceived himself by senselessly extracting my private particularity out of the evasive dialectical duplexity of the qualitative contrast – truly it is not my fault, I who for my part, precisely with propriety, and in the interest of the purity of the relationship, have done all that I could to prevent what an inquisitive portion of the reading public – God knows in whose interest – has from the very beginning done everything to achieve. (*Postscript* 529-530)

This offers us the following:

1) To believe that Climacus is Kierkegaard is not just confusion, but a form of self-deception -- we are fooling ourselves.

- 2) What is offered is an evasive dance. If we try to say that Climacus is Kierkegaard so we can understand how to evaluate his statements, it pulls away. However, if we ignore it as simply a fiction it draws us close.
- 3) Kierkegaard's way of saying how we should approach this pseudonymous text is also an evasive dance and is evasive in precisely the same way.
- 4) Therefore, it is just as much a confusion to rely on Kierkegaard's say-so as to rely on Climacus's say-so.
- 5) But it is just as much a decision to reject this text as to accept it. It is on us.

The passage informs us that it would be wrong of us to read the *Postscript* "encumbered" by Kierkegaard's "personal actuality." So, for example, if we found out that Kierkegaard himself never lived up to the standards of human life that he put forward in his works, this might distract us from the question of whether these standards are worth shooting for in our own lives. If we "senselessly extract" his "private particularity" and become concerned with questions of whether he was gay or not, or had syphilis, or was a cad to his girlfriend, we could convert his writing into a sort of gossipy reflection upon a weird Danish personality and not into a discussion about how to live a meaningful life. Furthermore, we could use the interminable nature of some of these questions to avoid ever reaching a decision about how to live our own lives. The question of, for example, whether Kierkegaard had syphilis could always be clarified by advances in historical epidemiology, and we would be responsible scholars if we withheld judgment before reaching a decision. We might want to wait and have his corpse exhumed and analyzed before deciding. However, all these questions would be "encumbering" our understanding of what Kierkegaard has to say. However, while we could always discover more facts about Soren Kierkegaard, this is not the case with Johannes Climacus. Johannes Climacus is a complete fictional creation.

However, this passage also makes it clear that there is a right way to connect Kierkegaard and the writings of his pseudonyms. It is simply untrue that Kierkegaard has, as he claims, "done everything to achieve" his goal of preventing a connection between himself and his pseudonyms. He could have, for example, refrained from writing the final word to the reader in which he gives his genuine authorship. It becomes clear that he is deliberately teasing us with this inconsistency when he writes, "Of my reader, if I dare speak of such, I would request the favour of a forgetful remembrance" (*Postscript* 530). Asking to be forgotten is not the same as asking to be forgetfully remembered, and someone who truly wanted to be ignored would not make either request.

There is a correct way of relating to Kierkegaard through the medium of Johannes Climacus, namely to realize that we have the "light ideality of a poetically actualized author to dance with," one who engages in "evasive dialectical duplexity" (*Postscript* 529). As we saw earlier, Kierkegaard sees communication as an art rather than a science. Dancing is thus a good metaphor for Kierkegaard's view of communication. If we participate in a dance, the success or failure is not entirely up to us. In success our movements become part of a larger whole. Although one partner may lead, it is not a coercive leading, not like the synching up of a cadet's movements with a drill

sergeant. In success a dance transports our movements to a different level of description -- we are not just flailing our arms around but tangoing. Kierkegaard holds that however he signs his work, whether as Kierkegaard or as Johannes Climacus, his mode of communication is more like inviting his readers to dance than it is like ordering them to get something correct.

Pseudonymity serves many of the functions of indirect discourse. It prevents us from being distracted by an inconclusive scholarly investigation into the facts of Kierkegaard's life, and prevents us from getting distracted by facts about Kierkegaard that were not under his control. However, Kierkegaard remains the "author of the author" of the *Postscript* and we are required to interpret Climacus in light of Kierkegaard's larger project. Yet this interpretation requires different skills than the evaluation of a detached objective argument. We need to see how we respond emotionally to the fictional creation of Climacus and to the actual person Kierkegaard. We need to employ our imagination and passion as well as our critical faculties. Our interpretation of the "evasive duplexity" of Kierkegaard's writing strategy calls on the same resources that Kierkegaard believes leading our lives requires. We need to take a stand on contradictory impulses and ultimately commit ourselves to a finite particular relationship.

3.1 The Specific Pseudonym of Climacus and the Structure of the *Postscript*

Kierkegaard's fiction takes the form of a philosophical monologue, but it is still a dramatic monologue, and also a story, although one with few incidents. Climacus is interested in faith but unwilling to profess faith because of the risk. Yet his thesis is that it makes no sense to be interested in faith if you are not willing to take the risk. So he doesn't just avoid the truth by believing something false. He avoids the truth by believing something true.

Often the fiction takes the form of a dramatic monologue with very little incident. Even in such instances the pseudonym is a fictional character and to evaluate what the character says we have to form an opinion of what sort of person he is. With certain pseudonyms, such as Johannes the Seducer or Johannes Climacus, we get quite a bit of incident and plot. When we form an impression of what they have to say we have more to go on than just what they have to say; we also know something of what they do. So for example, Johannes the Seducer claims not to care about the women he seduces but we can believe that this is self-deception -- that he is trying not to like her but cannot resist. For Kierkegaard, every sphere of existence except for Religiousness B requires self-deception. This is because all the other spheres of existence are engaged in a doomed project: they are trying to achieve meaning and invulnerability at the same time. Kierkegaard believes this is impossible, and that anybody who claims to be living a meaningful but invulnerable life is lying to himself.

By creating fictional characters, Kierkegaard goes further and shows us exactly how the evasion would function in a particular human life. In the case of Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard gives us quite a few clues that we should not take him at face value and that his philosophizing is an ingenious effort at self-deception. As we have seen, Climacus identifies himself as someone in Religiousness A, a sphere in which one's

stand on the factors tries to reconcile them by giving up on the satisfaction of any particular desires. As Dreyfus and Rubin write:

The point of Religiousness A is to attempt to satisfy my desires and needs in the present while remaining absolutely indifferent to their being satisfied in the future...Kierkegaard calls the expectation of nothing in particular an expectation of Victory but not victories. If I do not expect any particular desire or need to be satisfied, I can appreciate satisfaction and dissatisfaction equally. (*Being-in-the-World* 292)

Climacus is in Religiousness A but is interested in Religiousness B – the whole *Postscript* is his attempt to understand it. Climacus demonstrates that one can be interested in Religiousness B and understand it, but not actually succeed in making it one's sphere of existence. It is as if Climacus was distracting himself by writing "do not distract yourself" over and over again.

It helps to take a look at an issue like self-deception and see how it can be handled by fiction as compared to straight expository prose. One can definitely write a thesis about the fact that people lie to themselves, as Freud, Sartre, Fingarette, and Donald Davidson have done. However, straight expository prose about self-deception can render it somewhat mysterious because the expository prose is committed to being lucid and honest. So the writing itself does not exemplify the phenomenon it is discussing. A fable, such as the fox and the grapes, allows us to place a self-deceptive phrase in a fictional context that lets us know that it is not simply incorrect, but self-deceptive. "Those grapes are sour," says the fox, but we know from the story of the fox that the fox is lying to himself. A further step in the direction of showing self-deception rather than just talking about it would be to give a monologue from the point of view of the fox. In reading it we would have to be aware of the fox's true motivations and be skeptical about what he tells us about the sourness or sweetness of the grapes he fails to get. The *Postscript* takes this one step further. The fox is lying to himself by saying the grapes are sour, when we suspect they are sweet. Climacus is lying to himself by saying something true. It is true that intellectualizing can be used as a way of evading the importance of risky commitment to a life well-lived. Climacus is lying to himself by saying something true.

Climacus as a fictional character is easy to lose sight of because he talks a lot and writes in brilliant philosophical prose. However, there is a story buried within the *Postscript* in which Climacus the human being steps forward and we are able to see him as a person and not just a mouthpiece. This story provides a master key for interpreting his failings as a narrator, because when he is a narrator he is able to set things up to look good, while when he interacts with other human beings we can see his failings more clearly. Although commentators focus on the philosophical positions (or pseudo-positions) Climacus puts forward to distract us, he is a full-bodied character. If we pay attention to more details of his story we have more resources for understanding how Kierkegaard uses pseudonymity to communicate.

The story starts by portraying Climacus as a self-indulgent graduate student in philosophy, a serial womanizer who loves staying in his apartment smoking cigars, who is tormented by the fact that he wants to be famous but cannot decide what to write

about. He is funny, self-involved, and long-winded, but also brilliant at mocking the flaws of others and occasionally his own. This rather vain, caddish young man goes to a graveyard one Sunday seeking inspiration from nature, and witnesses a surprising scene. Rather than involving himself in this tragic story, however, he is overjoyed because he has figured out what he wants to write his book about. He decides to write his book about how objective thought misses the point of faith and commitment. He writes the *Postscript* because he thinks that solving the problem of faith will make him a famous, best-selling author, which is an ironic project because if he really understood faith he would not care about fame. We can imagine that his goal is actually a misunderstood desire for human connection and meaning. He wants to become a literary celebrity but is afraid of being mocked: "...I, too, am striving towards the exalted goal of being greeted with acclaim – unless I am ridiculed, or maybe crucified" (*Postscript* 157). He wants an audience -- he has admitted that he wants to be a famous writer -- but he protects himself against saying he wants an audience, preferring to joke about it instead. However, by the end of the book Climacus has given up his goal of fame in despair. He tells us wryly that he is sure no one is reading his book at all. He has written his book for an imaginary reader and he claims to be proud of it, though beneath the pride we can sense his loneliness and despair.

Kierkegaard has painted for us a psychologically acute and nuanced portrait of a philosophy graduate student who is tempted by faith but also afraid of it, interested in being famous but also ready to hide behind a joke and deny that he has any hope for fame. He is ambivalent and self-tormenting, but also appears in his readiness to own up to his flaws. Yet his readiness to own up to his flaws does not mean he is ready to fix them.

Having portrayed this very human, flawed and brilliant character, Kierkegaard then has him tell us about the most affecting experience of his life. The scene takes place on a Sunday. Climacus has already brought up the issue of Sunday conversions in the context of mocking Danish Hegelians. He is interested in the comedic fact that some Danish Hegelians claim to have been converted to Hegelianism on a Sunday; this is supposed to be funny because Hegelianism is a philosophy that repudiates miracles. This should alert us because Sunday is a day upon which faith and conversions are a possibility. In the scene, Climacus has the possibility of a religious conversion but avoids it and instead embarks upon writing the book we are reading.

The scene begins with Climacus wandering the graves of a cemetery when, unnoticed, he comes upon a grandfather and grandson standing in front of a freshly dug grave. Climacus discerns from the other gravestones that these are the last two surviving members of a large family. The occupant of the new grave is the old man's son and the young man's father. The father became engrossed in philosophical speculation and died without faith. The old man asks his grandson to "promise to hold fast to Jesus Christ" -- (one of only two uses of Jesus Christ's name in the *Postscript*). The grandson gets down on his knees and promises that he will. The grandfather lifts him up and embraces him.

Climacus does not reveal himself and gives us an extremely long-winded excuse for why he does not, a long discussion of how the best oath is not the womanish one that is given quickly but the one that is never given. But clearly he is afraid to act – he does not comfort the family and he does not bear witness to the oath. He tells us that it would

be a good thing to bear witness to the oath because the grandfather is so close to death that he will soon pass from the scene. If Climacus were to step forward and witness the oath, then after the grandfather's death he could help the child remember his oath and move forward in faith. Climacus tells us that he is moved profoundly, but he does not step forward and reveal himself as a witness for the young boy's oath:

The venerable old man's sorrow over losing his son, not just in death but, as he understood it, still more terribly through speculation, moved me profoundly...The whole thing appealed to me like an intricate criminal case in which the very complex circumstances made pursuit of the truth difficult. This was something for me. And I thought as follows: You are after all tired of life's diversions, you are tired of girls that you love only in passing, you must have something that fully occupies your time. Here it is. Find out where the misunderstanding between speculation and Christianity lies. (*Postscript* 202)

In other words, he is so moved that he decides to go home and write a book that will make him famous! It is, of course, the book we are reading: a brilliant and maddeningly obtuse treatise on faith and how hard it is to communicate.

Climacus's response is intellectual, detached and avoids risk. He claims he is silent but actually is not -- he is the one conveying the scene to us and asking us to appreciate his depth of feeling. But insofar as the scene does not provoke any vulnerable, real, human response, Climacus's depth of feeling is not true emotion but sentimentality. He does not reveal himself to the sad pair, and after being tempted to serve as a witness to the oath, withdraws. He writes a book for an audience of people he will never see.

Of course by telling us he is writing a book for people he does not believe exist he is engaging in what he calls a "dance." He is pulling us towards him as we think, "Of course I exist! I'm reading this!" and pushing us away. This is what makes him seductive and appealing.

Climacus both suffers from a disease and is an accurate diagnostician of it. It is hard to condemn him because he rushes to condemn himself, which of course is part of the reason he does it. Like Don Quixote, Climacus is a deeply flawed, tragicomic figure. He writes,

Psychologically, it is usually a sure sign that a person is beginning to give up the passion when he wants to treat its object objectively. Passion and reflection usually exclude each other. Becoming objective in this way is always a step backwards, for a person's perdition is in passion but so also his elevation. If the dialectical and reflection are not exploited to intensify passion, to become objective is to regress; and even the person who loses himself through passion has not lost as much as the person who lost passion, for the former has possibility. (*Postscript* 515)

By watching the most affecting scene of his life and deciding to write a book on faith, Climacus is taking exactly the sort of step backward that he describes and denigrates in the above passage. Instead of caring about these two people, Climacus defends himself

by finding “something for me.” That something is the book project he has been looking for -- an opportunity to make himself famous.

So I sat there and smoked my cigar until I fell into a reverie. Among others I recall these thoughts. You are getting on, I said to myself, and are becoming an old man without being anything, and without really taking on anything. Wherever you look about you on the other hand, in literature or in life, you see the names and figures of the celebrities... (*Postscript* 156)

Climacus decides to write the *Postscript* after glimpsing a truth in the cemetery. Specifically what excites him is his claim that he has made the discovery that this truth is incommunicable.

Although a mere spectator and witness, I was deeply gripped. At one moment I seemed myself to be the young man whom the father had buried with dismay; the next, I seemed to be the child who was bound by the sacred promise. I felt no impulse, however, to rush forward in order to bear emotional witness to the old man of my sympathy, assuring him with tears and tremulous voice that I should never forget this scene, or even begging him to put me, too, under oath; since only the over-hasty, barren clouds and scudding rain showers are more precipitate than oath-taking. (*Postscript* 200-201)

This is ironic because he has just witnessed an attempt to communicate which seemingly worked on the grandson, and perhaps even for a moment on Climacus himself. He takes pride in his inwardness, but the pride has a fake, bathetic quality.

How does Climacus respond to the scene that grips him? He goes home, assuring us that he has understood something very deep and important:

Then I, too, went home. Really, I had understood the old gentleman right away, for my studies had in many ways led me to discern a dubious relation between a modern Christian speculation and Christianity. But it had not occupied me in any decisive way. Now the matter acquired its significance. (*Postscript* 202)

This sounds promising. If this experience has now “acquired...significance” for Climacus we might expect from his own statement that he will now actually make a risky commitment in his life. He goes on to say that he is profoundly moved by his understanding of what happened to the old man, how he has lost connection with his own son through the confusion of commitment with intellectualizing, and worst of all doesn’t even understand what happened to him:

The venerable old man with his faith seemed to me an absolutely justified individuality whom existence had wronged through modern speculation putting faith’s property title in doubt, like a monetary reform. The venerable old man’s sorrow over losing his son, not just in death but, as he understood it, still more terribly through speculation, moved me profoundly, while the contradiction in his position, that he was unable even to explain how the enemy force operated,

became for me the decisive summons to come on a definite track. (*Postscript* 202)

At this point, when Climacus is profoundly moved and feels he has witnessed someone who is the victim of an enemy attack, we might expect him to become involved in the man's situation. However, he continues:

The whole thing appealed to me like an intricate criminal case in which the very complex circumstances made pursuit of the truth difficult. This was something for me. And I thought as follows: You are after all tired of life's diversions, you are tired of girls that you love only in passing, you must have something that fully occupies your time. Here it is. Find out where the misunderstanding between speculation and Christianity lies. This, then, was my resolve. (*Postscript* 202)

"This was something for me" is a critically ambiguous phrase. It could mean that Climacus realizes he has the same problem as the man in the grave. He has allowed thinking about the problem of commitment to keep him from actually making a vulnerable commitment. This, we the readers know, is in fact his problem, so if he took this interpretation and understood that the scene he witnesses has a lesson for him in his actual life he could be saved. But "something for me" has a less exalted meaning. We know that Climacus has been looking for a diversion and a topic for a book that will make him famous. It could be that "something for me" just means that. The next line resolves the ambiguity in the less flattering direction.

I have indeed never spoken about it to any one, and I am certain that my landlady has detected no change in me, either that evening or the day after. (*Postscript* 202)

In this passage, Climacus, a self-confessed serial seducer, brags about spending two whole days wondering if his landlady had noticed anything different about him, and upon discovering that she had not, deciding he has inwardness. Inwardness, you will recall, is a life characterized by commitment without guarantee of a result. But in this situation, Climacus's self-appointed "inwardness" is actually laziness and fear about connecting with other humans. That we are dealing with laziness and fear rather than inwardness is evident from Climacus doing precisely what he criticizes others for doing -- trying to formulate religion as a doctrine rather than allowing his encounter with it to change his life, or, to put it another way, erecting a speculative structure about the nature of commitment rather than making one himself.

Kierkegaard's use of the pseudonym "Climacus" allows him to illustrate a certain kind of self-deception in the sphere of Religiousness A. The person in Religiousness A is able to see that commitment is necessary in the abstract and that the approaches of the aesthetic and the ethical fail to bring the factors together in the right way, but does not actually make a specific, vulnerable commitment. Climacus reveals this in his self-contradictory project -- he wants to develop his understanding of the difference between speculation and faith, but he wants to develop this understanding purely speculatively. Rather than simply asserting that Religiousness A is a failure, Kierkegaard demonstrates this by presenting us with a fictional character who tries to live a

satisfactory life within the sphere but ultimately fails to do so. Thus, just as with indirect communication, the strategy of pseudonymity forces the reader to understand the importance of commitment by forcing her to come to this realization herself. Rather than just asserting that commitment is important, Kierkegaard forces the reader to make a commitment.

Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms allows him to display self-deception rather than simply describe it. Self-deception is obviously a tricky thing to observe. Someone who says "I love my Dad but I am lying" by that very statement reveals that he is not self-deceived. Someone who describes others as being vulnerable to self-deception may be correct, but he does not by doing so give us the tools for recognizing self-deception in ourselves, since he is describing a situation to which others are vulnerable, but not a situation to which he is himself vulnerable. Kierkegaard creates a character who is self-deceived and this gives us the ability to recognize our own self-deceptions in him. Kierkegaard's problem with objective thought is that it is self-deceptive and evasive, even when the person doing the thinking is personally brilliant, or perfectly aware that objective thought can be a form of self-deception, or, indeed, even if he has written a philosophical book on the subject. By using a pseudonym, Kierkegaard is able to make all these points, and more importantly, to force us to face what we think about a person like that. If we face up to what we think of a person like that it forces us to think for ourselves, because, after all, we ourselves might be a person like that. Kierkegaard draws a portrait of Climacus, the self-deceived, brilliant philosopher, and invites us to face the uncomfortable question – is that the right way to live? If we do face this question, we go further than Climacus does, who drew back when faced with such a choice in the cemetery, and instead wrote a book.

Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms allows him to show how people tend to avoid commitment rather than simply stating that this is what people do. In other words, Kierkegaard does not simply assert that sometimes human beings will use intellectuality as a defense mechanism to avoid making a vulnerable commitment. He creates a character who wants to understand faith, has a chance to make a vulnerable commitment, and then blows it by using intellectuality as a defense. Kierkegaard could have made the point easier and less interesting if he had made Climacus a Hegelian or a materialist – that is, someone with no interest in passionate commitment. Instead, he makes his character someone who is very interested in precisely what he should be interested in – the difference between objective thought and passionate commitment – but who still uses his intellectuality as a way of defending himself against an actual commitment. You could say Climacus is interested in precisely the right issues, but he lacks the courage to actually live according to his beliefs. Kierkegaard is able to illustrate all these points by creating a fictional character who exemplifies them.

Furthermore, by presenting a point of view in the life of a fictional character, Kierkegaard requires us to make a specific, local decision about what sort of life we admire and what sort of life we condemn. If he presented his philosophical points in the form of a detached essay with no particular author it would require a certain set of detached skills for us to evaluate it, such skills as following an argument, teasing apart logical distinctions, and so on. Since he presents his philosophical points in the mouthpiece of a fictional character, the skills we need to evaluate them are of a different

sort. They include having a sensitive ear for fakeness, deciding whether and how much to trust another human being, and choosing to allow ourselves to be emotionally drawn into a relationship or to protecting ourselves. These are precisely the skills Kierkegaard believes we need if we are to evaluate what sort of life we should live. They require taking a stand on the factors.

4. Revocation

We now come to revocation, the third distinctive feature of Kierkegaard's method of communication. In this section, I will show that revocation is consistent with indirect communication and pseudonymity. They are three fictional techniques that work in concert. Specifically, revocation is another way of making sure that the way of communicating the importance of risk does not itself become a way of evading the importance of risk; it is another response to the worry that our reading of Kierkegaard will allow us to fall into a superstitious belief in the truth. Specifically, the revocation at the end of the *Postscript* avoids a potential pitfall of Kierkegaard's use of fiction. If the *Postscript* ended with Climacus realizing how empty his life is and committing suicide, Kierkegaard would be letting the reader know what he actually thinks about Religiousness A -- namely, that it is a failure. Instead, the *Postscript* is a work of fiction that deliberately ends on an inconclusive note, and for that reason forces us more effectively to decide for ourselves what it means and what implications it can have for our own lives -- do we rest content with the speculative thesis about the importance of commitment, or do we become more receptive to making risky commitments by engaging with the work? Not only do we not know Climacus's ultimate fate, we do not even know precisely what he thinks about what he wrote. We spend hundreds of pages in his company only to be told that he revokes everything he has written. This makes it clear that the demands made on the reader far exceed the demands of a typical treatise in philosophy, religion, or ethics. The revocation is another strategy Kierkegaard uses to engage existentially, and not just intellectually, with his reader.

In the appendix to the *Postscript*, which is the last passage signed by Johannes Climacus and one that immediately precedes Kierkegaard's "first and last declaration" discussed above, Climacus writes:

The book then is superfluous; so let no one take the trouble to appeal to it; for anyone who thus appeals to it has eo ipso misunderstood it... As in Catholic books, especially from former times, one finds at the back a note informing the reader that everything is to be understood conformably with the doctrine of the holy universal mother Church, so too what I write contains an additional notice to the effect that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked, that the book has not only a conclusion but a revocation into the bargain. More one cannot ask. Forwards or backward. (*Postscript* 521-522)

As we saw in Chapter One, Conant connects this with Wittgenstein's famous ending to the *Tractatus*, in which Wittgenstein proclaims or admits that by his own lights his own philosophy is nonsense. For Wittgenstein, according to Conant, to make a claim and

then revoke it is a way of teaching the reader something about how philosophical claims are nonsensical and how we are tempted to make them anyway.

I argued that this view is mistaken, but that leaves me with the problem of explaining the difference between making a claim and revoking it and not making it at all. On the face of it, if A asks B for a piece of information, say, the capital of Romania, and B says “Budapest” but then corrects himself -- “I take that back. That’s not true. I can’t remember the capital of Romania” -- B is in essentially the same position as he would have been if he had not said “Budapest” in the first place. He seems to be back where he started. Yet, Climacus claims that there is a big difference between not ever saying something and saying something and then revoking it, and further that his ideal reader will know what that difference is.

Now, for an author to have an imaginary reader as a secret fiction and purely private enjoyment is of no concern to a third party...In praise and honour of such a reader, I feel incapable of speaking as he deserves. Anyone who has had to do with him certainly will not deny that he is absolutely the most agreeable of all readers. He understands one at once and piece by piece; he has the patience not to skip over subordinate clauses or to rush from the woof of the episode to the warp of the table of contents; he can hold out as long as the author... (*Postscript* 523)

So far this is a weird, complicated, and funny joke, because as we are reading this we know that his only reader is not an imaginary reader. We can allow our egos to be stroked by taking the praise that we are the most agreeable of readers. Or we can reflect that the praise is actually a bit insulting, because we the actual readers are less agreeable than imaginary readers, who are the most agreeable. Or we can turn around and criticize the author who is unable to find real people agreeable and would rather play with his imaginary playmates. Climacus goes on, though, to connect this in an even more mind-bending way to revocation. He continues that the imaginary readers

...can understand that understanding is revocation; the understanding with him as the only reader is indeed precisely the book’s revocation; he can understand that to write a book and revoke it is something else than not writing it... (*Postscript* 523)

We know that we are not imaginary. We know that Climacus’s relationship with us as imaginary is precisely the book’s revocation. So that would seem to imply that the book is not revoked, or at least that its revocation is not the same as not saying it -- it is not the same as giving us a ladder to throw away or exploding an illusion from within, leaving nothing behind. And indeed Climacus says this: “...to write a book which does not claim importance for anyone is something else than leaving it unwritten” (*Postscript* 523).

What is the difference between writing a book and revoking it and leaving it unwritten? If I write an ordinary factual book, meant to convey information, and claim that the Native Americans actually came from New Guinea and not over the Bering Straits and then revoke it, it is essentially the same as leaving it unwritten. Maybe it will leave a footnote behind -- letting researchers know that this is a blind alley -- but the difference between that footnote and its absence is slight. Writing a book and revoking it

is more like saying “I love you -- no I don’t.” That is to say, it is a flirtatious gesture which raises the stakes but ultimately relies on the listener to take the risk and resolve the situation in one way or another, either by continuing the flirtation or breaking it off.

Writing and revoking as in a flirtation invites or makes room for commitment in a relationship but does not compel it. In Kierkegaard’s general description of his own writing, it lacks “authority.” Joseph Raz has defined authority as follows. If an authority says *p*, that gives a listener a defeasible reason to believe that *p*. If we give a professor of surgery authority on the subject of surgery, his statement that a particular procedure is best performed through the nose and not through trepanning the skull gives us a reason for believing that this is in fact true.

Does “I love you” have authority? In one sense, obviously not, just because somebody saying “I love you” does not give you a reason to love him back. But it puts the question on the table! If you do love him back, then in retrospect (here is retroactive temporality again) the fact that he said “I love you” gave you a reason to love him back. Love is not the only risky endeavor in which communication has this quality. If someone says to me “Join me in the resistance -- I have no guarantee we will succeed” he also places it on me. My response is what will dictate what is important to me, what our relationship will be from then on -- comrades in arms or not -- and what sort of person I am.

Unlike Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, Kierkegaard is not making a general point about the limits of sense or of the dangers of philosophizing. He is making a specific point about the limitations of a particular fictional character, Climacus, and by extension the limitations of living a life in Religiousness A. This limitation and self-deception comes out in Climacus’s claim that he knows that his perfect reader is imaginary and that itself is the revocation of the book -- a claim that Wittgenstein never makes and one that must be evaluated with a different set of tools.

What meaning does revocation have for Climacus? The first thing to note is that it avoids risk. If Climacus believed he had an actual reader he would be vulnerable to criticism and failure. Climacus’s reader is imaginary, and so he is perfectly defended against human contact. Climacus has not committed himself to anybody in real life; he is simply committed to the idea of a person. This is what allows him to have the courage to express himself. Climacus is in the sphere of Religiousness A, which is precisely characterized by the commitment to the idea of the temporal as such without any concrete commitment to any actual temporal thing. Thus, Climacus’s revocation is not actually something we should take at face value. That is, the revocation that Climacus makes of his entire book is not something we should emulate -- it is more of a cautionary tale. A tip-off that this is the case is that we know that his claim that he has only an imaginary reader is false -- we are his actual readers. Climacus’s revocation shows us what it is like to fail to commit, and is an example of evasiveness.

All the examples of strange communication, from indirect communication to revocation to pseudonymity, are meant to throw the burden back on the reader to respond. In the lengthy discussion of his own work, Kierkegaard writes under the pseudonym Climacus, and provides a key to how strange communication works by explaining his own novella “Story of Suffering,” which is part of *Stages on Life’s Way*. The suffering in the title refers to the phenomenon of committing to a life of

vulnerability without knowing how it will turn out. Also known as “inwardness,” it is the characteristic of Religiousness B: “The suffering is, to recall the Frater’s words, the 70,000 fathoms upon whose depth the religious person constantly remains” (*Postscript* 241). The story of suffering is distinctive, Kierkegaard tells us, because it has no ending. It thereby takes as its topic the suffering that characterizes a lack of certainty and at the same exemplifies it. In this story, a Kierkegaard-like protagonist breaks off his engagement with a Regine-like woman and we are left unresolved as to whether or not he acted honorably.

Kierkegaard explains why the inconclusiveness of the book’s story is exactly what is needed to convey Religiousness B.

No doubt a book without an ending has been written before. Maybe the author died or could not be bothered to finish it, etc. But here this is not the case; the absence of an ending, of a result, is understood, just as suffering earlier, as a categorial requirement in respect of religious existence. Frater Taciturnus develops this himself...But it is the very absence of a result that defines inwardness, because a result is something external and the communication of results an external relation between a knower and a non-knower. (*Postscript* 242)

Inasmuch as inwardness involves acting without knowing a result, i.e. committing to something vulnerable without knowing that the commitment will work out but committing all the same, it is best conveyed by forms of communication that do not resolve. This is an example of the communicative strategy of “reduplication of form and content.” We need to commit to the story of suffering and decide for ourselves if we think the protagonist was a cad or a man of honor. Similarly, we must commit ourselves and decide whether a particular statement should be understood straightforwardly, as a joke, or as some other form of miscommunication. We must decide how to evaluate a particular pseudonym and how to respond to a book that revokes itself.

The *Postscript* functions structurally like “A Story of Suffering” and the revocation serves a similar role as the story’s lack of an ending. When Climacus revokes what he has said and tells us that we are only imaginary, we do not know what to make of it. Climacus gives us a clue about how to read the revocation at the end of the section by telling us a story about a very long book read by someone who does not realize that the meaning lies in the reader himself (*Postscript* 207). This must be the book we hold in our hands.

In Chapter One, we examined Conant's claim that the revocation that ends the *Postscript* was a piece of Wittgensteinian self-diagnosing nonsense. When we put it in the context of Climacus’s failings as a human being, it becomes easier to understand. Throughout the book Climacus has a teasing, flirtatious relationship with the reader. He is unwilling to be vulnerable. He never says, “I care about what I am writing and I want you to care too.” Instead, he suggests that he does not care and that he is writing it for himself, but he also toys with the idea of offering the reader a “douceur” or sweetener -- a cash bribe for finishing it:

...I would be the first to promise every one of my readers a reasonable douceur, or to open to my readers, one and all, men and women, the prospect of taking part in

a lottery of tasteful gifts, in order thus to instill into them the strength and courage to read my pieces. (*Postscript* 158)

This passage hits the characteristic Climacian tone of self-denigration while simultaneously fishing for compliments. His witty, self-deprecating suggestion that he would offer his readers lottery tickets to read his pieces is also an attempt to amuse the reader and cajole her into continuing. When Climacus addresses a book to us but revokes it he continues this flirtatious dance. Climacus is an author who teases us into loving him, who denigrates himself so that we will be provoked into contradicting him, and who claims to want to be ignored as a strategy to get us to pay attention to him.

Conant misses this point entirely when he argues that what remains after this revocation is Wittgensteinian silence. What remains after revocation is not silence, but a flirting, teasing, seductive and unstable invitation to human connection -- an increase in our receptivity to vulnerable commitment that could elevate us to the sphere of Religiousness B. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades complains that Socrates is a seducer, provoking attractive young men by claiming that all he knows is that he knows nothing. Kierkegaard, who wrote his dissertation on Socratic irony, follows in the footsteps of Socrates, writing (as Climacus) that he has figured out that Christianity is something you cannot figure out. In both cases, it is a bit too pious and innocent to take these seductive characters at their word.

When we look at Climacus's writing as an insecure, wavering seduction of the reader, we can understand the significance of the revocation. Climacus makes the connection between his writing and seduction explicit:

In a well-ordered state it is permissible, after all, to be in love in private, and the more profoundly private the love, so much the more permissible. On the other hand, it is not permissible for a man to accost all girls and assure each that she is the one he really loves. And anyone who has an actual beloved is prohibited by faithfulness and propriety from being on the heels of one who is imaginary, however privately. But anyone who has none – yes, well, he is free to do it, and the author who has no actual reader is free to have a fancied one; he is even free to admit it, because there is of course no one that he offends. (*Postscript* 522-523)

In this passage, Climacus claims i) if an author has no actual reader he is free and ii) if you have an actual reader you are not free and the police can arrest you. He is claiming that the first situation applies, but we know that the second one applies, because we are reading it. His claim that he has said nothing is clearly duplicitous, as are those who use racial slurs claiming that they mean no offence, that they are simply testing the rules, when in fact they are testing the rules as a cover for causing offence. Climacus compares writing a book to declaring his love for a girl and argues that it would be impermissible if he were accosting real girls, or if he had an actual beloved. However, since he posits that he has no actual reader, he is free to have an imagined reader without offending anyone. He continues,

Now, for an author to have an imaginary reader as a secret fiction and purely private enjoyment is of no concern to a third party. Let this be said as a civic

apologia and defence for what stands in need of no defence, since in its secrecy it is screened from attack: the innocent and permissible, yet perhaps nevertheless disdained and unappreciated, enjoyment of having an imaginary reader, an infinite pleasure, the purest expression of freedom of thought, precisely because it renounces freedom of speech. In praise and honour of such a reader, I feel incapable of speaking as he deserves. (*Postscript* 523)

Climacus's claim that he writes his book as a purely private enjoyment is seductive, flirtatious and evasive, and it is up to the reader to decide whether or not to take it at face value. There may, perhaps, be cases of a purely private enjoyment, but publishing a book surely cannot be one of them. The praise that he offers his imaginative reader -- who provides him "infinite pleasure" -- is really praise for us, his real readers.

It is only after this flirtatious, seductive, one-step forward, one-step back flattering of the reader that Climacus says that his ideal reader "can understand that to write a book and revoke it is something else than not writing it" (*Postscript* 523). What precisely is the difference between writing a book and revoking it and leaving it unwritten? It is the same as the difference between saying "I love you...no I don't," and not saying "I love you" at all. Saying I love you and then revoking it is a move in a flirtatious game -- it invites the recipient to say "Why?" or "Please love me, I love you." Not saying "I love you" at all would not invite such a reaction. The *Postscript* is an invitation to a commitment. Whether or not we take the invitation is up to us. Climacus is clear that making a commitment is not a matter of investigating whether something is objectively worth committing to. He emphasizes that all the worthwhile commitments must be made without such assurances. However, he does not make such a commitment himself.

Climacus concludes his never-concluding *Postscript* by invoking a character from a comedy who knows how to end a love affair:

You will recall that in a play by Scribe a man, experienced in casual love affairs, relates that he employs the following method when he is tired of a girl. He writes to her: 'I know everything' -- and, he adds, this method has never failed yet. Nor do I believe that it has ever failed in our time for any speculator who says, 'I know everything.' Ah, but those reprobate and lying people who say that there is much that they do not know get what is coming to them in this best of worlds, yes, well, best for all those who get the better of it by making a fool of it, by knowing everything, or by knowing nothing at all. (*Postscript* 525-526)

This final communication from Climacus is teasing and inconclusive. If the way to end a relationship is to say "I know everything," Climacus must list himself among those "lying people who say that there is much they do not know." Although his account of them is self-pitying and mocking -- he suffers in what is not the best of all possible worlds -- we must note that it is the opposite of what one who wished to end a relationship would say. If he wished to end a relationship he would say "I know everything," but instead like Socrates he says "I know nothing." So presumably he means to continue the relationship with us. And yet he also says he is lying, so who knows? It is on us to reciprocate his tentative request for human connection. Or not.

Like his seductive master Socrates, who also claimed to know nothing, Climacus is continuing his love affair with his “dear reader” -- us -- yet without coming out and saying so directly. Climacus’s seductive, flirtatious approach to the reader, and his simultaneous denial of this approach, is mirrored in Kierkegaard’s address to the reader signed under his own name. Immediately following Climacus’s flirtatious sign-off, we switch to Kierkegaard’s explanation of his own pseudonymity. However, this change in register does not strike one as the kind of significant change one would expect if Climacus had just been a mask and Kierkegaard was now telling us something we can take at face value. Indeed, he continues to compare the author’s relationship with his readers to that of a man in a seductive love affair with a woman:

My pseudonymity or polyonymity has had no accidental basis in my person (certainly not from fear of penalty under law, in respect of which I am unaware of having committed any offence, and, at the time of publication, the printer together with the censor qua public official have always been officially informed who the author was) but an essential basis in the production itself, which, for the sake of the lines and of the variety in the psychological distinctions in the individual characters, for poetic reasons required the lack of scruple in respect of good and evil, of broken hearts and high spirits, of despair and arrogance, of suffering and exultation, etc., the limits to which are set only ideally, in terms of psychological consistency, and which no factual person would, or can, dare to permit themselves within the bounds of moral conduct in actuality. (*Postscript* 527)

Kierkegaard is arguing that he says things in the character of Climacus that would be immoral if he were to say them in his own voice because they require a “lack of scruple in respect of...broken hearts.” In other words, if Kierkegaard were to claim that he had written the *Postscript* -- the story of a man who both longs for and flees human connection and uses philosophy and humor as a shield -- and signed it Kierkegaard, his readers would be tempted to fall in love with him, just as Alcibiades fell in love with Socrates. In order to avoid this and remain moral, he instead puts what he has to say in the mouth of a fictional character. And this gives Kierkegaard the freedom to permit himself to have a “lack of scruple” and stray beyond the “bounds of moral conduct.” However, if he had actually been concerned to avoid the reader's seduction, he probably would not have included a note at the end of the book saying something as seductive as, “If I said this myself you might fall in love with me.” If the book has the potential of being immorally seductive, then the book plus the note runs an even greater danger. The note is as teasing and seductive as the pseudonymous message. And, if for once we permit ourselves to look at Kierkegaard through the lens of his biography, he hand-delivered the work we are reading to his on-again, off-again girlfriend Regine. So it is untrue that no factual person would permit himself to use the *Postscript* to carry on a relationship with a woman – Kierkegaard did so himself.

Climacus, like Kierkegaard's other seductive pseudonym Johannes the Seducer, commits himself to the project of communicating without being vulnerable. Yet he fails and leaves us wondering whether, on some level, he wants to fail at the project of actually understanding commitment. After all, he has announced that his project is to understand

Christianity without becoming a Christian himself, but he has in the process proven that understanding Christianity without becoming a Christian is impossible.

He claims he does not risk offense, but he is deceiving himself. He has obviously risked offending anyone who recognizes himself in his cruel portrait of the objective thinker. More importantly, he risks the very self-disclosure he tries to evade. After concluding that the highest form of life is a concrete risky commitment, he draws back from commitment himself. He tells the reader “forward or backwards” but does not go forward or backwards himself.

Let us take stock of the discussion thus far. We have seen that the *Postscript*, like “A Story of Suffering,” is a work of fiction that deliberately lacks an ending. Specifically, it ends with the author telling us that he is revoking what he has said so far, and that this revocation precisely is having an understanding with an imaginary reader. He compares his writing to seducing a woman and invokes a book whose meaning is to be found in the reader. However, we also know that he is wrong about having only an imaginary reader, because we are reading the book ourselves. If we put these strands together, we can see that the *Postscript* is an effort to seduce us, and that if it has meaning the meaning is in our response to it. In other words, the real ending of the book will be if we the readers decide to incorporate Climacus’s view of faith into our own lives. If we make an unconditional commitment the book has one ending, and if we avoid commitment the book has a different ending, just as a seduction would have one ending if the romance fades and another if the lovers fall deeper in love. The revocation, just like pseudonymity and indirect discourse, puts the ball in our court. Although Climacus never takes a decisive step -- he hovers or flutters at the confinium of faith -- he invites us to do so. We are able to participate in what he communicates and take the step forward into the way of life he calls faith. He provokes the moment of decision in us, much like overhearing the old man talking to his grandson provoked an evaded moment of decision in him.

From Climacus's point of view, the *Postscript* is always on the way to concluding but never concluded. But just as the recipient of a flirtation has the option to conclude it by breaking it off or entering into an explicit love affair, the reader of the *Postscript* has the ability to provide the conclusion herself.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that indirect communication, pseudonymity, and revocation are all solutions to the same problem: how to say that Religiousness B, a life of risky commitment to a vulnerable project in time, is the best way of life without undercutting the reader’s ability to live a life of faith. Indirect communication shifts the burden of interpretation to the reader, so the reader realizes that meaning requires commitment. Pseudonymity puts the burden of interpretation on the reader in a different way. We are invited to decide how to evaluate the speaker based upon the limited facts that are placed within a fictional framework, and we are unable to avoid commitment by seeking to understand more facts about the speaker. Revocation puts the reader in the position of someone who is being seduced by a wavering, flirtatious lover who says “I love you -- but do I?” In each of these cases, an evasion of commitment is blocked and the reader is forced to commit.

All three strategies of communication are different ways for Kierkegaard to communicate the importance of commitment in a way that requires commitment -- a strategy that he calls "the reduplication of form and content." In writing (as Climacus) about the pseudonymous editor of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard makes the connection between pseudonymity, indirect communication and a lack of result.

On the other hand, I am glad that the pseudonyms themselves, presumably aware of the relation of indirect communication to truth as inwardness, have said nothing, nor misused a preface to take an official position on the production, as if an author were in a purely legal sense the best interpreter of his own words; as if it could help a reader that an author 'intended this and that' when the intention has not been realized; or as if it were certain that it had been realized because the author himself says so in the preface; or as if the existence-deviation were corrected by being brought to a final decision, such as insanity, suicide, and the like, as with women authors especially, and so speedily that they almost begin with it; or as if an author were served by a reader who, owing just to the author's own clumsiness, knew for certain all about the book. (*Postscript* 211)

Aside from the gratuitous sexism, Kierkegaard is making a point that knits up the issues of pseudonymity, revocation, and indirect discourse. There is no "official position" on the meaning of the *Postscript*. No knowledge of the author's intention is provided and the actual story does not come to a conclusion. If the book were a moralistic novel, we would know what to think of Climacus because of the book's ending -- he would have ended up killing himself or in a mental hospital and thus we would know that the author thought it was wrong to be like Climacus. Instead, Kierkegaard takes no position and the writing and the book ends inconclusively -- forward or backward. The burden of interpretation is shifted to us in a manner analogous to the way we must take a stand on the monstrous contradiction of human existence. We need to make a risky commitment to something specific in our lives for life to have meaning, and for the *Postscript* to have meaning for us we need to make a risky interpretation. No ending could resolve it for us - - and so it gets revoked. No fact about the author explains it for us -- and so it is pseudonymous. The conclusion is left for us to draw -- and so it is indirect.

In each case, we are forced to regard a philosophical communication as something more akin to responding to "I love you" than it is to "There are no bears in Africa." We would make a mistake in rephrasing I love you as "It is true that you are lovable" -- or at least we make a mistake if we think this lets us off the hook of either responding with love or with the rejection of love. Similarly, we make a mistake if we think we can evaluate "the most meaningful life is one of infinite commitment to the finite" by rephrasing it in objective terms. Kierkegaard is trying to write in a way that will keep us from falling into this mistake:

Psychologically, it is usually a sure sign that a person is beginning to give up the passion when he wants to treat its object objectively. Passion and reflection usually exclude each other. Becoming objective in this way is always a step backwards, for a person's perdition is in passion but so also his elevation. If the dialectical and reflection are not exploited to intensify passion, to become

objective is to regress; and even the person who loses himself through passion has not lost as much as the person who lost passion, for the former has possibility. (*Postscript* 515)

Treating passion objectively is a mistake. Treating passion passionately can also be a mistake -- we can respond to a Nigerian scammers promise of untold riches by jumping in with both feet. However, in the case of the scammer we are able to recover, but if we treat passion objectively we cut ourselves off from the possibility of living a meaningful life. The last option Kierkegaard considers is using reflection and dialectic to identify the importance of passion. In other words, by thinking about the conditions of thought and life and looking carefully at the different options, we could come to the conclusion that a meaningful life requires an infinite commitment to the finite. This is what Kierkegaard is helping us do in, among other places, this very passage, which is both an example of reflection and dialectic and is intended to bring us to the realization that the best form of life is one of infinite commitment to the finite.

Kierkegaard's communicative strategies show the influence of Socrates, the subject of his dissertation. He was not the first to draw this consequence from the example of Socrates. Disciples of Socrates in the ancient world followed their teacher in this way as well, as we know from Cicero's account of the argumentative style in Plato's Academy: "It is not our practice...[says the skeptical Academic] to give revelations...In order...that our listeners may be guided by reason rather than authority" (Cicero *Academica* 2.60, quoted in Long and Sedley 443). Whatever the position actually held by the members of Plato's Academy, they believed that putting it forward as a revelation would undo their purpose of bringing about a certain way of living and thinking in their listeners -- one that relied upon reason rather than authority. Kierkegaard has a different conception of the ideal way of life than these ancient Greek philosophers, but shares with them the concern that, however we communicate our ideal, the communication ought to be effective in helping one's listeners or readers achieve it. Since Kierkegaard's ideal is one of a passionate commitment to the finite, he is wary of the unintended consequences of putting it forward as a thesis.

In the foregoing I have argued that Kierkegaard has a philosophical thesis, namely that human beings are a monstrous contradiction of finite and infinite factors, and that the only way to live a meaningful, non-self-deceptive and non-despairing human life is by making a passionate and infinite commitment to something finite. In advancing this interpretation, I am criticizing an influential interpretation put forward by Stanley Cavell and developed by James Conant to the effect that Kierkegaard has no philosophical thesis, that he creates a sort of therapeutic nonsense that leads us to realize the futility of having any philosophical views at all. This is wrong: Kierkegaard does have philosophical views and he has arguments for them.

However, the nature of Kierkegaard's thesis makes him very wary of traditional modes of philosophical expression. He believes that faith or Religiousness B is so uncomfortable that human beings will naturally do almost anything to avoid facing up to it. We are so ingenious, in fact, that we will embrace the truth of a vulnerable commitment to the finite in such a way that we use our understanding of the truth to avoid living it. In other words, we are clever enough to say that the only meaningful life

is one of passionate commitment to the finite but use that idea as a way of avoiding any such commitment.

In order to block our ability to use the truth in an untruthful way, Kierkegaard employs a number of communicative strategies that can make his work seem very different from a traditional work of philosophy. As I discussed in the first three chapters, one of the main strategies is humor. According to Kierkegaard's account of humor, a joke consists in making us aware of a contradiction in our lives and giving us a joyous way to move forward without resolving it. Since human life is essentially a monstrous contradiction between the factors, joking is tailor-made to make us aware of this fact and give us a way of moving forward. Joking is also a classic way of puncturing hypocrisy and self-deception. Since Kierkegaard believes that all spheres of existence except for faith are based in self-deception, it is natural that he uses humor to point this out.

In the foregoing chapter, I called attention to three other strategies Kierkegaard uses to communicate: indirect communication, pseudonymity, and revocation. The account I gave of each one is structurally the same. In each case, what Kierkegaard is communicating is a straightforward philosophical thesis, but how he communicates it is unusual. This is not because what he says cannot be communicated, but because, human self-deception being what it is, it is very easy for us to get it wrong. Kierkegaard seeks to reduplicate the content of what he is expressing in the way that he expresses it. Since the content of what he is expressing is that the only way to live a meaningful human life is to make a risky, vulnerable commitment to the finite, he writes in a way that calls on our capacity to make a risky, vulnerable commitment to something finite. He communicates indirectly and so forces us to make a risky decision about what he really means. He revokes his communication, which makes us restate it ourselves. He communicates in the guise of a fictional character to give us practice making a vulnerable commitment to a specific, embodied, fallible human being.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

It would be a shame if the result of this journey were that we started to take comedy seriously. Just as it is possible to be pretentious about how unpretentious we are, it is possible to be very unfunny about how much we appreciate the importance of comedy. However, although we need to be aware of the risk of taking our comedy too seriously, it should not blind us to the equally serious risk of taking our seriousness too seriously. Part of the purpose of this exploration of Kierkegaard then is to realize that the sort of fiascos that risk making us ridiculous in our personal lives are present in our cognitive, intellectual lives as well. By connecting philosophy and humor Kierkegaard's goal is not to make us realize that humor is as safe as philosophy, but to bring us to a realization of how philosophy can be as risky, embarrassing and prone to fiasco as the attempt to be funny.

For example, there is something personally revealing about what I find funny. I run the risk of revealing myself as cruel, racist, or boorish by revealing what I find funny. What I find funny can be something I share with only one other person as a private joke. Since the funny is that sort of thing -- intimate, revealing, personal -- it cannot be that we can know what is funny without exercising our risky ability to find things funny. Kierkegaard makes this point by noting that the critical difference between laughing at a joke because one finds it funny and laughing at a joke because one believes on good authority that it is funny:

To believe the ideality on the word of another is like laughing at a joke not because one has understood it, but because someone has said that it was funny. In that case, for someone who laughs on the basis of belief and respect, the joke can just as well be left unsaid, he can laugh as much either way. (*Postscript* 272)

To see Kierkegaard's point, consider the following puzzle. If I am able to identify which jokes are funny and which jokes are not funny, but none of the jokes make me laugh, what do I miss? One could imagine I have a machine or algorithm that identifies humor for me, or that I delegate the job to a trusted employee who has a sense of humor. If the machine or employee says, "That was funny" I tickle myself, and if not, I do not tickle myself. One could think of this set-up as something like a cochlear implant for someone born deaf. While a hearing person responds to a certain frequency by hearing the note A on his own, the person with the cochlear implant needs a device to hear the note. On first blush, it would seem one could have a sense of humor implant that tickles one whenever it detects humor. There is something wrong with this picture, but what? What does the person with the humor implant miss?

One thing he misses is a certain sort of involvement in or responsibility for what he laughs at. If I laugh at a racist joke I am displaying racism. If I laugh at a racist joke that I wish I were not laughing at, then I am displaying involuntary racism. Likewise with a cruel joke. The person with the humor implant who roars with laughter at a man slipping and hurting himself is not convicting himself of racism, although the programmer of his machine or his personal humor consultant may be blameworthy. Suppose someone wants to increase her intimacy with me by making a private joke about something we both experienced. If I run it by my humor consultant,

then I will fail to find the joke funny -- my lady friend had not shared that private touchstone with my humor consultant. Emotionally, it does not seem as if I can feel the release of joy if a machine is tickling me, because I have not run the risk myself. The humor machine prevents me from putting myself out there. With this we see that not only a certain responsibility, but also a certain vulnerability is involved in finding something funny. What we find funny *reveals* something about us whether we like it or not.

What I find funny theoretically will depend upon what I find funny in my actual life, and that in turn depends upon a vulnerable, risky choice I make about how to reconcile conflicting factors. Because understanding and self-understanding are linked, to rely on a humor-implant turns me into a sort of person who is excluded from a critical dimension of human life -- the dimension of vulnerable attunements and risky commitment. Even thinking that there could be such a machine is itself a humorless move and a step away from understanding this critical dimension of life. So the notion that I could delegate my sense of humor to an employee or a machine or algorithm is itself humorless.

“Understanding” of a human phenomenon, in Kierkegaard’s sense, is that which is enabled or made possible by self-understanding. So one can contrast two different ways of becoming knowledgeable about medicine. Learning the steps of cell respiration from the citric acid cycle to the electron transport cycle can be performed just as well by someone in deep denial or confusion about what is important to him as by someone with self-knowledge. However, if I reflect upon what health is with an eye towards making end of life decisions, this requires having an understanding of how I want to lead my life. This sort of self-understanding is not just something I think -- it is something I do. It is not just having information about something called “me,” as I may have information about the cell; rather, it is leading a certain sort of life. To have an understanding of medicine, therefore, strange as it may sound, requires me to have an approach to my life that bears on how I live it.

By analogy, the philosophy of vegetarianism is comic if it does not bear on how the espouser eats. It is funny to imagine someone inveighing against the cruelty to animals involved in meat-eating while stuffing his face with a Big Mac. The mismatch would be comical.

Kierkegaard highlights the importance of risk for living a life but also of understanding ourselves as we live our lives. It is risky to live a human life and it is risky to understand a human life. The objective thinker manages to forget that it is risky to live a human life while he pursues the goals of theory in understanding human life. The goal of theory is to have an understanding that is not risky, that any competent inquirer would embrace. Since the goal of objective theory is at odds with the goal of a successful human life when it comes to understanding how one leads a life, we are misled by objective theory. Kierkegaard holds that his account allows us to keep exactly what the objective theory misses in focus, while the objective theorist allows what is most important to slip through his fingers. The objective theorist’s account of any dimension of human life that bears on this critical area – the role of risk in a meaningful life – is both impoverished and misses the point.

Kierkegaard's attack on the objective thinker is not simply limited to Hegel, but to any attempt to give an account of human life that does not own up to the fact that the thinker's own risky commitments are thereby expressed and put on display. Since Kierkegaard holds that the mistake of the objective thinker is not a theoretical mistake but a comical mistake -- one that follows from not facing up to the monstrous contradiction in the thinker's own life -- he pursues it by means of a comical line of questioning. Kierkegaard provokes the objective thinker with such rude questions as, "Are you a human?" This question, as we have seen by examining Kierkegaard's conception of being human above, means to ask whether or not you act in a way that expresses the risky commitments of your own life. The deposition continues: if you are a human, do you have a body? How does your concern for your body affect your theory? Do you embrace the theory you propose out of your own personal needs, fears, and desires? If not, why do you?

...it is also true ethically that pure being is fantasy and that one who exists is prohibited from wanting to forget that he exists. So caution must be exercised when dealing with a Hegelian, and one must above all make sure with whom one has the honour of speaking. Is he a human being, an existing human being, is he himself *sub specie aeterni*, even when he sleeps, eats, blows his nose and whatever else a human being does? Is he himself the pure 'I am I', something that has certainly never occurred to any philosopher? And if not that, how does he -- in existing -- relate to it, to the middle term in which the ethical responsibility in, by, and through existing, is duly respected? Does he exist? And if he exists, is he then not on the way to being? And if he is on the way to being, does he not then relate to the future? Does he never relate to the future in such a way as to act? And if he never acts, will he not then forgive an ethical individuality for saying of him, in passion and with dramatic truth, that he is an ass? (*Postscript* 256)

This kind of thing might seem to place Kierkegaard beyond the pale of serious philosophy. It is an invasion of privacy to ask your partner in a philosophical dialogue if he blows his nose, and it is extremely rude to call him an "ass." However, Kierkegaard is actually putting forward an argument based on the premise that fundamental decisions about how to lead our lives are both risky and personal. That is to say, we cannot prove that the way we live our lives -- whom we marry, for example, or what our professional callings are -- is correct. We run a risk, and these are deeply personal, not one-size-fits-all, decisions.

If we accept that premise, Kierkegaard then asks us what the connection is between our philosophical views and our views about how to live our lives. If we endeavor to think objectively, there are two possibilities. On the one hand, we can decide to live our lives objectively as well. When we choose whom to marry, if we do, we deny that we are making a personal commitment but instead claim that we are simply acting out an impersonal process, that the absolute march of history or the implacable logic of genetics are making us marry whom we do. If that is the case, Kierkegaard believes we are evading our human responsibility, pretending to be what we are not, living our lives in a ridiculous fashion, or, more pungently, being an "ass." On the other hand, we might decide to live our lives personally but think impersonally. If that is the case, then our

thought does not reflect our lives and that is ridiculous. What good is our thought to us if it cannot help us understand ourselves?

Kierkegaard hones in on the problem. If we are living our lives subjectively but explaining our lives in objective terms, we cannot even explain why we care about explaining our lives in objective terms!

Ask him to answer the following question, i.e., if such a question can be addressed to him: This giving up existing, as far as is possible, in order to be sub specie aeterni, is it something that happens to him, or is it something one does through coming to some conclusion, or perhaps even something one ought to do? For if I ought to do it, then an aut-aut is eo ipso established even in respect of being sub specie aeterni. Or was he born sub specie aeterni and has he lived sub specie aeterni ever since, so that he cannot even understand what it is that I am asking about, never having had anything to do with a future, and never having come across a decision? In that case, I must realize that this is not a human being with whom I have the honour of conversing. (*Postscript* 256-257)

Giving up existing and looking at life “from the viewpoint of eternity” means not owning up to the importance of personal, vulnerable, unjustifiable commitment. The details of the Hegelian position do not matter to Kierkegaard’s criticism. If they take ethical responsibility, do they believe that they do so without any risk? If they deny that they ever act and do not relate to the future with infinite passion -- in other words, if they think that their book is simply the result of impersonal processes working out and using them as a vehicle -- Kierkegaard’s response is not simply rude. It is an attempt to show that since life requires vulnerable commitment, an account of life that avoids making a vulnerable commitment cannot be illuminating. The attempt to be objective in developing an account of life ends up making it untrue to the life of which it is an account.

How seriously should we take this connection Kierkegaard argues for between a) leading a certain sort of risky life, b) self-understanding, and c) understanding in general? In certain areas of life, there is a clear distinction between expressing a doctrine in one’s life, talking about the doctrine in its own terms, and having beliefs about the doctrine. So, for example, a person can argue that the best way to fight a grizzly bear is with a shotgun, even though he himself cannot fire a shotgun and would actually deal with a grizzly bear by running away. He could be aware of studies that show that those who fight off bears with shotguns have a better chance of survival, and he could believe that the proposition “the best way to fight a grizzly bear is with a shotgun” has been conclusively demonstrated. Kierkegaard is interested in directing our attention to cases in which these three cases -- expressing a philosophy, talking by using the terms of a philosophy, and talking about the philosophy -- should be collapsed, because to engage in any of the three would require a distinctive exercise of capacities that is itself a necessary condition of all three. Specifically, he argues that the ability to commit oneself in the absence of assurance, thereby running a risk in conducting one’s life, is required for expressing a philosophy and having an opinion about it. Love, marriage, death, and knowledge all require decisive action to express an understanding of them in one’s life, and to have an opinion about what they are. Unlike the poor shot who

has a correct opinion about how to fight a bear, someone who has never realized that he stakes his identity by marrying someone (or by foregoing marriage) has no standing to have an opinion about marriage, or about different philosophies of marriage.

A sense of the comic -- as well as emotion and imagination -- can be our guide in testing whether what we are hearing or saying ourselves comes from an existing human being or from a hypocrite or self-dramatizing fragment of a human. On the other hand, the claim that pure thought can answer the question of how to live is not just false, but comes from someone who is not an existing human being, and is therefore comic. The objective thinker is therefore ridiculous and ridiculously wrong on the philosophy of humor:

That thinking is higher than feeling and imagination is taught by a thinker who has himself neither pathos nor passion. That thought is higher than irony and humour is taught by a thinker who lacks altogether any sense of the comic. How comic! (*Postscript* 254)

Kierkegaard's substantive claim is that to be a human requires acting without proof of results. Therefore, to understand oneself requires understanding that vulnerability.

The objective thinker ignores his or her existential situation and thereby makes a comical mistake. Kierkegaard's essential diagnosis is that the objective thinker is pursuing this as a self-defeating strategy to avoid risk and vulnerability. Rather than face up to the fact that considering a certain type of life as important is a risk that may be wrong, the objective thinker claims that a certain way of living and thinking is dictated by reason itself. Responding to a joke puts our own sense of what is important on the line -- if we laugh at a racist joke we may learn that we are more racist than we might have wished, while if we are able to laugh at a joke about our own deaths, it is an achievement of courage in the face of our own mortality. Failure to see what is funny about our own attempts to philosophize renders us ridiculous because we are distracted from our own lives -- our sex lives, our emotional needs, and our risky, personal commitments.

Humor is a genuine effort to come to terms with paradox and risk. Since objective thought approaches human life in a way that avoids the unavoidable nature of existential risk, it thinks that existential thought misses what is important in humor. For Kierkegaard, however, humor ironically gets its revenge. Although objective thought is unable to illuminate the depths of humor, humor is able to find objective thought funny.

Bibliography

- Allison, Henry E. "Christianity and Nonsense." *The Review of Metaphysics* 20.3 (1967): 432-60. JSTOR. Web. 06 Oct. 2016.
- Amir, Lydia. *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard*. Albany: State U Of New York, 2014.
- Cavell, Stanley. "Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy." *Themes out of School: Effects and Causes*. San Francisco: North Point, 1984.
- . "Kierkegaard's On Authority and Revelation." *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge UP, 2002.
- . "On Some Aesthetic Problems in Modern Philosophy." *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Conant, James. "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense." Ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam. *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*. Lubbock, TX, USA: Texas Tech UP, 1993. 195-224.
- . "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?" *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*. Ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1989. 242-283.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L., and Mark A. Wrathall. "The Roots of Existentialism." *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L. *Being-in-the-world: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991.
- Hacking, Ian. *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1999. Print.
- Hannay, Alastair. "Climacus among the philosophers." *Kierkegaard and Philosophy: Selected Essays*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 1987.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* Trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert Anderson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1980.
- . *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*. Trans. Alastair Hannay. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2009.

- . *Fear and Trembling*. Trans. C. Stephen. Evans and Sylvia Walsh. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.
- . “Judge for Yourself!” *For Self-examination; Judge for Yourself!* Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990.
- . *The Point of View for My Work as an Author; a Report to History, and Related Writings*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Ed. Benjamin Nelson. New York: Harper, 1962.
- . *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers / Vol. 1*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Bloomington-London: Indiana UP, 1967.
- Lear, Jonathan. *A Case for Irony*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011.
- Lippitt, John, and George Pattison. *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford UP, 2013.
- Long, A.A., and D.N. Sedley. *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Noë, Alva. *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*. New York: Hill and Wang, a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015. Print.
- Schönbaumsfeld, Genia. *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.
- Searle, John R. “Indirect Speech Acts.” *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1979.
- Todes, Samuel. *Body and World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2001.
- “What the Supreme Court Justices Said on Gay Marriage.” *PBS*. PBS, 29 Apr. 2015. Web. 07 Oct. 2016.
- Williams, Bernard. *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973-1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.