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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

The Virtues of Irony and Silence:  
An Ethical Reading of Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Philosophy

by

Robert Eli Sanchez, Jr.

March 2012

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Erich Reck, Co-Chairperson

Dr. Larry Wright, Co-Chairperson

Dr. Howard Wettstein

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The Dissertation of Robert Eli Sanchez, Jr. is approved:

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Committee Co-Chairperson

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Despite the increasing professionalization of the discipline, philosophy is, and always will be, a solitary activity. As one philosopher put it, “A live [philosophical] issue is a piece of country in which no one knows which way to go. As there are no paths, there are no paths to share.” Everything else in “philosophy” is either discipleship or simply not philosophy. Philosophy is also deeply personal. In essence, one’s effort to understand the nature of reason, knowledge, what there is, and what is good, is a (sometimes disguised) struggle to understand oneself and the limits of one’s own understanding. However, it is also true that philosophy is a luxury afforded by an entire community. So, while what is contained in these pages reflects the contours of a path that I had to clear by myself and for myself, I was able to wander off *only* because my community – my family, friends, and teachers – allowed me to.

It is not easy to trust someone you care for to spend so many years pursuing something that has no clear aim or obvious benefits. And yet my family never asked me – thankfully – what philosophy is, what I *really* intended to do with a degree in philosophy, or why I wouldn’t do something more practical. Similarly, although I presented my advisors with an unusual and practically impossible dissertation topic, they let me pursue it anyway – on what basis, I will probably never know. I cannot exaggerate how much this freedom has meant to me.

Of course, the freedom to earn an education costs much more than trust, and in this regard there are several people who deserve more gratitude than the following

few words can express. The first two people I would like to thank are my Uncle Rick and my grandma Lydia, who both took financial risks to help me through, and whose unshakable confidence I would return to when I needed it, whether they knew it or not. I would like to thank my mother, who has kept me tied to reality in her own way, and whose honesty continues to inspire me. Next, I would like to thank my brothers, Andrew and Mike, who did best what younger brothers do: encourage their older brother to set a good example. I would like to thank the friends I made in graduate school, specifically John Ramsey, Joe Cressotti, Young Koh, and Neal Tognazzini. More than anyone else, they have taught me that philosophy is so much more than an academic exercise. Finally, I must thank Fernanda, who has *endured* the graduate school version of me for too long, and who did it with an incomprehensible amount of patience.

However, I would not have had this occasion to thank anyone if it were not for the early and heroic support of my father and my stepmother, Terry. To put it briefly and without confessing too much, I did not make it easy for them to continue believing in me. Yet they stood firm from the beginning, and proved better than anyone I know that genuine love precedes any *reason* we have for loving or not loving someone – especially a teenager. I have learned this especially from my father, whom I want to thank above all else. In a chaotic and uncaring universe, he has shown me that at least one thing is permanent.

*Dedicated to the memory of my grandfathers  
and their insistence on the value of an education*

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Virtues of Irony and Silence:  
An Ethical Reading of Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein

by

Robert Eli Sanchez, Jr.

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Philosophy  
University of California, Riverside, March 2012  
Dr. Erich Reck and Dr. Larry Wright, Co-Chairpersons

Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is one of the most enigmatic works of philosophy ever published. According to Wittgenstein, even those for whom it was meant – Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege – did not grasp its main point. In this dissertation, I argue that the *Tractatus* is so enigmatic and yet so engaging because, although it represents a pivotal moment in the philosophy of language and logic, it is also a major ethical and aesthetic achievement. That is, I hope to show that although the *Tractatus* is a response to the problems raised by Russell and Frege, its aim and form are essential to grasping its “solution.” However, it is difficult to discern the significance of Wittgenstein's aim and style in the *text* itself; so, to illustrate the nature of the difficulty of the *Tractatus*, I compare it to the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and Socrates. In particular, I argue that the interpretive difficulties



surrounding the *Tractatus* resemble what has come to be called “the Socratic problem,” and what should be recognized as “the Kierkegaardian problem.”

“The Socratic problem” is that it is virtually impossible to distinguish Socrates’ voice from the many who have written about him, since he did not write his own philosophy. Similarly, what I call “the Kierkegaardian problem” consists in the fact that although Kierkegaard did write his own philosophy, it is virtually impossible to identify his own voice behind the voices of his many pseudonyms. So, I hope to show that, like Socrates and Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein did not say enough to settle disagreements about what he actually believed – that is, he creates what we might call “the Wittgensteinian problem.” What unifies the three “problems,” moreover, is that they each represent a kind of irony and silence, which Kierkegaard thought is essential to ethics, philosophy, and life.

One aim of the dissertation is to uncover the virtues of irony and silence in philosophy. Although there are many virtues, perhaps the most important is that they challenge the common assumption underlying traditional philosophy that philosophy is valuable only if it presents clear arguments in favor of clear theses or views.

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# Introduction

*I have never been anyone's teacher.*

– Socrates

*I was never a teacher but a learner.*

– Søren Kierkegaard

*He would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy.*

– Ludwig Wittgenstein

## I. A Cluster of Interpretive Questions

Like many dissertations, perhaps most, the one before you is the product of its author writing to figure out where to begin. Originally, its aim was relatively straightforward: to contribute to the growing literature on Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.<sup>1</sup> Like all readers of Wittgenstein's first major text, I wanted a firmer grasp on the meaning of its closing remarks, particularly the following:

[1] The correct method of philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e., something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—*this* method would be the only strictly correct one. (TLP 6.53)

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge Classics, 2001). Henceforth, TLP.

And:

[2] 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 up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) (TLP 6.54)

And:

[3] What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. (TLP 7)

What struck me about these remarks, as well as their position at the very end of the text, I could not quite put into words. So, again, like many dissertations, perhaps most, mine began also as an attempt to understand myself and my own attraction to an enigmatic text and the discipline it both represents and defies.

Now that I have completed the dissertation – though it is in no way finished – I have a somewhat clearer idea of what it was about each of these remarks that compelled me to write about the *Tractatus*. In the first remark, Wittgenstein purports to offer a definition of the correct method of philosophy. However, he says that the correct method is not to speak about philosophy, unless it is necessary to demonstrate to the metaphysician that she has failed to say anything meaningful. In other words, Wittgenstein seems to have believed that the product of philosophy is inevitably deflationary, and that its “only strictly correct” method is negative. As one might imagine, for a young student who wanted to take this text seriously as a classic in the history of philosophy, and who was ambivalent about the prospects of a career in philosophy, a statement like this posed a serious challenge. Moreover, it raises questions about the intelligibility of the *Tractatus* itself; after all, Wittgenstein says

quite a bit in it about metaphysics and philosophy and almost nothing about the natural sciences. Besides, I did believe that through reading it I was learning *something* about philosophy.

In the next remark, Wittgenstein appears to respond to these very worries. “Yes,” he suggests, “you are learning something about the nature of philosophy. What you are learning is that *this* is not it.” The *Tractatus*, which *is* ostensibly about the nature of language and the world – in other words, about metaphysics – is, Wittgenstein says, “nonsensical.” However, one complication in saying that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical, as opposed to saying that they are merely gibberish, is that the *Tractatus* offers a theory of “sense” and “nonsense,” and a distinction between “saying” and “showing,” according to which a proposition can *show* something even if it *says* nothing – that is, even if it is nonsensical. According to the theory, although the propositions of the *Tractatus* say nothing about the world, unlike the propositions of science, they are established as conditions for the possibility of language and are thus in some sense true. As Elizabeth Anscombe summarizes this point, the propositions of metaphysics are “things which, though they cannot be ‘said’, are yet ‘shewn’ or ‘displayed’. That is to say: it would be right to call them ‘true’ if, *per impossible*, they could be said.”<sup>2</sup> So, one problem with TLP 6.54 is that it is unclear whether Wittgenstein means ‘nonsensical’ in the technical sense, in which case we ought to understand him as saying that the *Tractatus* tries to show something

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<sup>2</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, Second ed. (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1963), 162.

that would be true if it could be said; or whether he means it in a non-technical sense, in which case we are to understand him as saying that the *Tractatus*, including the theory of sense and nonsense, is nonsense, ordinarily construed.

Thus, there is a potential incompatibility between [1] and [2]. If Anscombe is right in claiming that the *Tractatus* demonstrates the proper method of metaphysics, showing instead of saying, then we should have the feeling that we *are* learning philosophy and metaphysics. We may not agree entirely with the theory of sense/nonsense and saying/showing, but it is also not nothing, and certainly not nonsense, ordinarily construed (i.e. a kind of gibberish). So, one thing a technical reading of ‘nonsensical’ like Anscombe’s has going for it is that it does not understand Wittgenstein as saying that the *Tractatus* is gibberish, and thus does not suggest that [2] indicates that the *Tractatus* is a performative contradiction. If TLP 6.54 means to say that the *Tractatus* – including, presumably, TLP 6.54 – really is gibberish, it is unclear how we are supposed to make sense of its gibberish. However, if we maintain a technical reading of ‘nonsensical,’ according to which the *Tractatus* is not gibberish, then [2] conflicts with [1], the claim that we are not supposed to have the feeling that we are being taught anything positive about metaphysics or philosophy.

Unfortunately, the third remark offers little consolation and raises a set of questions of its own. In saying that we must pass over in silence what we cannot speak about, it is unclear whether this remark is merely tautological – of course we cannot speak about “what we cannot speak about”; whether it follows as a corollary to



his theory of sense and nonsense – reminding us that there are certain things we are tempted to speak about but should not; or whether it is merely added at the end as a kind of coda. To put it another way, what is unclear about TLP 7 and what calls for interpretation is whether Wittgenstein intended it as a descriptive or normative claim. When he says we *must* remain silent, does he mean that we are fated to silence as we pass over certain regions of thought, or does he mean that we ought to resist the temptation to speak when nothing meaningful can be said? If Wittgenstein meant the former, we still want to know why he thought it worth mentioning; if he meant the latter, we want to know why we should.

What these remarks indicate, in part, is that it is unclear what the aim of the *Tractatus* ultimately is or what it is really about. On the one hand, it is undeniable that Wittgenstein aimed to solve (or dissolve) the problems that beset the logico-philosophical theories of Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege. Not only are Russell and Frege the only two philosophers Wittgenstein mentions by name in the *Tractatus*, but he also says in clear terms, “My *fundamental* idea is that the ‘logical constants’ are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the *logic* of facts” (TLP 4.0312, my emphasis), which is a direct challenge to a basic presupposition of Frege and Russell’s logicism. So, according to many commentators, the *Tractatus* is best read in light of the work of Frege and Russell and as one of the founding texts of “analytic philosophy.”

Now, while a basic understanding of the problems that afflicted Frege and Russell, as well as the techniques they devised to solve them, is required background just to be able to read through the *Tractatus*, some commentators have pointed out that the text also belongs to another tradition of thought, better associated with fin-de-siècle Vienna. According to Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, for instance, the question we ought to be asking about the *Tractatus* is this: “What was the philosophical problem by which Wittgenstein was *already* preoccupied—the problem whose solution he saw as a key to all outstanding difficulties in philosophy—*before* he even got in touch with Frege and Russell in the first place?”<sup>3</sup> In other words, according to Janik and Toulmin, the *Tractatus* was not (primarily) the result of Wittgenstein’s effort to solve Frege and Russell’s logico-philosophical problems; instead, Wittgenstein’s preoccupation with Frege and Russell’s philosophy was motivated by another – and, we might say, more personal – interest in philosophy.

For Janik and Toulmin, the issue is not just a question of the priority of the set of problems that led Wittgenstein to philosophy. They say, “If the story we shall be telling in the present book has any validity, one of its implications will be that the preconceptions with which his English hearers approached him debarred them almost entirely from understanding the point of what he was saying.”<sup>4</sup> That is to say, the interpretive challenge is not so much a matter of working out the details of

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<sup>3</sup> Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna* (New York: Touchstone, 1973), 167. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

Wittgenstein's thought as much as it is of thinking in the right tradition. In particular, English-speaking readers who locate the *Tractatus* in the tradition of Frege and Russell might overlook "the . . . intellectual problems and personal attitudes [that] alike had been formed in the neo-Kantian environment of pre-1914, in which logic and ethics were essentially bound up with each other and with the critique of language."<sup>5</sup> So, despite its obvious interest in the work of Frege and Russell, some commentators have defended the view that the *Tractatus* is, at bottom, a work of ethics or a text with an ethical aim.

There is clear evidence, moreover, that Wittgenstein thought the aim of the *Tractatus* was ethical or that it was really "about" ethics. For instance, in a famous letter to Ludwig von Ficker, a prospective publisher of the *Tractatus*, he says:

In reality, [the *Tractatus*] is not strange to you, for the point of the book is ethical. I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which, however, I'll write to you now because they might be the key for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I am convinced that, *strictly* speaking, it can **ONLY** be delimited this way.<sup>6</sup>

Another clue is the fact that in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says, "Ethics is transcendental" (TLP 6.421), and earlier that "Logic is transcendental" (TLP 6.13), suggesting that, as Janik and Toulmin say, his aim is to draw the parallel between ethics and logic in the Kantian tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 94-95. All emphasis is in the original.

However, to say *that* the aim of the *Tractatus* is ethical is one thing; to specify what Wittgenstein means by ‘ethics’ or ‘the ethical’ or how it is bound up with logic is another. Because he says almost nothing else about ethics either in or out of the *Tractatus*, one can be forgiven for not taking Janik and Toulmin’s warning seriously. That is, even if one wanted to pursue the allusion to neo-Kantian philosophy, there still exists the seemingly insurmountable difficulty of explaining what Wittgenstein *does not* say in the text, and which, as he suggests in his letter to von Ficker, he could not say. So, the fundamental challenge facing commentators who argue that the *Tractatus* is really a work of ethics is that, even if they are right, it is unclear how we are supposed to say on Wittgenstein’s behalf what he was unwilling to say on his own – or, given TLP 7, whether we should. Perhaps ethics is precisely that which we are supposed to pass over in silence.

Before proposing how I think we ought to approach the *Tractatus*, I should mention one more interpretive difficulty that is central to the challenge of reading both the *Tractatus* and the rest of Wittgenstein’s corpus, and which is another aspect of the text that compelled me to write about it: its style. When one reads Wittgenstein’s philosophy, beginning with the *Tractatus*, one cannot but be struck by his almost defiant refusal to write a traditional philosophical essay. In the case of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein begins as if from nowhere: “The world is all that is the case” (TLP 1). His language overall is aphoristic and almost oracular. He does not offer a proper introduction, and says about the arrangement of his gnomic remarks that they

succeed according to their “logical importance” or “the stress laid hold on them in my exposition” (TLP, p. 5n), whatever that means. So, lacking either a clear explanatory or argumentative structure,<sup>7</sup> it is not farfetched to say that Wittgenstein thought of the *Tractatus* as a literary or aesthetic achievement as much as he did a logical achievement.<sup>8</sup>

One reason to mention the artistic aspect of Wittgenstein’s prose is that it puts him in the company of other philosophers – such as Nietzsche and Rousseau, to mention two – who thought that style is essential to the production, and thus the aim, of a work of philosophy. On this view, the style or manner of one’s authorship is at least as important to one’s philosophy as what one says. Thus it may be the case, as James Conant puts it, that “unless we come to terms with [Wittgenstein’s] conception of philosophical difficulty – where the pressure of this conception is reflected in the peculiar form of the author’s text – we shall fail to understand his thought.”<sup>9</sup> However, as with the difficulty of ascertaining Wittgenstein’s understanding of ethics, it is not

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<sup>7</sup> I do not mean to suggest that no argument or set of arguments can be discerned in the *Tractatus* (as a whole). Alfred Nordmann, for example, argues that the “conclusion” of the *Tractatus* is established by means of a *reductio ad absurdum*. Alfred Nordmann, *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chapter two. Rather, the point is simply that, if there is (are) an argument(s) to be found in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein certainly did not do his part to make them explicit.

<sup>8</sup> Frege, too, wondered whether the *Tractatus* was primarily meant to be an aesthetic or literary achievement. In a letter to Wittgenstein, he says, “The pleasure of reading your book can therefore no longer be aroused by the content which is already known, but only by the particular form given to it by the author. The book thereby becomes an artistic achievement; what is said in it takes second place to the way in which it is said.” Quoted in Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 174.

<sup>9</sup> James Conant, “Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors,” in *The Grammar of Religious Belief*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 250.

clear how we even begin to factor one's style into the substance of one's thought – let alone (again) whether we should.

In this first section, I have outlined a few of the challenges that compelled me to write about the *Tractatus*. The first was a cluster of challenges that indicate the potentially paradoxical nature of the text and the possibility that it undermines the conditions of its own intelligibility. Second, I raised the question about the aim and subject of the *Tractatus*. As I hope becomes clear by the end of the dissertation, it is not for nothing that commentators have yet to decide whether the *Tractatus* is a work of logic, a work of ethics, both or neither. Finally, I suggested that we should not overlook the peculiarity of Wittgenstein's style. Part of what interested me in the *Tractatus* was simply the fact that it is *not* an essay and the possibility that Wittgenstein tried to convey *something* by his decision to write the way he did. In the next section, I will explain what I meant when I said that my dissertation is the product of its author trying to figure out where to begin.

## II. Working Backwards

Originally, as I said, the plan for the dissertation was to write only about Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. However, as I began to articulate my thoughts, I realized that my interest in it was not entirely innocent. One thing everyone can agree on is that the *Tractatus* is many things to many readers – that is, it lends itself to a variety of interests, preconceptions, and expectations. Realizing this, I began to wonder what

was shaping *my* interest in the text and how I was reading it, and I realized that what I found exciting about it was similar to what drew me to the work of Søren Kierkegaard. So, what began as a dissertation on Wittgenstein quickly transformed into a dissertation about Wittgenstein *and* Kierkegaard.

Of course, I am not the first to draw the connection between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, nor was it ever my aim to establish *that* Wittgenstein's philosophy is indebted to Kierkegaard's. As far as I am concerned, that has already been established,<sup>10</sup> though perhaps it is worth repeating that he thought "Kierkegaard was by far the most profound thinker of the last century."<sup>11</sup> I also do not think that my understanding of Wittgenstein's debt to Kierkegaard is fundamentally different from the likes of Stanley Cavell, James Conant, or Genia Schönbaumsfeld in that I too want to show that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard were both driven to distinguish honest from fraudulent authors and works of philosophy that are personally edifying from those that are not. What is potentially different about my approach to Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard is that whereas most commentators, including Cavell and Schönbaumsfeld, compare Kierkegaard to the "later" Wittgenstein, specifically the author of the *Philosophical Investigations*, I want to compare him to the "early"

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Genia Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), especially chapter two.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by M. O'C. Drury in Rush Rhees, *Recollections of Wittgenstein: Hermine Wittgenstein--Fania Pascal--F.R. Leavis--John King--M. O'c. Drury* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 87.

Wittgenstein as well.<sup>12</sup> For it seems to me that what Cavell says about Kierkegaard and the later Wittgenstein applies in many cases just as well to the author of the *Tractatus*, especially the claim that they aim to show that there are certain messages or truths “of such a form that the words which contain [their] truth may be said in a way which defeats that very truth.”<sup>13</sup> Besides, there are a number of parallels between Kierkegaard and the early Wittgenstein – specifically between the *Tractatus* and Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*<sup>14</sup> – that are too striking not to factor into one’s reading of the *Tractatus*. Let me review a few of the most obvious.

First, both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard draw a distinction between sense and nonsense. That is, they both attempt to articulate the limits of language and thought in order to show that there are certain things that cannot be said. Wittgenstein says, “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words” (TLP 6.522). And, in this context, it is clear that he is not merely repeating the truism that sometimes words fail us. Instead, he suggests that there is a kind of nonsense, which is different from ordinary nonsense, and which conveys something. Similarly, Kierkegaard says:

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<sup>12</sup> Although a number of Cavell’s works are either influenced by or about the parallel he found between Kierkegaard and the later Wittgenstein, the two papers that have been particularly helpful in my own research are his Stanley Cavell, “Kierkegaard’s *On Authority and Revelation*,” in *Must we mean what we say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); “Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy,” in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Cavell, “Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy,” 229.

<sup>14</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Henceforth, CUP.



Nonsense, therefore, he cannot believe against the understanding, as one might fear, for the understanding will precisely see nonsense for what it is and prevent him from believing it; but he makes as much use of the understanding as is needed to become aware of the incomprehensible, and then relates to this, believing against the understanding. (CUP 476)

Like Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard suggests that there is a kind of nonsense – the incomprehensible – that cannot be *believed* against the understanding, or put into words, but which one can nevertheless be *made aware of*. As Henry Allison puts it in his seminal paper on Kierkegaard’s *Postscript*, “Climacus [the pseudonymous author of the *Postscript*] does in fact attempt to distinguish between the absurdity of the absolute and mere nonsense” – where “the absurdity of the absolute” refers to the truth of the Incarnation as part of Christian dogma.<sup>15</sup> In short, according to some commentators, both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein aim to distinguish “illuminating nonsense” – sometimes referred to as “what can be shown” (TLP 4.1212), “what is mystical” (TLP 6.522), “that which can be communicated only indirectly,” “the incomprehensible,” and “the absurd” – from mere nonsense.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most striking parallel between the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*, the one that leads readers to think that Wittgenstein *must* have had Kierkegaard’s *Postscript* in mind when he wrote the *Tractatus*, is that they both employ the

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<sup>15</sup> Henry E. Allison, “Christianity and Nonsense,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 20, no. 3 (1967): 448.

<sup>16</sup> I am borrowing the phrase ‘illuminating nonsense’ from Peter Hacker, who says, “But the nonsense of the pseudo propositions of philosophy, in particular the philosophy of the *Tractatus*, differs from the nonsense of ‘A is a frabble,’ for it is held to be an *attempt to say what cannot be said but only shown*. In this sense it can be said to be ‘illuminating nonsense.’ It is the motive behind it and the means chosen for the objective (e.g. the illegitimate use of formal concepts) that earmarks the nonsense of the *Tractatus*.” P. M. S Hacker, “Was He Trying to Whistle It?,” in *The New Wittgenstein* ed. Alice Cray and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), 365.

metaphor of a ladder to indicate that their works include a kind of revocation at the end of the text. As we saw in [2] above, Wittgenstein claims that the *Tractatus* ought to be thought of as a ladder to be thrown away after one has climbed it. Similarly, Johannes Climacus – the pseudonymous author of the *Postscript* whose surname is a Latinization of the Greek word for “ladder” – says at the end of the *Postscript* that “what I write contains an additional notice to the effect that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked” (CUP 522). Perhaps Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard were both (maybe independently) hinting at the impossibility of *arguing* for the limits of argumentation. We might see this parallel more clearly, for instance, if we compare it to something Sextus Empiricus says in his *Against the Logicians*:

Just as, for example, fire after consuming the fuel destroys also itself, and like as purgatives after driving the fluids out of bodies expel themselves as well, so too the argument against proof, after abolishing every proof, can cancel itself also. And again, just as it is not impossible for the man who has ascended to a high place by a ladder to overturn the ladder with his foot after his ascent, so also it is not unlikely that the Skeptic after he has arrived at the demonstration of his thesis by means of the argument proving the non-existence of proof, as it were by a *stepladder*, should then abolish this very argument.<sup>17</sup>

But it still needs to be explained what we are supposed to take away from texts that encourage us to “throw them away” after they have served their function.

Besides these parallels, there are many others that are less obvious, which is to say, more difficult to articulate. For example, both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard – along with Tolstoy, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky – were profoundly conflicted about

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<sup>17</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, trans. Robert Gregg Bury, 4 ed., 4 vols., vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 487-89. My emphasis.

the truth of Christianity and the possibility of becoming a Christian. Although both were convinced that Christianity is the only sure way to happiness,<sup>18</sup> neither allowed himself to settle comfortably into the way of Christian dogma. In fact, one way of characterizing the parallel between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard is to say that they both resisted the thought that spiritual development is the product of dogma, definition, or abstract understanding – and encouraged others to do the same. In any case, a complete account of the parallel between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard cannot, or at least should not, overlook the extent to which they both thought of themselves as religious authors, or writing from a “religious point of view,” and the difficulty that their understanding of Christianity creates for interpreters.<sup>19</sup> In short, this connection between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard is more difficult to articulate because a careful interpreter has to square Wittgenstein’s claim that “if Christianity is the truth then all the philosophy that has been written about it is false”<sup>20</sup> with the attempt to philosophize about Wittgenstein’s view of Christianity.

Again, I am recounting here how I came to the beginning of writing my dissertation. With the above parallels in mind, I thought I would take up the challenge to explain how the work of Kierkegaard, and the *Postscript* in particular,

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<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein is quoted as saying, “Christianity is indeed the only sure way to happiness,” in Monk, *The Duty of Genius*, 122. I mention these authors in particular because they are also recognized as important influences on Wittgenstein’s early thought.

<sup>19</sup> For an interpretation that argues that Wittgenstein saw his own philosophizing “from a religious point of view,” see Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 83e. Henceforth, CV.

might help us resolve the interpretive difficulties of the *Tractatus* with which I started. Then, like anyone interested in the current literature about Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, I began to read the work of James Conant, which pushed me, we might say, a few steps further back.

According to Conant, what is particularly striking about the parallel between the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript* is not *what* both texts say about the difference between sense and nonsense or about the truths of ethics and religion, but, as he puts it, that commentators have been “misreading these two books in perfectly parallel ways.”<sup>21</sup> In both cases, he says, commentators have mistaken “the bait for the hook— . . . the target of the work for its doctrine.”<sup>22</sup> That is, on Conant’s view, Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard were not trying to illustrate the possibility of illuminating nonsense, which can be shown or communicated only indirectly, but rather they were attempting to expose the incoherence of that very project. He says, “The central parallel between [the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript*] lies not in their sharing some mystical doctrine of the ineffable, but rather in their sharing a common twofold project of exposing the incoherence of any such doctrine and diagnosing the source of its attraction.”<sup>23</sup> In short, on Conant’s view, the parallel between them consists in their presenting, in their own way, elaborate *reductios* on the same conception of

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<sup>21</sup> James Conant, “Must We Show What We Cannot Say,” in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 255.

<sup>22</sup> James Conant, “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” in *From Frege to Wittgenstein*, ed. Erich H. Reck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 381.

<sup>23</sup> James Conant, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense,” in *Pursuits of Reason*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1992), 196.

philosophy – namely, that it can employ objective arguments to demonstrate the limits of sense.

An important feature of Conant's reading is the meaning of 'silence,' especially as Wittgenstein uses it in TLP 7. Conant says:

I wanted to urge that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein envisioned no alternatives to silence except the following three: those of (1) plain ordinary effable speech, (2) unintelligible though apparently intelligible chatter, and (3) mere gibberish. The latter two alternatives differ only in their psychological import: one offers the illusion of sense where the other does not. Cognitively, they are equally vacuous. My interlocutory commentators, on the other hand, insist on a fourth alternative: the possibility of speech that lacks sense while still being able to convey volumes.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, Conant is suggesting that commentators such as Anscombe and Hacker are mistaken in their view that the propositions of the *Tractatus*, *qua* nonsense, are able to convey volumes despite (or because of) the fact that they violate the syntax of ordinary, meaningful language. However, if Conant argues that the *Tractatus* is not designed to show the possibility of ineffable truths, as Anscombe and Hacker claim, then by his own list of alternatives, it is either an example of effable speech, only apparently intelligible chatter, or mere gibberish. Of course, neither the *Tractatus* nor the *Postscript* is mere gibberish, and in saying that the *Tractatus* is nonsensical, Wittgenstein apparently rules out that it is ordinary effable speech. So, Conant argues that the text is an example of unintelligible, though apparently intelligible, chatter. That is, what *appears* to convey volumes actually does not: "The

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<sup>24</sup> Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say," 249.

‘what’ in ‘what cannot be said’ refers to nothing.”<sup>25</sup> On Conant’s view, then, when Wittgenstein says that “It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words” (TLP 6.421), he is not claiming that there is *something* that we call ‘ethics’ but which can only be shown. Instead, he is saying that although we think the term ethics refers to something, it refers to nothing.

To explain the value of showing the incoherence of talking about “illuminating nonsense,” Conant emphasizes the “psychological import” of the alternative to silence that falls into category (2). At several places, for example, he points out that at the end of the *Postscript*, Climacus says that “to write a book and revoke it is something else than not writing it; that to write a book which does not claim importance for anyone is something else than leaving it unwritten” (CUP 523). The moral that Conant draws from this is that the principle of charity, which encourages us to assume that the author is up to something important, does not require us to attribute particular theses to him. It is possible, in other words, to employ propositions that are, cognitively, equivalent to gibberish, but to do so *in a way* that makes a contribution to our understanding. For example, we can, and Conant thinks Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein do, show someone else that she is inclined to mistake a proposition which only has the illusion of sense for one that either does make plain sense or one that does not but speaks volumes.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 244.

On Conant's view, then, the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript* exemplify what he calls "indirect communication." He says, "A direct communication says something. A noncommunication says nothing. An indirect communication wishes to show that something that appears to be a communication is actually a noncommunication."<sup>26</sup> One virtue of showing the reader that she is inclined to mistake a noncommunication for a communication is, among other things, to help her overcome the tendency to (over-)intellectualize the claims of ethics and religion. All of us are familiar with the difficulty of capturing our ethical and religious convictions in words, and we might even say on occasion, "I cannot say exactly what I mean; it is ineffable." But a philosopher comes along and tries to say *why it is* we cannot say what we mean, failing to realize that the attempt to explain why we cannot talk about ethics, insofar as we are still talking about ethics, also cannot be put into words. And it is this kind of trap that Conant argues Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard tried to point out:

The aim of the work therefore is to present something that has the form of an intellectual difficulty, inviting the philosopher to grapple with it, and leading him to the point where the terms in which he was tempted to pose the difficulty come apart on him. The aim is to expose the roots of his compulsion always to reflect upon the task of living (a certain sort of life) rather than to attend to the task itself.<sup>27</sup>

In general, there is a lot to be admired in Conant's work and I thought, at some point, that the dissertation would consist in fleshing out the nature of the trap mentioned above. I hoped to find my own words to distinguish "reflecting on the task

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>27</sup> Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," 207.

of living a sort of life” and actually living one, which *is* the distinction that certainly brings the works of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard together. Moreover, I wondered, along with Conant, “How is it that these commentators are able to do the very thing the *Tractatus* held could not be done?”<sup>28</sup> How is it, in other words, that commentators are able and willing to talk about what they agree Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard are trying to show us cannot be talked about? Then something else occurred to me. In writing this dissertation, am I not becoming one of these very same commentators? Moreover, is Conant himself not subject to the very same criticism he levels against his commentators?

On the one hand, Conant maintains that the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript* are examples of “indirect communication” and thus that they do not say anything (“communication”); they only show that what is taken to be a communication is in fact a noncommunication. In the case of the *Tractatus*, its propositions are cognitively no different from gibberish. So, rather than present a view or doctrine, the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript* instruct us to read the text in a certain way, namely as a *reductio* on the intelligibility of the views one is tempted to attribute to them. Beyond this, as I understand Conant, the “content” of the text amounts to nothing; there is no theory, doctrine, or view. There is only the possibility that the reader is changed by the realization of this very absence. But, on the other hand, I wondered whether Conant is not attributing a view to the *Tractatus* and *Postscript* despite his insistence on the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 197.



fact that they do not express “views” or “accounts.” At the very least, he is saying to his interlocutory commentators, “not *that*,” which sounds to me suspiciously more contentful than trying to demonstrate the incoherence of something that only has the form of an intellectual difficulty.

So, I began to wonder how to take the basic idea of Conant’s reading more seriously than he does. To take it perfectly seriously would require one to say nothing at all on behalf of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, to get on with our lives, and perhaps to quit philosophy as Wittgenstein did after he finished the *Tractatus* and as Kierkegaard hoped to after he finished the *Postscript*. But that would also mean not writing a dissertation. So the guiding question became this: how do we talk about a philosopher’s effort *not* to say something positive without betraying the general spirit of his silence? And it was this question that eventually led me back to Socrates.

I am not the first to bring Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein into the same discussion, nor the first to say that the link between them consists in their insistence on the value of silence. Any understanding of Kierkegaard’s philosophy is incomplete without an appreciation of Kierkegaard’s debt to Socrates, which he began to articulate in his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*,<sup>29</sup> and which transformed his understanding of “indirect communication” and (how to express) the limits of philosophical understanding. But I am unaware of any literature that attempts to demonstrate a link between the *Tractatus* and Socrates, and

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<sup>29</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). Henceforth, CI.

assuming that there is a link to be drawn, I thought that, if nothing else, the absence of this literature was worth remedying.

One explanation of the fact that commentators do not typically compare Wittgenstein to Socrates (or Plato) is that, in a certain sense, Wittgenstein's (later) philosophy is very much anti-Socratic. That is, if we define Socratic philosophy in terms of Socrates' (and Plato's) pursuit of essences and a final telos, Socrates and Wittgenstein would make strange bedfellows indeed. But there is another aspect of *Socratic* philosophy – as opposed to Plato's philosophy – that I believe does invite us to compare (both the early and later) Wittgenstein to Socrates, namely, “the Socratic problem,” as it has come to be called. In short, the central problem that has exercised commentators on Socrates, as early as Plato, is to decide what to make of the fact that Socrates did not write his own philosophy or tell us exactly what he thought. To some commentators, as we shall see, this problem presents us only with a historical and philological hurdle, which challenges us to determine the principles by which to guarantee that the thought we attribute to Socrates was in fact his own. To other commentators, however, including Kierkegaard, Socrates' silence is essential to his thought, and must be factored into the correct interpretation of his philosophy. That is, to know *what* Socrates thought is to know *why* he did not tell us directly or commit his opinion to paper.

This connection to Socrates promises to be especially illuminating in our effort to resolve the various interpretive difficulties about Wittgenstein outlined

above, since, besides offering a much needed fresh perspective on the question of what it is (not) to write philosophy, Kierkegaard also thought that Socrates' silence was essential to his contribution to the history of ethics. So the comparison gives us a point of reference in our attempt to understand Wittgenstein's view of ethics (which, again, we are forced to interpret on the basis of what he did not say). Moreover, unlike what I found problematic in Conant's reading, by introducing "the Socratic problem" into the discussion we create a space for talking about the difficulties and possibilities of silence without necessarily saying too much ourselves. For me, it would thus be an achievement to have shown in this dissertation that besides "the Socratic problem" there is also "the Kierkegaardian problem" and "the Wittgensteinian problem." This would be an interesting contribution in itself because then we would have not one but three major, world-historical philosophers whose thought is utterly indeterminate (in a sense to be clarified later), and which, depending on the strength of the parallel between the three "problems," would challenge a well-established conception of philosophy. If it turns out that the thought of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard is really as elusive as that of Socrates, we might begin to wonder whether the primary aim of philosophy is really, as many suppose, to defend particular theses about the nature of the world and ourselves.

In a sense, Conant got this far without Socrates. He would no doubt agree – or rather, I should say that I agree with him – that the purpose of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein's philosophy is ethical, designed to remove illusions and not to defend

philosophical theses. However, by considering the comparison to Socrates, we are encouraged to question not only the purpose of (their) philosophy, but also the purpose of a secondary literature about philosophers. Perhaps Conant is right to say that the purpose of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein's philosophy is to show that a communication is in fact a noncommunication. But then I wonder how he can account for the intelligibility of his own reading. That is, if he is right to say that the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript* are crafted *not* to convey volumes, but to show that there are no volumes to be conveyed, then I wonder how we are supposed to understand the volumes that Conant nevertheless attributes to them.<sup>30</sup>

There is at least one important difference between Socrates, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein that needs to be addressed: unlike Socrates, the latter two *did* write their own philosophy and thus did leave *something* by which a later age can judge them. However, as I hope to show, the relevant sense of 'silence' still applies to Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, for it is not a matter of not saying anything *at all* – that is not even true of Socrates – but rather of not saying anything *in particular* or anything that amounts to a philosophical thesis. Moreover, the emphasis on silence may help us understand the importance of style in Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard's philosophy,

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<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard says, for example, that "what Socrates himself prized so highly, namely, standing still and contemplating—in other words, silence—this is his whole life in terms of world history. He has left us *nothing* by which a later age can judge him" (CI 11-12, my emphasis). Conant seems to be saying something similar about Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, and yet he does so by saying that there is *something* – something dangerously close to a set of theses and arguments – by which we can judge them.

and why their works remain as enigmatic as they strike us at first.<sup>31</sup> To explain this, I will try to show that like Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein wound up employing “Socratic irony” to create a distance between him and his reader. I am not sure whether Wittgenstein was aware of this connection himself, but I do believe that, on a certain account of Socratic irony, which I explain in the first chapter, it is a useful notion to help us understand Wittgenstein’s claim, in [1] above, that we will not (or should not) have the feeling that the *Tractatus* is teaching us anything about philosophy.

To sum up, what originally began as an attempt to resolve some interpretive difficulties surrounding the *Tractatus* led me back to the philosophy of Kierkegaard, particularly the *Postscript*. Not only was I, like several commentators, struck by the obvious parallels between the two texts, but I was also committed to the idea that in general the philosophy of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard represented an important challenge to a traditional conception of philosophy. However, after reading the work of Conant, I began to question the direction of that challenge. I wondered whether it was directed only against a certain interpretation of the two texts and the tradition of philosophy that *that* reading represents, as Conant argues, or whether it also applies to a certain way of reading the texts, i.e. as commentators. So I found myself, in a certain sense, at the beginning of philosophy, wondering about its strange start in

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<sup>31</sup> I am assuming, of course, that the best explanation of the riddling nature of the philosophy of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard is *not* that they were simply “bad writers” or that they could not find the words or the clarity to say what they “really” wanted to. In other words, I am assuming that the peculiarity of their style is deliberate and essential.

Socrates and the related possibilities of silence in a tradition that seems to value philosophers for the strength and clarity of their theses and arguments.

So, finally, a dissertation whose first chapter probably would have been on the current debates about the correct reading of the *Tractatus* ended up starting with a chapter on the meaning of “Socratic irony.” As for me and my attraction to not one but three frustratingly enigmatic philosophers, the guiding question became: why was I so interested in making Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein speak more directly than they did?

### III. Outline and Structure

Besides this introduction, my dissertation consists of four related but autonomous chapters. In the following chapter, I examine the exegetical difficulties that arise in trying to determine Socrates’ thought despite his “silence” – i.e., the difficulties involved in “the Socratic problem.” Central to the difficulty, as we shall see, is the concept of irony; so, the aim of the first chapter is also to introduce us to the concept as it has been discussed in the literature and to its potential role in philosophy. In the second chapter, I move on to the development of Kierkegaard’s understanding of Socrates, which he began to articulate in his dissertation, but which remained a central topic throughout his corpus and which, on my view, explains the exegetical difficulties surrounding the *Postscript*. The aim of chapter two is to show that Kierkegaard’s understanding of Socrates ultimately exhibits itself in his attempt

to re-create Socrates' silence in the form of a philosophical text. In the third chapter, I argue that the ethical aim of the *Tractatus* is ultimately what makes it stubbornly enigmatic and a real challenge to commentators. Although I do not discuss Socrates and Kierkegaard in much detail in this chapter, I do refer to them and the earlier chapters, for on my view part of what makes the *Tractatus* a work of ethics is that it does not say (directly) any of the many things commentators typically attribute to Wittgenstein. Finally, in the last chapter, I will return to Conant's reading of the parallel between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard and try to show why I think the difficulty surrounding the philosophy of both is one of not allowing ourselves as commentators to say more on their behalf than they were willing to say on their own.

I say that the chapters are related but autonomous because, in a certain sense, they are attempts to show the same thing – namely, the trouble three philosophers create for secondary literatures and the artistic and ethical implications of their respective forms of silence. To put it another way, I am not sure the reader will learn anything from the dissertation as a whole that he cannot learn from each individual chapter. However, I take heart in the fact that what the reader might learn is nearly impossible to summarize, even more difficult to explain, and that the method of comparison may be the only proper way of commenting on Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, and Socrates without betraying the aim of their art.

I might have guessed this much from the beginning, taken as I was early on by the following remark by Wittgenstein:

What Aesthetics tries to do . . . is to give *reasons*, *e.g.* for having this word rather than that in a particular place in a poem, or for having this musical phrase rather than that in a particular place in a piece of music. . . . *Reasons*, he said, in Aesthetics, are ‘of the nature of further descriptions’: *e.g.* you can make a person see what Brahms was driving at by showing him lots of different pieces of Brahms, or by comparing him with a contemporary author; and all that Aesthetics does is ‘to draw your attention to a thing’, to ‘place things side by side’. [Wittgenstein] said that if, by giving ‘reasons’ of this sort, you make another person ‘see what you see’ but it still ‘does not appeal to him’, that is ‘an end’ of the discussion. . . . And he said that the same sort of ‘reasons’ were given, not only in Ethics, but also in philosophy.<sup>32</sup>

But sometimes it takes a dissertation to realize what one might have known earlier.

And so, what follows is my attempt to get the reader to see what I see in the *Tractatus* by comparing Wittgenstein to two like-minded philosophers. Insofar as the *Tractatus* is a work of ethics, philosophy, or aesthetics, I am not sure what more one can do.

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<sup>32</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions: 1912–1951*, ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 106. Henceforth, PO.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Interpreting Socratic Silence: Irony, Ethical Autonomy and Irresoluble Complexity

*Particularly in our age, irony must be commended. In our age, scientific scholarship has come into possession of such prodigious achievements that there must be something wrong somewhere; knowledge not only about the secrets of the human race but even about the secrets of God is offered for sale at such a bargain price today that it all looks very dubious. In our joy over the achievement in our age, we have forgotten that an achievement is worthless if it is not made one's own.*

– Søren Kierkegaard

In this chapter, I argue that we do not need to determine what Socrates believed in order to account for his status as a great moral philosopher. Moreover, I argue that there is a sense in which we can explain Socrates' contribution to the history of ethics, not *in spite of* the difficulty of determining once and for all what Socrates says (as opposed to what Plato has him say), but precisely *because* he remains, in the relevant sense to be described below, silent. To explain the sense in which Socratic silence is essential to Socrates' contribution to ethics, we need to consider first what makes Socrates a particularly enigmatic figure, and how various interpreters have tried to resolve the enigma. As we will see, just how we settle the questions that Socratic silence raises will turn on how we understand the possibilities and meaning of irony.

### I. From the Concept of Irony to Silence

Irony is so basic to our linguistic competence, it is hard to imagine our world without it – a world, that is, in which saying something other or opposite of what is

meant is unheard of or forbidden. Imagine, for example, that on a stormy day you said to the person next to you, “Isn’t the weather wonderful?” and she responded, somewhat confused, “Actually, like most people, I do not like the rain.” Or imagine that after two hours of vigorous exercise you said to the person next to you, panting, “What a warm up!” and she said, somewhat irate, “If you mean to say that the class was difficult, then just say so.” If you can imagine such a world, then you can also imagine that something indescribably important would be missing. But to say exactly what would be missing in a world without irony is a different matter – especially if in such a world there were still satire, sarcasm, metaphor, hyperbole, and litotes. That is, to say exactly what *irony* is and how important it is to everyday life is perhaps as difficult as it is for me to say what I would think about myself if I were not myself.

Nevertheless, philosophers have labored to define the concept of irony, in part because, unlike other linguistic conventions, it has a comparatively well-charted history, and in part because its history is especially important to Western philosophy. As Kierkegaard tells us in his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, “. . . the concept of irony makes its entry into the world through Socrates. Concepts, just like individuals, have their history and are no more able than they to resist the dominion of time, but in and through it all they nevertheless harbor a kind of homesickness for the place of their birth” (CI 9). In other words, as I understand Kierkegaard, although the concept of irony has evolved, and will continue to evolve, it inevitably leads us back to Socrates. “It is common knowledge,” he continues, “that tradition has linked the word ‘irony’ to the existence of

Socrates” (CI 11). So, what does the existence of Socrates have to do with a convention that, as we said, is so basic to who we are? Kierkegaard cannot be saying that had Socrates not existed, neither would irony, or that the practice of irony did not exist before him.

Today the primary definition of ‘irony’ is the same one that the Roman rhetorician Quintilian standardized in the first century AD: “Irony is that figure of speech or trope in which something contrary to what is said is to be understood.”<sup>1</sup> It is importantly different from lying, moreover, in that the point of irony is to make the truth of the situation, as one sees it, understood. So, for example, someone is lying if she believes that the weather is horrible but says that it is wonderful in order to make her audience understand that it is, in fact, wonderful. Now, irony in the primary sense of the word did not make its entry into the world through Socrates; he could not have been the first person to utter the opposite of what he meant in order to be understood, and he was not.<sup>2</sup>

In saying that tradition has linked the *word* ‘irony’ back to Socrates, Kierkegaard is emphasizing that it is the concept of irony, not the use of it, that made its entry into the world through Socrates. That is, he is saying that Socrates was the first to encourage us to reflect on the meaning and complexity of irony. However, as Gregory Vlastos has claimed, Socrates was not the first to theorize about the concept of irony: “In none of our sources does [Socrates] ever make *eironeia* the *F* in his ‘what is *F*?’ question or bring it by

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>2</sup> As Vlastos says, “The use of irony, as distinct from reflection on it, is as old as the hills. We can imagine a caveman offering a tough piece of steak to his mate with the remark, ‘Try this tender morsel.’” *ibid.*, 27n.

some other means under his elenctic hammer.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, if Socrates did “introduce” the concept into the world, it was by giving the Greek *eironeia* “something new for it to mean: a new form of life realized in himself which was the very incarnation of *eironeia*. . . .”<sup>4</sup> So, to say that the concept of irony entered the world through Socrates is to say, at the very least, that before Socrates the word *eironeia* meant one thing and that after him, and because of him, it began to mean something else – something, moreover, that is worthy of philosophical interest.

Before Socrates, Vlastos tells us, the word *eironeia* denoted a form of expression or behavior that was intended to deceive, making it closer to lying. *Eiron*, accordingly, was a term of abuse that referred to someone who was considered a dissembler or sham.<sup>5</sup> And, as we know from Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates was not entirely free from such abuse himself. For example, when he claims to be as ignorant about the nature of justice as he has shown his interlocutors to be, Thrasymachus says to him “loudly” and “sarcastically,” “By Heracles . . . that’s just Socrates usual *eironeia*. I knew, and I said so to these people earlier, that you’d be unwilling to answer and that, if someone questioned *you*, you’d be *ironikos* and do anything rather than give an answer” (*Rep.* 337a).<sup>6</sup> And it is clear from

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> In modern American parlance, we express a similar worry when we call someone a “bullshitter.” See Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Interestingly, much of the discussion about Socrates to follow can be recast (I believe helpfully) in the form of the question: Was Socrates a bullshitter (in Frankfurt’s sense of the term)?

<sup>6</sup> All references to Plato’s dialogues are from Plato, *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

the context of the dialogue that Thrasymachus is accusing Socrates of only *pretending* to be ignorant.

After Socrates, the Greek *eironeia* was transliterated into the Latin *ironia* (from which we derive ‘irony’) and, “laundered and deodorized,” it came to signify “the height of urbanity, elegance, and good taste,”<sup>7</sup> that is, a manner of comporting oneself that was not only stripped of its disreputable past but which also came to indicate social aptitude. What made the difference? According to Vlastos, “the image of Socrates as the paradigmatic *iron* effected a change in the previous connotation of the word.”<sup>8</sup> Even though Socrates was the paradigmatic *iron*, he was not obviously disingenuous, as Thrasymachus thought. True, he could not have meant exactly what he said when he claimed not to know anything. He must have known *something*; otherwise, it is impossible to make sense out of his ability to constantly confute the beliefs of everyone he met. But whether he knew exactly what he meant is now open for dispute. That is, when *we* examine the meaning of Socrates’ disavowals, we tend to be more generous than Thrasymachus was and we tend to think that Socrates, the figure who famously bet his life on the value of philosophy, was sincere even if misunderstood. So, as Vlastos tells us, it was through reflecting on the life and thought of the historical Socrates, as he was portrayed by his most famous pupils, most notably Plato, that the semantic possibilities of *eironeia* broadened to include the complex meanings of the modern word ‘irony.’

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<sup>7</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

The purpose of this chapter, however, is not to define ‘irony’ or simply to trace the concept back to Socrates. Instead, it is to show the way in which irony is central to the nature and complexity of what I call “Socratic silence” and to its ability to provoke commentators into attributing clear beliefs to someone who was unwilling to claim them for himself. I am also not concerned here with the correct interpretation of Socrates’ moral philosophy, but rather with the question of whether he deserves our philosophical attention if we decide that the figure of Socrates is irresolubly complex and, in a certain sense, lost to history. What I hope we come to see through examining Socratic silence and its relation to irony – or, more specifically, to “Socratic irony” – is the possibility that although Socrates was frustratingly enigmatic, perhaps he was not unnecessarily so.

## II. “The Socratic Problem”

One thing we must bear in mind as we think about the life and thought of the historical Socrates is that we enjoy a privileged perspective that distinguishes us not only from Thrasymachus, but also from Plato. Whether we think that Socrates was a sham or a moral exemplar, unlike Thrasymachus, we do so knowing how he died, and unlike Plato, on the basis of a comparatively complete or rich interpretation of his life and accomplishments.<sup>9</sup> Our privileged perspective, however, can also act as a barrier, since it is not actually the life of Socrates we are inquiring into – in fact, there is little historical

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<sup>9</sup> Even though Plato did not write his first dialogue until after Socrates had died, his understanding of Socrates appears to have developed the more he *wrote* about Socrates, suggesting that the earlier dialogues are comparatively incomplete. As readers of Plato’s entire corpus, by contrast, we are able to read Plato’s mature portrait of Socrates into the earliest dialogue.

record of the actual man – but the man behind the many “Socrateses” who populate our tradition. This creates a barrier because it becomes increasingly unclear whether we are peering into the mind of the historical Socrates or the minds of commentators who have attempted to make Socrates their own. (This is the obstacle that seems to motivate the following passage from Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*: “Because Socrates . . . gave rise to moral philosophy, all succeeding babblers about morality and popular philosophy constituted him their patron and object of adoration, and made him into a cloak which should cover all false philosophy.”<sup>10</sup>) In fact, Socrates is not unlike Jesus in that the problem of identifying the life and thought of Socrates amounts to the problem of distinguishing his voice from a long and established tradition of thinkers and institutions that claim to represent the one true world-view of their patron. And, needless to say, the more “Socrateses” or “Jesuses” there are, the harder it is to prove that yours is the true one.

That there are so many “Socrateses” is possible because Socrates did not tell us directly what he thought. He did not write his own philosophy and it is only *through* those who claimed to know him best and who made the effort to immortalize him – especially Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes, and, to a lesser extent, Aristotle – that we have access to his thought. This, in a word, is the crux of “the Socratic problem”: since Socrates wrote nothing of his own, the problem of identifying his thought consists in distinguishing his voice from everyone else’s. “The Socratic problem” is especially knotty

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<sup>10</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E.S. Haldane, 3 vols., vol. 1 (New York: The Humanities Press Inc, 1955), 388.

since the earliest – and, presumably, for that reason, most reliable – authors of “Socratic *logoi*,” dialogues in which Socrates is featured as the central character, present a thoroughly inconsistent figure.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps, even, a paradoxical one.<sup>12</sup> Not only is there a Socratic problem because Socrates did not write anything, but it is also unclear whether his life and mind would be any less enigmatic even if he had. As Kierkegaard says:

He has left nothing by which a later age can judge him; indeed, even if I were to imagine myself his contemporary, he would still always be difficult to comprehend. In other words, he belonged to the breed of persons with whom the outer is not the stopping point. The outer continually pointed to something other and opposite. (CI 12)

So, according to Kierkegaard, Socrates will continue to elude us because he was an ironic “breed” and not just because he was “silent” in the relevant sense. As we shall see, whether one is trying to fix a picture of the historical Socrates or to understand the nature of Socratic silence (or the concept of irony), the two tend to go hand-in-hand.

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander Nehamas points out, for example, that if you compare what Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Plato say about Socrates’ attitude toward natural philosophy, it is difficult, if not impossible, to decide whether Socrates was a natural philosopher himself, as Aristophanes says, whether he thought that natural philosophy was useless but harmless, as Xenophon says, or whether he was entirely ignorant of it, as Plato says. See Alexander Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 86-87.

<sup>12</sup> Nehamas also says, in a different work, “Socrates confronted Plato with a paradox. Convinced that Socrates was the best man of his generation (*Phd.* 118a15-18), perhaps the best man who had ever lived so far, Plato had to face the fact that, on his own admission, Socrates did not have what he himself considered necessary in order to be what he was. If knowledge of *arete* is required for having *arete* and so for living well, then Socrates, who lacked that knowledge, could not have been virtuous and could not have lived well. Yet he was, and he did.” Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 68.



### *Socratic Silence*

For reasons we cannot enumerate here, Plato is typically considered the most reliable source of the historical Socrates – particularly his “early” or “Socratic” dialogues.<sup>13</sup> Yet, even if we narrow the source material to a few dialogues that relate a comparatively coherent narrative, Socrates still comes across as a thoroughly enigmatic figure. Perhaps his most famous (and characteristic) claim is found in Plato’s *Apology* where he says, “I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know” (*Ap.* 21d). At least this is what almost every college freshman who takes “Introduction to Philosophy” remembers, and is encouraged to remember, about Socrates: he was that Greek philosopher who knew that he did not know anything. A nice phrase – but what does it mean and did Socrates actually believe it?<sup>14</sup>

Socrates’ claim that he was wise only to the extent that he acknowledged his ignorance, as well as the claim that he had never been anyone’s teacher (*Ap.* 33a4), is considered ironic – both in Thrasymachus’s sense and in ours – in part because Socrates knew that he was considered by many to be the wisest Athenian, and because, despite what he thought, he *was* a well-respected teacher. Let alone the fact that Socrates

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<sup>13</sup> Plato’s so-called “Socratic” dialogues include the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Charmides*, *Hippias Minor*, *Hippias Major*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Protagoras*, and Book I of the *Republic*.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion about the order of the dialogues, reasons the early dialogues best represent the historical Socrates, and the centrality of Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge, see Gregory Vlastos, “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35, no. 138 (1985).

contradicts himself later in the *Apology*, as well as in other dialogues, when he says, for example, that he *is* a teacher (*Ap.* 35c2). So, assuming Socrates did not mean exactly what he said, we would like to know what he meant and why he did not simply say what he meant – especially since he must have known that he was considered an *eiron* in Thrasymachus’s sense of the word.

What we notice from the passage above is that Quintilian’s simple definition of ‘irony’ does not apply to it. Whatever Socrates actually meant, it is not simply the opposite of what he said. It is not even clear what the opposite of “I am wiser in that I do not think I know what I do not know” would be: “I am *not* wiser . . .,” “I am wiser in that I *do* think I know what I do not know,” or “I am wiser in that I do not think I know what I *do* know”? The answer, of course, is none of these and we must keep in mind the context of Socrates’ statement. As Plato has Socrates say, the definition of his own wisdom is *Socrates’* solution to “the riddle” presented to him by the Oracle at Delphi, who proclaimed that he was the wisest Athenian. Socrates says, “When I heard of this reply I asked myself: ‘Whatever does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious that I am not wise at all’ (*Ap.* 21b). In other words, Socrates is saying that the definition of ‘wisdom’ that he attributes to himself is the best solution he could muster, leaving open the question whether it is *the* solution. So, in a sense, “the Socratic problem,” or Socratic silence, and the question about the meaning of Socratic irony are connected to the fact that we continue to be as riddled by the Oracle’s prophecy as was Socrates.

Further, it is a riddle not everyone agrees can be solved. According to Kierkegaard, “what Socrates himself prized so highly, namely, standing still and contemplating—in other words, silence—this is his whole life in terms of world history” (CI 11). That is, “the Socratic problem” cannot be solved because Socrates’ “whole life,” including his solution to the Oracle’s riddle, is shrouded in silence and irony. By contrast, Vlastos considers Socrates’ silence and irony a code to be deciphered, behind which there is both a doctrine about the nature of morality and a method. To borrow a metaphor from Kierkegaard, whereas Vlastos thinks that Socrates’ silence is like “the silence of the night [which] is full of sounds for someone who has ears to hear,” Kierkegaard thinks that it is “dead silence” (CI 258). He says, “Socrates’ life is like a magnificent pause in the course of history: we do not hear him at all; a profound stillness prevails—until it is broken by the noisy attempts of the many and very different schools of followers who trace their origin in this hidden cryptic source” (CI 199).

### III. A Pedagogical Device

To appreciate Vlastos’s account of Socratic irony, as well as his solution to “the Socratic problem,” it helps to understand what sort of philosopher Vlastos was or wanted Socrates to be. According to Alexander Nehamas, Vlastos pioneered the “analytic” approach to the history of Greek philosophy, particularly to the study of Socrates, and “produced one of the most *systematic* interpretations of Socrates’ views and personality ever to be accomplished . . . [which] pays particular attention to arguments and addresses

problems that can be put in direct contact with questions attracting contemporary attention.”<sup>15</sup> Vlastos believed, first of all, that “the Socratic problem” can be solved; second, that behind Socrates’ ironic disavowals of knowledge there *is* a systematic philosophy; and third, that Socrates’ philosophy is relevant to contemporary philosophical or moral issues. (As we will see, Kierkegaard rejects all of these presuppositions.)

### *Simple and Complex Irony*

According to Vlastos, “Nothing about [Socrates] had been less well understood than [his irony] in the previous literature. In a misinterpretation that was virtually canonical – it was even ensconced in the dictionaries – Socratic irony had been taken to mean Socratic *deception*.”<sup>16</sup> Even though commentators might not share Thrasymachus’s belief that Socratic irony (his deception) was malicious, they typically believe that it was deceptive nonetheless. As we saw in the passage from Plato’s *Apology*, it certainly was not a case of what Vlastos calls “simple irony,” where the opposite of what is said is to be understood. And, there is a sense in which, because Socrates does not simply tell us what he thinks or make it easier for us to discover the truth for ourselves – e.g., by writing his own philosophy – he conspires to let us misunderstand him (that is, to deceive us).

However, as Vlastos suggests above, he believes that understanding Socratic irony as a form of deception is the result of a misunderstanding. True, Socratic irony is not “simple” and the meaning of what Socrates says is lost if one tries to force it to mean the

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<sup>15</sup> Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity*, 100.

<sup>16</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates*, 13.

same *or* the opposite of what is said. But, Vlastos maintains, a new meaning is discovered if we complicate Socratic irony into a form of speech in which Socrates means both what he says *and* the opposite of what he says. For example, according to Vlastos's account of "complex irony," when Socrates said that he had never been anyone's teacher, according to one sense of 'teacher' – according to which someone claims to be able to augment her student's body of knowledge – Socrates meant what he said. He certainly was *not* a teacher in that sense. However, at the same time, there is another sense of 'teacher,' according to which Socrates engaged "would-be learners in elenctic argument to make them aware of their own ignorance and enable them to discover for themselves the truth the teacher had held back – and in that sense of 'teaching,' Socrates would want to say that he *is* a teacher, *the only true teacher.*"<sup>17</sup> So, according to Vlastos's account of "complex" (i.e. "Socratic") irony, Socrates genuinely expresses himself, even if he does it by punning on the word 'teacher.'

At this point, however, it is still unclear how Socrates is not being deceptive. Imagine, for example, what Thrasymachus might say about Vlastos's account of "complex irony": "So, you are saying that Socrates *does* have an opinion, and that he is less forthright than he could have been?! That is all I mean by dissembler." What Vlastos needs to explain is why, if he in fact wanted to be understood, Socrates did not say, "When you ask whether I am a teacher, I know that you have one sense of the word in mind, and according to that sense, I am not a teacher. But there is another sense of the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 32.

word according to which I do consider myself a teacher, and it is *this*.” In other words, Socrates might be considered deceptive under Vlastos’s account inasmuch as he allows himself to be misunderstood, insofar as he could be more direct but is not. In response to this objection, Vlastos reminds us of the ethical aim of Socratic irony, which he illustrates by examining Alcibiades’s famous panegyric of Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*.

### *The Importance of a Riddle*

In this famous speech, Alcibiades tells his audience that they do not know the real Socrates because he is a life-long *ieron* (which at this point in the conversation would have been taken to mean a life-long dissembler). He begins by recounting his attempt to seduce Socrates into swapping sexual for intellectual favors: a young boy’s beauty and charm for an old man’s inner beauty and wisdom. However, despite his well-known appreciation for youthful beauty, Socrates rejects Alcibiades, preferring instead to continue the *philosophical* conversation. Then Alcibiades, who assumed that Socrates was simply playing hard to get, makes his offer explicit, to which Socrates responded in “that absolutely inimitable ironic manner of his”:

Dear Alcibiades, if you are right in what you say about me, you are already more accomplished than you think. If I really have in me the power to make you a better man, then you can see in me a beauty that is really beyond description and makes your own remarkable good looks pale in comparison. But, then, is this a fair exchange that you propose? You seem to me to want more than your proper share: you offer me the merest appearance of beauty, and in return you want the thing itself, ‘gold in exchange for brass.’ (*Symp.* 218d-219)

In saying that Socrates' response was an example of his "inimitable ironic manner," Alcibiades is saying that he realized Socrates did not mean what he said. He knew that he was not more accomplished than he thought, or at least that Socrates did not think so, and he was convinced that Socrates really did possess the power to make him a better man, though he implied that he could not.

Alcibiades recounts this exchange with Socrates because he wants to explain to his audience that although Socrates rejected his offer to swap the appearance of beauty for the thing itself, he nevertheless succeeded in teaching him a valuable lesson about wisdom. In the end, Alcibiades came to realize that Socrates did in fact exercise the power he claimed not to have, even though at the time Alcibiades thought he was merely being rebuffed. He says:

[Socrates'] ideas and arguments are just like those hollow statues of Silenus. If you were to listen to his arguments, at first they'd strike you as totally ridiculous. . . . But if you see them when they open up like the statues, *if you go behind their surface*, you'll realize that no other arguments make any sense. (221d8-222a2, my emphasis)

In other words, not only did Alcibiades come to realize that Socrates' irony was benign but he also came to see it as essential to what he understood the lesson to be. You just have to go behind the surface.

At bottom, the lesson Vlastos learns from Alcibiades's interpretation of Socratic irony is that Socrates was not intentionally being deceptive, but believed "that if you are to come to the truth, it must be by yourself for yourself."<sup>18</sup> What Alcibiades seems to have

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 44.

learned from Socrates' ironic dismissal is that the sort of wisdom he sought in Socrates – that which would make him a better man – is not something that can be handed over. It is something you have to learn for yourself. But more important is *how* Alcibiades had to learn even this much, i.e., on his own. True, Socrates did not mean the opposite of what he said. (As with the passage from the *Apology*, whatever the correct interpretation of Socrates' ironical statement, it is not simply the reverse of what is said.) Instead, he presents Alcibiades with a riddle and encourages him to reconsider the meaning of 'beauty' and 'wisdom,' so that he might come to understand the difference between "gold and brass" or the appearance of a thing and the thing itself.

#### *Ethical Autonomy*

Rather than claim that Socrates was *attempting* to deceive Alcibiades, Vlastos says his irony is a pedagogical device designed to hold back the truth that he wishes to impart, so that the would-be pupil can learn it for himself. Like all irony, Socrates' withholding the truth is deceptive in that he willingly risks being misunderstood or having the truth twisted, but it is not (necessarily) intentionally deceptive in the sense that he wanted the truth to be lost on his audience. Vlastos says, "Yes, Alcibiades was deceived . . . but by whom? Not by Socrates, but by himself. He believed what he did because he wanted to."<sup>19</sup> What is crucial to Vlastos's account of Socratic irony, then, and part of his solution to "the Socratic problem," is that through irony, Socrates teaches us something about the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 41.



nature of (teaching and learning) ethical truths: insofar as they belong to the sort of truth that make us better people, we have to learn them for ourselves. Whether or not we wish (or are able) to employ Socratic irony ourselves, the lesson is that it is important not to be didactic. And, although there is a certain amount of risk in being indirect, the lesson is too important not to challenge your audience to discover it for themselves.

#### IV. An Ironic Personality

Although Vlastos's essay is more involved than what I could have presented here, what we have seen so far is enough to signal a few points of contention in the literature about Socratic irony. The first point is that Vlastos's account focuses too heavily on what Socrates *says*. As Jill Gordon puts it, Vlastos's account misses the fact that "irony is incongruity between phenomena within a dramatic context . . . Actions, behavior, modes of expression, thoughts and words can all be incongruous. . . . The elements of Socratic irony are always incongruous *within a dramatic context*."<sup>20</sup> In sum, Gordon does not think that Vlastos's notion of "complex irony" is complex enough, since it deemphasizes the role of context and our privileged perspective, which I discussed earlier. Vlastos's account, so the criticism goes, suggests that in principle the true meaning of Socrates' words can

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<sup>20</sup> Jill Gordon, "Against Vlastos on Complex Irony," *The Classical Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (1996): 134. Emphasis is in the original.

be deciphered on their own, independently of a larger understanding of who Socrates was or how he develops as a character across Plato's dialogues.<sup>21</sup>

The second and related set of worries is raised by Nehamas who argues that Vlastos has "*made it difficult* to pay attention to Socrates as a whole, as a character and a personality no less than as a proponent of arguments and an advocate of theories."<sup>22</sup> In other words, by focusing on what can be woven into systematic, theoretical philosophy, Vlastos plays down the fact that part of what makes Socrates so enigmatic and interesting is the way he defied Athenian thought and culture. Also, Nehamas takes issue with Vlastos's "governing assumption that there are truths that Socrates knows and that he knows that he knows," but which he "holds back." Nehamas continues, "*This* Socrates is, in the ancient sense of that term, a dogmatist.<sup>23</sup> That is, Vlastos's account seems to contradict the spirit of Socratic ignorance, which as I suggested above, is central to Plato's (and our) understanding of the historical Socrates. Socrates knew that he did not know; he did not know that he knew *and* that he should keep his knowledge to himself.

Third, Vlastos does not seem to be worried enough by the fact that Socrates conspicuously chose not to write his own philosophy. He might respond that Socrates' literary silence was required by his ethical aim, as was his irony, but we have to wonder

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<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that Vlastos's account of Socratic irony is not informed by his understanding Socrates the person or character in Plato's dialogues. He *must* be insofar as Vlastos aims to solve "the Socratic problem." Instead, Gordon argues that Vlastos focuses on the fact that Socratic irony, something that is at least theoretically available to all of us, amounts to a figure of speech.

<sup>22</sup> Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity*, 100. My emphasis. Again, the point is not that Vlastos rules out the importance of considering Socrates as a complete person, but that he deemphasizes the difficulty of apprehending the truth of his personality, as opposed to the arguments he purports to defend.

<sup>23</sup> Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity*, 101. My emphasis.

why Vlastos thought Plato was exempt from the requirements of that aim or why Socrates chose not to write *anything*, not even notes or dialogues. This is important to point out because if we agree that Socrates' claims to ignorance are central to the identity of the historical Socrates, we must not forget that we are always inferring the historical Socrates from Plato's own solution to "the Socratic problem." True, Vlastos factors Plato's voice into his account of Socrates, but he seems to overlook the thought that part of what makes Plato's early dialogues a credible source for identifying the historical Socrates is that Plato introduces us to someone he is clearly struggling to understand himself. As Nehamas puts it, "Opacity, a character's being beyond the reach of his author and not the subject of his will, has become one of the central grounds of verisimilitude."<sup>24</sup> In short, the criticism is that Vlastos may be smuggling Plato's mature understanding of the historical Socrates into his interpretation of the early dialogues, which (again) are credible to the extent that they are innocent of Plato's developed view.

In the following section, I will discuss the basic contours of Kierkegaard's account of Socratic irony, as he presents it in his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*. As we will see, Kierkegaard seems to be sensitive to some of the worries raised just now, and he offers a radically different interpretation from that of Vlastos.

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<sup>24</sup> Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, 13.

## V. A Magnificent Pause

Before we turn to his account of Socratic irony, a word about what sort of philosopher Kierkegaard was or wanted Socrates to be, in contrast to Vlastos, is in order. If anything characterizes Kierkegaard's philosophy as a whole, it is his emphasis on the tension he thought existed between the philosophy of existence and systematic or scientific knowledge.<sup>25</sup> I say "tension" because Kierkegaard did not believe that the two were mutually exclusive, but rather that "our age" tends to mistake the difficulties of scientific knowledge for the qualitatively different difficulty of living well, and that the failure to recognize that there is a qualitative difference between them is the cause of philosophical confusion.

Kierkegaard, moreover, thought that (the problem of) Socrates nicely illustrated the nature of philosophical confusion, as he understood it. In a passage from *Sickness Unto Death*, for example, he describes systematic philosophy as deeply "un-Socratic":

A thinker erects a huge building, a system, a system embracing the whole of existence, world history, etc., and if his personal life is considered, to our amazement the appalling and ludicrous discovery is made that he himself does not personally live in this huge, domed palace but in a shed alongside it, or in a doghouse, or at best in the janitor's quarters.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For Kierkegaard, "systematic philosophy" referred to the now somewhat archaic practice of constructing comprehensive metaphysical systems, such as we find in the philosophy of Kant and Hegel. However, although his use of 'systematic' is different from the sense Nehamas means when he says that Vlastos produced a systematic account of Socrates, they are not unrelated and it is worth thinking about the parallels between the old and new use of 'systematic.'

<sup>26</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 43-44. Henceforth, SUD.

Just so it is clear, Kierkegaard is not saying (as I understand him) that such a thinker *cannot* live in his own domed palace, just that he tends not to. What is deeply “un-Socratic” about this? It is the belief that essential to Socrates (his life, thought, irony, and silence) is the priority of the existing individual. In many ways, according to Kierkegaard, Socrates was a rebel, and what makes his life worthy of reflection is that he stood out as an individual and not, as Kierkegaard would say, a “a copy, a number, a mass man” (SUD 34).

*Not A Figure of Speech*

Perhaps the best way to begin to understand Kierkegaard’s account of Socratic irony here is to compare Kierkegaard to Vlastos by saying that if Vlastos wanted to understand the nature of Socratic irony in order to solve “the Socratic problem,” Kierkegaard wanted to solve “the Socratic problem” in order to understand nature of Socratic irony. Kierkegaard says:

Before I proceed to an exposition of the concept of irony, it is necessary to make sure that I have a reliable and authentic view of Socrates’ historical-actual, phenomenological existence with respect to the question of its possible relation to the transformed view that was his fate through enthusiastic or envious contemporaries. (CI 9)

This is an important contrast to draw because, unlike Vlastos, Kierkegaard does not assume that the word ‘irony’ refers to a figure of speech or rhetorical device, and because he thinks that focusing on irony as a figure of speech is one way of confusing Plato’s irony with Socrates’. With respect to the latter point he says, “Thus, when Hegel’s whole

examination of Socratic irony ends in such a way that Socratic irony becomes identified with Platonic irony both ironies become more a manner of conversation . . . and not pure negation” (CI 267).

At the very least, Kierkegaard is suggesting that defining *Socratic* irony is doubly difficult because, not only does one have to make sense out of the irony in what Plato says on Socrates’ behalf, as Vlastos does, but one also has to assert beyond this that Plato’s interpretation accurately represents Socrates’ *unwillingness* to make any clear statements on his own behalf. And this is what Kierkegaard thinks focusing on irony as a figure of speech fails to do. He says that “the ironic figure of speech cancels itself; it is like a riddle to which one at the same time has the solution” (CI 248). (As we saw, this is precisely how Vlastos interprets Socrates’ claims to ignorance.) However, for Kierkegaard, if Socrates’ irony consists in a riddle which Plato solved and then tried to reconstruct for the sake of the reader, once *we* crack the code, the irony has, so to speak, done its job and is finished. If Kierkegaard were able to speak to Vlastos, I imagine he would say that Vlastos cannot have it both ways. If irony is the “substance of Socrates’ existence” (CI 12), and not a mere figure of speech, then it is not a riddle to which there is a ready solution; if Socrates’ irony *is* a riddle with a solution, then there is nothing particularly enigmatic about the figure of Socrates, at least not after one cracks the code re-encrypted by Plato.

For Kierkegaard, Socrates is thoroughly enigmatic and is rendered no less so by interpretations like that of Vlastos. Socratic irony, he says, is “complete in itself”:

When Socrates declared that he was ignorant, he nevertheless did know something, for he knew about his ignorance; this knowledge was not a knowledge of something, that is, did not have any positive content, and to that extent his ignorance was ironic . . . If his knowledge had been a knowledge of something, his ignorance would merely have been a conversational technique. His irony, however, was complete in itself. (CI 269)

What is ironic about Socrates' claims to ignorance is built into the peculiarity of Socrates' saying that he knows that he does not know. If this is the sum total of Socrates' knowledge, then his knowledge *is* his ignorance, or his awareness of it, which is not *really* knowledge. According to Kierkegaard, this is a riddle indeed, but not necessarily one with a *positive* solution.

In Kierkegaard's jargon, Socratic irony is a "negative concept." It is "negative," first of all, in that "it is easy to see how difficult it becomes to fix a picture of [Socrates]—indeed, it seems impossible or at least as difficult to picture a nisse with the cap that makes him invisible" (CI 12). That is, according to Kierkegaard, Socratic irony makes it harder, perhaps impossible, to solve "the Socratic problem." Second, it is negative in that "ultimately the ironist always has to posit something, but what he posits in this way is nothing" (CI 270). What makes "the Socratic problem" difficult to solve, in other words, is that the (Socratic) ironist does not disguise and complicate something positive, as Vlastos believes, but rather only appears to "hide" something positive because what he represents is *nothing*.

On Kierkegaard's early picture of Socratic irony, Socrates represents the possibility of what Kierkegaard calls "negative freedom," that is, the total rejection of all ordinary social and moral commitments. To be negatively free, however, does not mean

that one is necessarily immoral; it simply means that one is no longer bound by social norms and public morality. Socratic irony is a way of “turning against” someone or something or everything:

Socrates’ irony was not turned against only the Sophists; it was turned against the whole established order. He demanded ideality from all of it, and this demand was the judgment that judged and condemned Greek culture. But his irony was not the instrument he used in the service of the idea; irony was his position—more he did not have. (CI 214)

Thus, for Kierkegaard, Socratic irony refers to the conflict between Socrates *the person*, not what he says, and the society he rejected and which rejected him. He represents “nothing” in that his life and manner of philosophizing ultimately reflect the invalidity of (the) ordinary understanding (of ethics), but he offers nothing in its place. For example, although his famous trial and death is often interpreted as a challenge to direct democracy, he famously does not say, “Direct democracy is wrong” or “This other kind of democracy would be better.” Moreover, his negative freedom was exemplified in his method, for which he is famous, in that “His activity was intended not so much to draw their attention to what was to come but to wrest from them what they had” (CI 175).

### *Total Irony*

Essential to Kierkegaard’s notion of negative freedom is the idea that Socratic irony is “total.” It is, as Nehamas puts it, “a kind of irony that goes all the way down: it does not reveal the ironist’s real state of mind, and it intimates that such a state may not



exist at all.”<sup>27</sup> What is particularly enigmatic about Socrates’ irony, then, is that unlike just any other rebel (or complete moral reprobate), the interior life of Socrates is a complete mystery. He is clearly critical of Athenian society, but it is not clear what exactly he is critical of; he definitely does not “play by the rules,” but it is not clear that he abides by a different set of rules. In the end, one begins to get the sense that Socrates is “like that old witch, [who] continually makes the very tantalizing attempt to eat up everything first of all and thereupon to eat up itself—or as in the case of the witch, eats up its own stomach” (CI 56). So, what ultimately distinguishes Socratic irony is that, contrary to what Vlastos believes, there is no fixed point of reference by which to judge whether Socrates actually held the views or beliefs that we attribute to him. Socrates’ “position” is irresolubly complex because his silence is total. As Kierkegaard says, Socrates left *nothing* by which a later age can judge him.

At a certain point, however, one will resist Kierkegaard’s account of Socratic irony because it is hard to see the value of “pure negation.” If *all* Socrates represents is a radical opposition to Greek culture, without representing anything positive to put in its place, by virtue of what criteria can we distinguish him from any other rebel or reprobate? We can say, of course, that Socrates was a good person or something else equally vague, but our commitment to Socrates’ moral excellence only serves as a reason to question Kierkegaard’s account. As we will see in the next chapter, Kierkegaard reconsidered his own account of Socratic irony for this very reason. But first let us consider a slightly

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<sup>27</sup> Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, 20.

different criticism of Kierkegaard (and, to the extent that his interpretation is similar, of Nehamas). According to John Lippitt, the problem with Kierkegaard's notion of "total irony" is that it leads to what Lippitt calls "interpretive nihilism" and undercuts the condition of its own intelligibility. The problem with total irony is that if it is in fact total it is impossible to say in what sense it is *ironic*, and not one of any number of ways someone can completely elude his audience.

## VI. "A Modest Proposal"

To illustrate his criticism of total irony, Lippitt examines Jonathan Swift's famously ironic satire, "A Modest Proposal," in which Swift "modestly" proposes that the best way to end poverty and overpopulation in Ireland is to feed poor children to "persons of quality and fortune." Doing so, Swift claims, has many advantages. First, since Catholics are the most likely to have children out of wedlock, as everybody knows, it will reduce the number of non-Protestants; second, it will provide destitute, young mothers with a form of private property; third, it will save the kingdom the money needed to rear children of the poor; fourth, it will save young mothers the trouble of having to abort babies they cannot afford; fifth, as children would be a new delicacy, it promises to improve gastronomy; etc.

What makes Swift's satire a particularly illustrative example of irony is that we *know* that it is ironic. Unlike the irony of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, for example, Swift's "Proposal" is clearly meant to convey something other than what is

said.<sup>28</sup> (If someone thought Swift literally meant what he said, we would have all the reason we need to question her sincerity, intelligence, or sanity.) Moreover, it is an appropriate example for us because, like Socratic irony, although it is clear that Swift does not mean what he says, it is also clear that he does not mean exactly the opposite. Citing Wayne C. Booth's interpretation of the "Proposal," Lippitt says:

Nothing here can simply be reversed, once the irony is discovered. If the speaker's position is that he will save the children and the kingdom by butchering the children, *Swift's* position cannot be simply that 'we should *not* butcher them'; nobody . . . had ever proposed that we should, and to write an essay attacking such a position would be absurd.<sup>29</sup>

So, it is worth comparing Swift's irony to Socrates' since they are both examples of irony that is not, to borrow Vlastos's vocabulary, "simple."

At the same time, the fact that Swift's "Proposal" is undeniably ironic is, according to Lippitt, a reason to think that its intended meaning is not radically undecidable or irresolubly ambiguous as Nehamas and Kierkegaard think Socratic irony is. At the very least, we are able to decide that Swift does not mean what he says literally *and* that he is being critical of *something*. Whether one can say exactly what it is – Swift's satire is certainly subtle and sophisticated – the fact of the matter is that no intelligent

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<sup>28</sup> In the first chapter of *The Art of Living*, Nehamas argues that *The Magic Mountain* is an example of the kind of irony that "goes all the way down." In the end, its irony consists in the fact that the correct interpretation of the author's meaning is "irresolubly ambiguous." What makes it *totally* ironic is that ultimately it is unclear whether it is ironic.

<sup>29</sup> John Lippitt, "Irony and the Subjective Thinker," in *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, LLC, 2000), 150. The original citation is from Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 109.

adult in her right mind would argue seriously that the “Proposal” ought to be read literally.

According to Lippitt, Swift’s satire works (i.e. is not merely absurd) through its irony only if it is not “exclusionary” as Kierkegaard seems to think all irony must be. On Kierkegaard’s view:

A certain superiority deriving from its not wanting to be understood immediately, even though it wants to be understood, with the result that this figure [that is, the figure of speech of irony] looks down, as it were, on plain and simple talk that everyone can promptly understand; it travels around, so to speak, in an exclusive incognito and looks down pitying from this high position on ordinary, prosaic talk . . . Just as kings and princes speak French, the higher circles (this, of course, must be understood according to an intellectual ordering of rank) speak ironically so that lay people will not be able to understand them, and to that extent irony is in the process of isolating itself; it does not wish to be generally understood. (CI 248-49)

On Lippitt’s view, Swift’s satire wants to be understood because, like all satires, it has an ethical aim. And the same, he says, is true of Socrates’ irony:

If we assume that Socrates *cares* about the true well-being of his interlocutors, there is a sense in which his irony is also satirical, in that it is intended to serve their improvement (recall Dryden’s claim that the appropriate end of satire is the amendment of vices). If he were a *total* enigma – if there were no way of getting at what Socrates cares about *at all* – then that purpose would hardly be served.<sup>30</sup>

That is, insofar as Socrates’ irony, as well as his behavior in general, was meant to serve some ethical purpose, as almost all serious commentators agree, then there must be some way to make sense out of Socrates’ ethical position.

On Lippitt’s analysis of Swift’s “Proposal,” it can work only if Swift has a *position* and if we can be reasonably confident in our attempt to decide what it is. If we cannot

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<sup>30</sup> Lippitt, “Irony and the Subjective Thinker,” 151.

reconstruct the author's intentions at all – that is, if anything goes – it is unclear in what sense there is an author at all. If there is nothing “stabilizing” in the work, something that counterbalances the absurdity and ties it to a collective understanding and a common aim, then it risks sliding into what Lippitt calls “interpretive nihilism,” and thus risks losing its ethical significance altogether. Swift’s “Proposal” works to the extent that not everything goes: again, we know at the very least that Swift did not mean what he said literally and did not want us to think that he did. And we are relatively confident that with effort we can reconstruct both what he meant and why he thought it was worth concealing for a time.

So, Lippitt’s response to Kierkegaard’s early understanding of Socratic irony is that if it were irresolubly complex or radically undecidable, Socrates could not have become the moral exemplar that he is. Lippitt says, “the vast range of ‘Socrateses’ notwithstanding, the figure of Socrates cannot remain *totally* slippery; our relationship to Socrates cannot be one of ‘anything goes.’”<sup>31</sup> As with Swift’s “Proposal,” there must be some way of reconstructing Socrates’ position, that is, of avoiding interpretive nihilism; otherwise, it is unclear why we should bother with Socrates at all. Sure, he will always be a historically significant figure, and we can always learn something from Plato’s interpretation of him, but if Socrates’ silence cannot be broken, why should we expect to learn anything from *Socrates*? After all, as Kierkegaard seems to have believed, he wanted *not* to be understood.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 155.

In brief, Lippitt thinks Socrates exemplifies the “importance of the *elenchus* and that ethical and religious communication needs to be indirect, to allow the ethical autonomy of the recipient.”<sup>32</sup> Lippitt, in other words, defends an account similar to Vlastos, since they both understand Socratic irony as a form of indirect communication that aims to preserve ethical autonomy. Whether it is tied to satire, the *elenchus*, or silence, the point of irony is “as Booth points out . . . to deceive *all* readers for a time and then require *all* readers to recognize and cope with their deception.”<sup>33</sup> It is a kind of provocation toward the truth, which the ironist has already discovered for himself, and a large part of the truth in question is that ethical development, “the amendment of vices,” is something one must win for oneself.

## VII. The Constant Intractability of Philosophy

One virtue of Lippitt’s reading is that it combats the threat of interpretative nihilism. As Lippitt claims, if Socratic irony is totally slippery – if it is “pure negation” – it is *difficult* to see what the point of studying Socrates could be. Conversely, that Socrates has become a moral exemplar in the Western tradition is reason to think that his identity is not totally lost and can be reconstructed somewhat systematically. However, in what remains, I will take issue with Lippitt’s account in order to show that the prospect of interpretative nihilism is not necessarily nihilistic.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 151.

*Against Interpretative Nihilism*

Here is a fact that Lippitt agrees with: despite who we want Socrates to be, there are, and will forever be, many “Socrateses.” Despite the few historical facts about Socrates that are beyond dispute, the fact is that because Socrates underdetermined what we were intended to learn from him, our knowledge of his ethical aspirations and method for executing them is largely, if not totally, a matter of interpretation. Socrates says, moreover, in what we must assume is the closest thing to his own voice, that he did not consider himself a teacher and we *know* that he was unwilling or unable to teach wisdom in the ordinary sense of simply stating what he thought to be true.

Like Vlastos, however, Lippitt assumes that Socrates’ disavowals are pregnant with meaning. Socrates is ironic in that although he *says* he is not a teacher, he *means* the opposite and/or something else. But it is important to point out that irony does not always imply the opposite or something other than what is said. At bottom, it serves as a mask to conceal one’s meaning, but one can just as well conceal what one means by saying what one means, ironically. For example, consider a passage from Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, in which Ivan’s wife, Praskovya Fyodorovna, announces to her husband that she has decided to call the celebrated physician against Ivan’s wishes:

‘So no arguments, please. I’m doing this for my sake,’ she said ironically, letting him know that she was doing it all for his sake and said this merely to deny him the right to protest. . . . Everything she did for him was done strictly for her sake; and she told him she was doing for her sake what she actually was, making this seem so incredible that he was bound to take it to mean just the reverse.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004), 93-94.

Playing on the expectations of her hearer, Praskovya Fyodorovna is able to mean what she says by saying what she means, knowing that because what she says is so incredible, she will be taken to mean just the reverse. And, I contend, the same may be true of Socrates. That is, it may be that because what Socrates says seems so incredible we take him to mean the reverse of, or something other than, what he says, even though he means what he says. (Or even though, as Nehamas and Kierkegaard would say, we cannot *know* what he means.)

Of course, Socrates might have meant the opposite or something other than what Plato has him say. However, it is a mistake to assume that since what Socrates says is incongruous with our expectations of him, or is just plain mysterious, he must be concealing a clear idea for the sake of some end. It could be, in fact, that Socrates is so mysterious to us because he is so mysterious to himself. As Nehamas says:

Often, irony consists in letting your audience know that something is taking place inside you that they simply are not allowed to see. But it also, more radically, leaves open the question whether you are seeing it yourself: speakers are not always in the privileged position in relation to themselves that Quintilian attributes to them. Irony often communicates the fact that the audience is not getting the whole picture; but it does not necessarily imply that the speaker has that picture or that, indeed, there is a whole picture to be understood in the first place.

Irony constructs a mask. It leaves open the question what, if anything, is masked.<sup>35</sup>

What is intriguing about Socrates, then, is the *possibility* that he in fact does not know what everyone assumes he does, and that he might actually mean what he says (in the

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<sup>35</sup> Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity*, 103.



ordinary or “simple” sense) when he says that he does not know or that he has never been anyone’s teacher.

At the very least, I want to challenge the assumption underlying Vlastos and Lippitt’s account that irony consists in the opposition between a clear statement and a clear but different meaning, or that irony is only successful insofar as we have access to the latter. Socratic irony is different, at least potentially, from Lippitt’s interpretation of the “Proposal” in that whereas Lippitt is probably right in saying that Swift’s satire only works as a satire insofar as it can be made sense of, I do not see any reason to think that Socrates’ irony needs “to work” or that it is supposed to be satirical. That is, it is not clear to me that Socrates does anything more than honestly represent himself as the riddle that he was – or the riddle that the proclamation of his wisdom presented to him – even if we cannot believe that *Socrates*, of all people, actually thought he was ignorant. Moreover, there is at least one important difference between Swift and Socrates: Swift *was* an author who wanted to make his thoughts public and permanent. So, in the end, perhaps it is better to compare Swift to Plato. In any case, whatever one’s interpretation of Socratic irony, it must include the possibility that Socratic silence – especially the fact that he did not write anything – is essential to his ethical aim.

### *Ethical and Philosophical Autonomy All The Way Down*

So far, it seems that “the Socratic problem” consists, at bottom, in the difficulty of deciding, first of all, whether the historical Socrates is an irresolubly complex figure

whose philosophy is radically ambiguous. One reason for thinking that he is *not* is that, as Lippitt puts it, the loss would simply be too great: it is unclear how we could say that with Socrates anything goes *and* that he is at the same time one of the most treasured personas in the history of ethics. And since it is true, as Hegel says, that Socrates *is* “not only a most important figure in the history of philosophy – perhaps the most interesting in the philosophy of antiquity – but also a world-famed personage,”<sup>36</sup> it seems to follow that it must be possible to reconstruct the thought and life of the historical “personage.” Everyone I have discussed so far, for instance, agrees with Kierkegaard that Socrates stood for the belief that “knowledge not only about the secrets of the human race but even about the secrets of God . . . is worthless if it is not made one’s own” (CI 327) – that is, that he is an exemplar of ethical autonomy.

However, in closing, I would like to suggest that the common belief that Socrates was an exemplar of ethical autonomy does not require us to follow Lippitt in saying that Socrates’ life and thought must be, as he says a satire must be, decipherable to some extent. In fact, I contend that we *can* attribute the importance of ethical autonomy to Socrates’ philosophy precisely because he was radically ambiguous. Even Vlastos seems to have recognized the importance of undecidability in preserving ethical autonomy, as when he says:

But in the course of this inquiry I stumbled upon something I had not reckoned on at the start: that in the persona of Socrates depicted by Plato there is something which helps explain what Kierkegaard’s genius . . . read into Socrates. . . . The concept of moral autonomy never surfaces in Plato’s Socratic dialogues –

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<sup>36</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 1, 384.

which does not keep it from being the deep thing in Socrates, the strongest of his moral concerns. What he is building on is the fact that in almost everything we say we put a burden of interpretation on our hearer. When we speak a sentence we do not add a gloss on how it should be read. We could not thus relieve the hearer of that burden for this would be an endless business: each gloss would raise the same problem and there would have to be a gloss upon gloss *ad infinitum*. Socratic irony is not unique in accepting the burden of freedom which is inherent in all significant communication.<sup>37</sup>

As Vlastos suggests here, it is not *in spite of* the fact that the concept of moral autonomy does not appear in Plato's dialogues that we are able to claim that it is nevertheless among Socrates' strongest moral concerns, but *because of* Socrates' silence. Part of what we learn about Socrates indirectly through Plato is that whatever view we wish to attribute to him is fundamentally – *ad infinitum* – a projection of what we find valuable in his philosophy. If Socrates *had* been more direct then we would not have been able to say that he represents ethical autonomy in the deeper, interpretive sense that Vlastos describes above.

The danger, of course, is to interpret Socrates' silence, which is reflected in the radical ambiguity of his irony, as not saying anything at all. Indeed, if we interpret Lippitt's notion of interpretive nihilism as not saying anything at all, then we will want to save Socrates from total irony, since we would not be able to distinguish him from everyone else who, so to speak, failed to say anything of philosophical value. However, following Kierkegaard and Nehamas, I believe we can make sense out of Socrates' irony and silence as the result of grappling as candidly as he could with the inevitable intractability of philosophical questions about how to live. On this view, Socrates sees the ordinary attempts to simply *say* what one thinks important as concealing the truth by

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<sup>37</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates*, 43-44.

making it seem more accessible (i.e., requiring less of his interlocutors). So, refusing to say more than he did – the basis of “the Socratic problem” – is potentially more revelatory, not less. What Socrates contributes to the history of ethics and the concept of ethical autonomy, on my view, is that he serves as one of the first reminders, and perhaps the most nagging, that (the philosophy of) life itself is irresolubly complex.<sup>38</sup> When Vlastos says that “each gloss would raise the same problem and there would have to be a gloss upon gloss *ad infinitum*,” he is speaking about the difficulty Socrates presents to commentators, but he could have just as well been talking more generally about all the problems of life. Similarly, what we can learn from grappling as candidly as we can with “the Socratic problem” is that the question “What is wisdom?” has become *our* question, our riddle, through Socrates’ attempt to understand his own wisdom, and that our solution, too, may be more than we are able to say.

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<sup>38</sup> I am grateful to Larry Wright for helping me to articulate this point.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Re-creating Socratic Silence: Ethics, Subjectivity and Pseudonyms

*In his dissertation, Magister Kierkegaard was alert enough to discern the Socratic but is considered not to have understood it, probably because, with the help of Hegelian philosophy, he has become super-clever and objective and positive, or has not had the courage to acknowledge the negation. Finitely understood, of course, the continued and the perpetually continued striving toward a goal without attaining it means rejection, but, infinitely understood, striving is life itself and is essentially the life of that which is composed of the infinite and finite.*

– Johannes Climacus

### I. Introduction

In the last chapter, I claimed that Socratic silence leaves open the possibility that Socrates is an irresolubly complex figure. In the final section, I claimed that although Socrates' irresoluble complexity may result in what Lippitt calls interpretive nihilism, that need not discourage us, since interpretive nihilism is not, on my view, necessarily nihilistic. I suggested that it may be required by a certain understanding of ethical autonomy, as it applies both to the secondary literature about Socratic irony and to the philosophical problems of life.

In the present chapter, I would like to expand on the sense in which Socrates ought to be considered a great moral philosopher, focusing specifically on Hegel's and Kierkegaard's accounts of Socrates. In particular, I hope to show that Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms is an attempt to illustrate what he believed was essential to Socrates' contribution to the history of ethics – namely that, as we saw in the last chapter, whatever

it is, it is something Socrates was not willing to write down on his own behalf. To draw the connection between Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms and Socratic silence, however, requires that we start from the beginning and understand how Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates developed from his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, which was both deeply Hegelian and written in his own name (of course), to *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, which is very much un-Hegelian and written by the pseudonym Johannes Climacus. As I hope we will see, these two points are not unrelated. Before I discuss Hegel's and Kierkegaard's understanding of Socratic ethics, I would like to mention two general worries or difficulties that carry over from our discussion of "the Socratic problem" in the last chapter, and which hover above and are important to the present discussion.

#### *One: The Role of Socrates*

The more we emphasize Socrates' silence or irresolvable complexity, the less clear it is that we are talking about Socrates *the person*. That is, if we decide that the life and thought of Socrates is, as Kierkegaard thought, lost to history, we might wonder whether in considering Socrates a great moral philosopher, we are talking about the historical Socrates or about a fictional character, e.g. the hero of Plato's dialogues, who is only loosely based on the actual person. Not only does this distinction threaten to take Socrates completely out of the picture – if we consider Socrates a fictional character in Plato's dialogues, it is Plato (not Socrates) who is the great moral philosopher – but it

also threatens to undermine a central tenet of our understanding of Socrates' philosophy.

Alexander Nehamas states the essence of this worry best when he says:

More than any other figure in our secular intellectual history he seems to have lived and died as he thought: holding that thought and action are continuous, he actually drew no line between what he believed and what he did. The question, therefore, who he really was, whether what we know of him in any way corresponds to historical reality, seems absolutely crucial. If Socrates was in reality radically different from his representations, then it is not clear that he deserves his status. In such a case, some of our most cherished conceptions of the nature of a good human life may turn out to be simply fictions. Can a 'merely' literary figure, which is what he would in that case be, provide us with a paradigm of how actually to live?<sup>1</sup>

The worry, as I understand it, is that since Socrates' moral philosophy represents a way of life, not just a set of beliefs, it is crucial that Socrates actually lived as he is said to have lived. His life, that is, is exemplary only if it represents a life that is possible for a living, breathing human being.

The threat of relegating Socrates to the status of a fictional character is also problematic, and perhaps more so, even if we hope to mine Socrates' philosophy only for its positive *theoretical* contribution. One might think that just the reverse is true: if we focus on what Socrates believed and the arguments in favor of his theses, it should not matter to us as philosophers whether he actually held the views we attribute to him – it really does not matter whether he existed at all – since what matters to us philosophically is whether what he believed is true or helpful. We might say that it does not matter whether Socrates is any different from, for example, the characters in Hume's *Dialogues*

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<sup>1</sup> Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity*, 85.

*Concerning Natural Religion*, the truth of whose thought does not depend at all on who says what.

The problem with this latter objection, however, is that Socrates *was* an actual person and a major philosopher in his own right. The better analogy, then, is not between Socrates and one of Hume's characters, but between Socrates and Hume. And I doubt many Hume scholars would be willing to take Hume completely out of the picture or think of him merely as another fictional character. So, if we are interested in knowing what *Socrates* believed, as a Hume scholar is interested in discerning Hume's voice through his characters, we must factor in what Socrates did and did not say, and how he did or did not say whatever we believe he meant. In other words, in trying to determine the thought of Socrates, we must remember that *he chose not to be an author*, unlike Hume. This makes it very difficult to distinguish the thought and life of Socrates from *our* preoccupations with Socrates. So, whether we are talking about a fictional character or the thought of someone who chose to be silent in the relevant sense, it is increasingly unclear to what extent we are talking about *Socrates*.

### *Two: Socrates' "Negativity"*

Socrates' ethical views are also difficult to comprehend because his philosophical method, as we know through the work of Plato, consisted almost entirely in confuting the beliefs of his interlocutors without offering positive theses of his own. Moreover, as we saw in the last chapter, it is unclear whether Socrates had any clear opinions of his



own. So, rather than show his interlocutors that they were wrong by convincing them of what he took to be the truth, or at least the premise of the conversation, Socrates was content to demonstrate that his interlocutors were confused or careless. That is all. So he is difficult to comprehend, not just because he did not write his own philosophy, but because he did not seem to share our view that philosophy is valuable only if it establishes clear theses that can be argued for or against, or at least ideas that have the potential to be formed into clear theses.

Again, we saw this in the last chapter where I suggested that if we compare Lippitt and Vlastos, on the one hand, to Nehamas and Kierkegaard, on the other, we will see that what is being debated is not only the correct solution to “the Socratic problem,” but also fundamentally different approaches to philosophy. Where Lippitt and Vlastos are interested in Socrates only to the extent that his voice can be heard and understood, Nehamas and Kierkegaard seem to be interested in the possibility that we can learn from his total silence. It is perhaps natural to agree with Lippitt and Vlastos that Socrates’ status as a moral philosopher depends on Socrates’ actually having *believed* something about ethics and that we can know what it is. So, the second difficulty is the possibility that with Socrates we might be forced to accept the unnatural position that we have to make sense of Socrates on the basis of what he did not say.

## II. Adapting Socrates

I remarked in the last chapter that because Socrates did not write anything, our tradition is populated with a number of “Socrateses.” Each Socrates, moreover, is not just the product of individual philosophers who, as Kierkegaard says, attempt to trace the origin of their philosophy back to a cryptic source; he also represents the collective interest of an age and its understanding of philosophy. So, for example, although the identifying characteristics of Plato’s Socrates tell us something about Plato, they also tell us something about the context in which Plato wrote: in opposition to the sophists, as part of a collective (though not universal) effort to criticize the political system that sentenced Socrates to death, and under the influence of a growing interest in the power of mathematics. Similarly for other eras that have produced their own “Socrateses”: e.g., there is the early effort to Christianize Socrates (cf. “The Second Apology” of St. Justin) and the later effort to naturalize him (cf. the essays of Michel de Montaigne). In the nineteenth century, when Kierkegaard wrote his dissertation, Socrates was typically adapted in the German effort to define the role of the author – first by the German romantics, who extolled Socrates as a paradigm of an ironic or poetic existence, and then, in opposition to the romantics, by Hegel and Kierkegaard, who argued that the romantics had failed to recognize the ethical dimension of Socratic irony.<sup>2</sup>

Although Hegel and Kierkegaard’s rejection of romanticism was predominantly based on their respective views of ethics, it cannot be understood fully outside the context

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<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Walsh, “Living Poetically: Kierkegaard and German Romanticism,” *History of European Ideas* 20, no. 1-3 (1995).

of the romantics' adaptation of Johann Fichte's idealism, according to which the ego or the mind is "the absolute principle of knowing, reason, and cognition," and "whatever is, is only by the instrumentality of the *ego* . . ." <sup>3</sup> In other words, according to Hegel, the German romantic believed that reality (the non-ego) was entirely the product of the *ego* and was not, in the jargon, a thing-in-and-for-itself. Moreover, since the Fichtean-inspired romantic believed that the *ego* was itself insubstantial, a purely formal or abstract entity, he also held that *nothing* existed in and for itself. The ego exists but is not a thing. <sup>4</sup>

Again, Hegel and Kierkegaard's rejection of romanticism was motivated primarily by a desire to resist the moral consequences of Fichte's metaphysics. According to Hegel in particular, the problem with the romantics' view of reality (and of Socrates) was not just that it was wrong, but rather that it resulted in a radical misunderstanding of the ethical:

It was Friedrich von Schlegel who first brought forth this Idea, and Ast repeated it, saying, 'The most ardent love of all beauty in the Idea, as in life, inspires Socrates' words with inward, unfathomable life.' This life is now said to be irony! It is when subjective consciousness maintains its independence of everything, that it says, 'It is I who through all my educated thoughts can annul all determinations of right, morality, good, &c, because I am clearly master of them, and I know that if anything seems good to me I can easily subvert it, because things are only true to me in so far as they please me now.' The irony is thus only a trifling with everything, and it can transform all things into show: to this subjectivity, nothing is any longer serious. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 64.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the metaphysics relevant to Hegel's and Kierkegaard's opposition to the German Romantic, see David J. Kangas, *Kierkegaard's Instant: On Beginnings*, Studies in Contentual Thought (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), especially his introduction and first chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 1, 400-01.

What worried Hegel about the romantics' claim that "subjective consciousness" is completely independent of everything – as well as his belief that through irony, Socrates best represents the independence of subjectivity – is that it leads to a moral free-for-all. To Hegel, this form of radical individualism was not only conceptually wrong, but more importantly, it was also potentially dangerous.

So, for better or worse, Socrates stood as a symbol for competing ideologies in the nineteenth century, as he had before and has since. Whereas for the romantics he personified a radical freedom from the requirements of conventional morality, for Hegel and the young Kierkegaard, he represented a major turning point in the history of the development of conventional morality. Hegel even says that Socrates was the "founder of morality," a claim that is more striking than saying that through Socrates *irony* made its entry into the world. In order to explain what Hegel and Kierkegaard meant by calling Socrates the founder of morality, as well as the fact that Socrates could be interpreted along such radically opposing lines, it is important to introduce a basic distinction in Hegel's view of ethics: the difference between *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität*.

#### *Ethics: A Dialectical Process*

As it was with 'irony,' there is one sense of the word 'morality' according to which it makes no sense to say that Socrates was its founder. For as long as humans have gathered, there has always been a perceived, if not established, difference between right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust. There have always been rules, customs, and a

sense of obedience and rebellion. In some sense, the outward expression of morality, what Hegel calls *Sittlichkeit*, is a human or instinctual tendency to make what is tacitly understood public. But, on Hegel's view, *Sittlichkeit* is inadequate by itself because even though our understanding of morality is often established, say, in the form of law and convention, if it does not undergo the process of justification, if it derives its force merely from tradition, it is *only* instinctual, subconscious and practical.

By contrast, *Moralität* refers to individual or subjective morality, which results from one's questioning the authority of tradition and taking it upon oneself to examine the validity of the moral code. Almost by definition, rejecting the authority of convention in order to make morality one's *own* involves a certain level of consciousness, for morality is no longer a matter of merely "doing what one does"; it is a matter of doing what one *thinks is right*, regardless of the dictates of tradition. By making oneself the arbiter of right and wrong, *Moralität* is the act of rejecting or negating *Sittlichkeit* or conventional morality, but it is also inadequate by itself, since it is only a qualification of *Sittlichkeit*: without the latter, there is nothing to reflect on, reject, accept, or make one's own. Thus, according to Hegel, *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* are locked in dialectical conflict, and ethics is the ongoing process of rejecting and becoming conscious of conventional morality (the negative aspect of ethics) in order to make it better and increasingly objective and universal (the positive).

To illustrate the nature of this dialectical process, as well as to explain the phrase, "the founder of morality," Hegel invokes Socrates as the first significant challenge to

*Sittlichkeit*. According to Hegel, Socrates was born into Hesiod and Homer's world in which the notions of right, wrong, heroism and virtue were established by the gods, dictated by the oracle, and strengthened through practice and ritual (e.g. the Olympic games in which one, for a time, exemplified the godly attributes of courage, stamina, and discipline). That is, they were essentially taken for granted. But then came Socrates, whose ". . . principle is that man has to find from himself both the end of his actions and the end of the world [the final telos], and must attain to truth through himself."<sup>6</sup> Socrates refused to take Hesiod and Homer's world for granted and he took it upon himself to discover the truth for himself. But, again, to make morality subjective, as Socrates did, is to reject the authority of tradition, the state, or culture.

A related idea was expressed by the distinguished Ancient Greek scholar, F. M. Cornford, who compares Socrates' ethical development to adolescence. He says:

[The adolescent] becomes self-conscious in a new way. It is now his central concern to detach his individual self from his parents and the family group, and from every other social group claiming to dominate his will and warp his personality. The individual has to find himself as a moral being who must learn to stand upon his own feet, as a man. . . .

Now in Greek society, after the Persian wars of the first quarter of the fifth century, we can observe, with admirable clearness, an analogous effort of the individual to detach himself from the social group – the city and its traditional customs. Until that time, the claim of authority to regulate the citizen's conduct had not been explicitly challenged.<sup>7</sup>

Although, to my knowledge, Cornford was not attempting to support Hegel's view of ethics or Socrates in particular, this is a nice way of illustrating Hegel's point – namely,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>7</sup> F. M. Cornford, *Before and After Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 40-41.

that Socrates is a crucial turning point in the history of ethics in that he was (among) the first to challenge the moral authority of the state *responsibly*. To say that Socrates was the founder of morality, then, is to say, in Hegel's jargon, that Socrates was the founder of *Moralität*, and the dialectical process which followed from it.

To say that Socrates made ethics "subjective," however, is not to say that he was a subjectivist. The word "subjective" for Hegel is a technical term referring to the essential role that individual consciousness plays in the development and manifestation of objective truth. It is true, as Hegel says, that subjectivity is "negative," a manner of rejecting the authority of *Sittlichkeit*, but there is an important difference between rejecting the authority of the standard ethical code (subjectivity) and rejecting the possible validity of any ethical code other than one's own (subjectivism). As for Socrates, though it is true on Hegel's account that he did not succeed in turning his negative stance toward Greek society into a concrete plan for a better society – or, as Cornford might have put it, that he died an adolescent – it is important to distinguish *failing* from *not trying*. This, according to Hegel, was the crucial mistake of the romantic, who failed to see that Socrates would have tried to make ethics objective. He was not, as the romantic believed, only a rebel who valued a total detachment from the constraints of one society above all else.

It should now also be easier to see how Socrates can easily be interpreted as representing opposite personalities. For both Hegel and the romantics, his historical significance lay in his rebelliousness; but, as we have seen, it matters whether one

considers Socrates' rebelliousness an end or a means (or part of the dialectical process): if it is only a means, then one can view it for its potential to develop into a systematic and universal account of ethics (it *is* the mode of calling conventional ethics into question, but that is a condition of justifying the correct account of ethical truth); if it is seen as an end, one might see it as the realization of the supreme ideal of a poetic existence (total detachment from tradition and the exaltation of the individual).

On Hegel's view, the romantics' mistake was that they mistook the means or process for the end, a diagnosis that motivates Hegel's criticism of K. W. F. Solger, another romantic whom Hegel held in slightly higher regard than he did Schlegel:

Solger was not content, like the others, with superficial philosophical culture; on the contrary, his genuinely speculative inmost need impelled him to plumb the depths of the philosophical Idea. In this process he came to the dialectical moment of the Idea, to the point which I call 'infinite absolute negativity', to the activity of the Idea in so negating itself as infinite and universal as to become finitude and particularity, and in nevertheless canceling this negation in turn and so re-establishing the universal and the infinite in the finite and particular. To this negativity Solger firmly clung, and of course it is *one element* in the speculative Idea, yet interpreted as this purely dialectical unrest and dissolution of both the infinite and finite, only *one element*, and not, as Solger will have it, the *whole* Idea. Unfortunately Solger's life was broken off too soon for him to have been able to reach the concrete development of the philosophical Idea.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Solger's mistake was not that he completely misunderstood the significance of Socrates' life and philosophy, but that he failed to recognize the positive element of his negativity. The purpose of Socrates' "infinite absolute negativity" was not to do away with the Idea altogether, but to help bring out the Idea eventually. Socrates did not articulate the Idea himself, so it is easy to understand why the romantics extolled

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<sup>8</sup> Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 1, 68-69.



him as their patron poet, but on Hegel's view he would have, perhaps if he, like Solger, had lived a little longer. So, in the end, according to Hegel, Socrates' world-historical significance amounted to his initiating the dialectical process of ethics, even if he only achieved the negative aspect of the process: subjectivity.

*"A Mere Modification"*

In one respect, Kierkegaard's entire career can be characterized as a rejection of Danish Hegelianism. However, it would be a mistake to say that Kierkegaard, at least at the beginning of his career, was "anti-Hegelian," for his quarrel with Hegel's philosophy was so thoroughly Hegelian that it is hard to tell at times whether he was endorsing or opposing Hegel's philosophy. This is nowhere more clear than in Kierkegaard's early study of Socrates, which he himself characterizes as a "mere modification" of Hegel's Socrates.

Like Hegel, Kierkegaard believed that Socrates' contribution to ethics consisted in his negativity, which he also thought the romantics had mistook as a paradigm example of radical individualism. He also believed, like Hegel, that Socrates' subjectivity was only one element of a (potentially) positive contribution to objective ethics. In describing the purpose of irony, for example, he says:

Anyone who does not understand irony at all, who has no ear for its whispering, lacks *eo ipso* what could be called the absolute beginning of personal life; he lacks what momentarily is indispensable for personal life; he lacks the bath of regeneration and rejuvenation, irony's baptism of purification that rescues the soul from having its life in finitude even though it is living energetically and robustly in it. He does not know the refreshment and strengthening that come with

undressing when the air gets too hot and heavy and diving into the sea of irony, not in order to stay there, of course, but in order to come out healthy, happy, and buoyant and to dress again. (CI 326-27)

What is important for us to note at this point is that Kierkegaard thinks that the purpose of “undressing” and diving into the sea of irony – a clear allusion to Socrates’ negativity – was ultimately positive: to come out and dress again, refreshed and renewed. Earlier in his dissertation, moreover, Kierkegaard says that “irony is the beginning, and yet no more than a beginning” (CI 214). In other words, irony is a means and not an end in itself.

Although Kierkegaard is speaking specifically of Socrates’ irony in the above passages, it is clear that he is developing a related account of Socrates’ view of ethics, since for Kierkegaard “Socratic irony” is synonymous with “infinite absolute negativity,” the essence of Hegel’s *Moralität*. Kierkegaard makes the dialectical aspect of Socratic ethics clear when he says, for example:

Irony is the glaive, the two-edged sword, that he swung like an avenging angel over Greece . . . [I]rony is the very incitement of subjectivity and in Socrates this is truly a world-historical passion. In Socrates one process ends and with him a new one begins. He is the last classical figure, but he consumes this sterling quality and natural fullness of his in the divine service by which he destroys classicism. (CI 211-12)

Like Hegel, Kierkegaard argued that Socrates’ contribution to ethics – the incitement of “subjectivity” or the essence of *Moralität* – is dialectical: destroy in order to rebuild. The difference between Hegel and Kierkegaard is that for Kierkegaard irony was essential to the process whereas Hegel thought that it was merely a rhetorical device.

Another way to cast the similarity between Hegel and Kierkegaard’s view is in terms of Kierkegaard’s early criticism of Socrates. Although Kierkegaard clearly esteemed

Socrates for his ironic persona and his ability to achieve “negative freedom,” as we noted in the last chapter, he thought that Socrates had *failed* to achieve the positive counterpart of Socratic irony: positive freedom. That is, although Socrates had successfully detached himself from Greek society by calling it into question (“destroying classicism”), he failed to become “*positively* free in the actuality to which [one] belongs” (CI 326, my emphasis). Socrates did not reconcile himself with the society that he rejected and that rejected him. Unfortunately, Kierkegaard does not specify what Socrates’ life would have looked like if he had reconciled himself to society, i.e. achieved positive freedom. (He may not have known at the time he finished his dissertation.) What is clear is that his aim was to reject the romantics’ claim that Socrates’ irony was the essence of a “poetic existence” understood as a complete independence from one’s given actuality, which he did by arguing that the romantics had failed to see the positive potential of Socrates’ negativity.

Despite the underlying similarity of their views, however, it is possible to see the seeds of Kierkegaard’s eventual dissent from Hegel in his early view of Socrates. The first important difference is Kierkegaard’s emphasis on irony and the priority of a personal life. Although both Hegel and Kierkegaard refer to “subjectivity” as the basis of Socrates’ contribution to ethics, Kierkegaard suggests throughout his dissertation that the aim of subjectivity is not the development of objective morality (*Sittlichkeit*), but the development of a concrete individual existence. Moreover, although Kierkegaard seems to agree with Hegel that Socratic philosophy was based on “the speculative idea,” he claims that Socrates was not on his way to becoming a speculative philosopher. In this regard,

Socrates' ignorance was essential to who he was and what he taught: "to be ignorant is to be ignorant, and in the role of being taught [Socrates] teaches others" (CI 266). As for the negativity implicit in Socrates' ignorance, Kierkegaard says that it was not "a point of departure" or a "conclusion" "but the speculative element of the idea, whereby [Socrates] had infinitely circumnavigated existence" (CI 175).

It is less than clear what Kierkegaard means by the phrase "circumnavigated existence," but it is connected to the claim that Socrates' ignorance constituted a boundary, as when he says:

In the philosophic sense . . . he was ignorant. He was ignorant of the ground of all being, the eternal, the divine—that is, he knew that it was, but he did not know what it was. He was conscious of it, and yet he was not conscious of it, inasmuch as the only thing he could say about it was that he did not know anything about it. But this says in other words the same thing that we previously designated as follows: Socrates held the idea as boundary. (CI 169)

Kierkegaard draws a different conclusion about the nature of Socrates' ignorance than Hegel does, or is at least heading in a difference direction. Whereas, according to Kierkegaard, Hegel thought that Socrates' ignorance of "the absolute" – the ground of all being, the eternal, the divine – was a necessary stage in the process of articulating it, Kierkegaard understood Socrates' ignorance as a limit on the possibility of articulating it.

In the end, it is hard to pinpoint on the basis of his dissertation alone exactly where Kierkegaard agrees and disagrees with Hegel. Like Hegel's account of Socrates, his early view of Socrates explores the relationship between Socrates' negativity, subjectivity, and the sense in which Socrates was the founder of morality. Kierkegaard also seems to believe that Socrates represents the beginning of ethics as a dialectical process between

subjectivity (negativity) and positivity. But unlike Hegel, he thinks that Socrates' positivity consists in the beginning of an individual life, not objective morality or the speculative idea. Like almost all dissertations, however, Kierkegaard's does a better job at setting the parameters of his future philosophy than it does at settling any fundamental issues. It is not until his later, pseudonymous work that we get a clearer idea of Kierkegaard's account of the significance of Socrates' negativity.

### III. Climacus's Experiment

As Kierkegaard begins to acquire his own voice (or voices), it becomes easier to see where exactly he disagrees with Hegel, and to what extent. This is especially true of his developed view of Socrates, to which we will now turn. In a famous journal entry from 1849, eight years after Kierkegaard published his dissertation, he says:

*A Passage in My Dissertation*

Influenced as I was by Hegel and whatever was modern, without the maturity really to comprehend greatness, I could not resist pointing out somewhere in my dissertation that it was a defect on the part of Socrates to disregard the whole and only consider numerically the individuals. What a Hegelian fool I was! It is precisely this that powerfully demonstrates what a great ethicist Socrates was. (CI xiv)

Whereas the young Kierkegaard had assumed (the spirit of) Hegel's view of ethics, according to which the negative is locked in dialectical conflict with the positive, the "mature" Kierkegaard was willing to assert that Socrates' ethical greatness consisted precisely in his disregard for the whole. What changed, as the epigraph of this chapter

suggests, was Kierkegaard's appreciation for the individuality of subjectivity and an evolving understanding of "negativity."

For reasons we shall consider, however, the later Kierkegaard does not offer an "account" of Socrates' (ethical) greatness, as he does in his dissertation. So, we cannot compare the earlier and later accounts of Socrates side by side. Instead, Socrates shows up scattered throughout Kierkegaard's pseudonymous literature, often as a point of reference or illustration, and so the best and perhaps only way to bring the later Kierkegaard's Socrates to life is by examining the philosophical view that Socrates is meant to illustrate and clarify. And, while there is a sense in which Kierkegaard's developed understanding of Socrates informs his entire pseudonymous corpus, we will focus on the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in part because it is known to be Kierkegaard's most Socratic text and in part because in it Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author, makes explicit his discontent with Hegel's understanding of ethics and the corresponding notion of "subjectivity."

### *The Postscript*

The fundamental question guiding the *Postscript* is this: How does one become a Christian? According to Climacus, this problem is "subjective" in that it asks how *I* can become a Christian. It is different from "objective" questions about the truth of Christianity, such as whether Jesus was in fact who he said he was or whether historical events can serve as sufficient evidence for the existence of God. At the same time, the

*Postscript* is not what one would call a religious text, since its aim is not to convert its reader or to answer standard theological questions. (In fact, Climacus makes it clear that he is not himself a Christian.) Instead, it is better to characterize the *Postscript* as an existential text, which is designed to clarify the difference between the objective and subjective aspects of questions concerning the nature of human *existence*. Climacus's interest in Christianity, after all, is based on his desire to share in the eternal *happiness* that Christianity promises if he can.

The basic difference between the objective and subjective questions of existence is that whereas the objective problems of life (roughly, those that are addressed by science) question how the world is, subjective problems are those that challenge the individual to question himself. This is not only a difference about what questions one takes to be important, but also one about how an individual person reflects on them. As James Conant describes it:

The difference between an objective and a subjective problem, [Climacus] explains, turns on the character of one's 'interest' in the object one is related to. The genuineness (the 'authenticity', if you will) of a particular subjective relation is a function of how it shapes the character of one's life as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

So, in raising questions about ethics and Christianity *subjectively*, Climacus invites the reader to reflect on the character of one's interest in the problems of life, and whether her interest in them is, for lack of a better word, authentic.

As might be expected, Hegel plays a leading role in the *Postscript* since, according to Climacus, he represents the pinnacle of objective thought. In his classic commentary

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<sup>9</sup> Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," 262.

on the *Postscript*, Henry Allison succinctly summarizes the aspect of Hegel's philosophy that preoccupies Climacus as follows:

In the Hegelian philosophy we are shown the necessity of transcending our finite particularity and viewing things from the standpoint of the Idea. There one will come to see the unity of thought and being and the identity of the subject and object. . . . From this standpoint it is incumbent upon the individual to 'forget himself,' in the sense of his finite particularity, to become disinterested in his personal existence and absorbed in the idea.<sup>10</sup>

According to Allison, the essence of "the Hegelian philosophy," and of what Climacus means by "objective thought," is the assumption that the problems of life and philosophy demand a perspective *sub specie aeterni*.

Climacus's basic objection to the Hegelian philosophy – and, as Allison notes, Climacus's criticism is directed at Danish Hegelians more than it is at Hegel himself – is that Hegel's call to transcend our finite particularity, to "forget ourselves," confuses the problems of existence with the problems of logic. Climacus says:

As willing as I am in the capacity of a humble reader to admire Hegel's *Logic*, by no means aspiring to judge it, and as willing as I am to admit that there may be much for me to learn when I return to it, I shall be just as proud, just as defiant, just as assertive, just as fearless in my contention that the Hegelian philosophy puts existence into confusion through not defining its relation to someone existing, by *ignoring the ethical*. (CUP 259, my emphasis)

For Climacus, then, the problem with Hegel's philosophy is not that he has the wrong view of logic, or of *systematic* understanding more generally, but that he attempts to apply the same perspective and methods to the problems that are important to an *existing*

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<sup>10</sup> Allison, "Christianity and Nonsense," 433-34.



individual, that is, one who is bound to his finite particularity.<sup>11</sup> What concerns Climacus, by contrast, is the nature of true existence, absent of the ideal conditions that define the Hegelian philosophy. This is what is problematic about what Climacus calls “the ethical.”

Climacus knew that Hegel did not “ignore” the ethical altogether. He would have been able to explain, for example, the difference between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* much better than I. Instead, he is suggesting that Hegel did not fully appreciate the qualitative and irreconcilable difference between ethics and logic. In fact, despite his unwillingness to “judge” Hegel’s logic, he *does* judge it precisely on the grounds of Hegel’s confusing ethics and logic, saying:

If, however, a logical system is to be constructed, special care must be taken not to include in it anything that is subject to life’s dialectic, anything that only ‘is’ by being there, or having been there, not something that is just by being. From this it follows quite simply that Hegel’s matchless and matchlessly applauded invention – having movement brought into logic . . . does nothing but confuse logic. (CUP 92)

On Climacus’s account, the problems that face creatures who “are” by being there, that is, whose existence is defined in part by friction and finite particularity, are qualitatively different from the objective problems of logic, metaphysics, and science, and for the sake of both, ethics and logic should not be confused. At bottom, Climacus objects to what he calls the “lunatic postulate” of Hegel’s philosophy: “If the Hegelian philosophy has emancipated itself from every presupposition, it has won this freedom by means of one

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth pointing out that when I, following Climacus, mention “the problems of logic” here, I am referring to Hegel’s use of the term ‘logic,’ which is better understood in terms of Hegel’s attempt to articulate the nature of his larger metaphysical system. For a brief and helpful discussion of Hegel’s understanding of logic, and its centrality to his metaphysical system, see John W. Burbidge, *The Logic of Hegel’s Logic: An Introduction* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006).

lunatic postulate: the initial transition into pure thought” (CUP 279). Climacus’s issue is not that pure thought is impossible – it is presumably a possibility for God – but that it is not possible for existing human beings.

So, when Climacus says that Hegel ignores the ethical, he means that whereas for Hegel ethics requires one to “forget himself” in view of an objective or universal account of the ethical, ethics is a matter of not forgetting the importance of the individual self. “Ethics,” Climacus says, “concentrates on the individual, and ethically it is the task of every individual to become a whole human being” (CUP 290). Part of the difficulty of this task and the basis of Hegel’s mistake, according to Climacus, is that we tend to think that since we are already ourselves – and, in one sense, cannot but be ourselves – there is no such task to worry about at all. “To become what one in any case is, yes, who would waste time on that, surely the most unrewarding of all life’s tasks. . . . Quite so, but just for that reason it is extremely hard, the hardest task of all” (CUP 108). In other words, one difficulty of the task of becoming a whole human being is that we are unaware of it or that we (can) easily forget about it.

Not only do we tend to forget that we have the task of becoming individual selves, but on Climacus’s view, we also *want* to forget. That is, what characterizes the task of becoming a self, as is repeated in all of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous literature, is that it is one full of despair, anxiety, fear and trembling. Without pursuing the nature of despair and anxiety, which would take us much too far into Kierkegaard’s psychological works and away from the present topic, let it suffice to say that Climacus thinks that we have a

strong motivation to forget the task, and ourselves, as he thinks Hegel does. “But let us never forget that the more difficult the matter becomes [remember, the task of becoming a self is supposed to be the hardest task of all] the more tempted one is to hurry down the easy path of speculation, away from terrors and decisions, to renown, honour, a life of ease, etc.” (CUP 175). Hegel’s speculative view, then, is, according to Climacus, the easy way out.

But what is the task of becoming a self? What are we required to do in order to become whole human beings? To answer this question, of course, we have to know what Climacus thinks a self is and how it is possible for an individual not to be one. In the *Postscript*, he says, “But what is existence? Existence is that child born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and therefore is constantly striving” (CUP 78). Although Climacus is defining ‘existence’ here, we know that Kierkegaard applies the same definition to ‘the self’ or ‘human being’; for example, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, he says, “A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity” (SUD 13). According to Climacus, as well as Kierkegaard, the task of becoming a whole human being, then, amounts to continuing to hold the elements of existence (finitude-infinitude, eternity-temporality, and freedom-necessity) in the proper relation.<sup>12</sup>

To illustrate the nature and difficulty of becoming a self, in light of the above distinctions, we can now turn to Climacus’s understanding of Socrates, for he represents

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Kierkegaard’s analysis of the self, see part one of Edward F. Mooney, ed. *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

the challenge of maintaining the proper synthesis. First, what distinguishes Socrates from antiquity prior to him was his emphasis on the importance of the soul as the seat of morality, as when he says, “Are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?” (*Ap.* 29e) What distinguishes Socratic ethics is not just that it was subjective in Hegel’s sense, as described above, but that for Socrates the soul is what hangs in the balance of one’s moral development. That is, morality is not only, in some sense, up to each individual, but it is also about each individual soul.

What is more, by emphasizing the importance of the soul, and distinguishing it from the material world, Socrates suggests that the aim of morality transcends the physical, finite world. For Socrates and Plato, both the soul and moral truth are eternal and a person purifies the former by aspiring toward the latter. If we, in other words, were merely temporal creatures without anything eternal about us, we would be cut off from moral truth. But, according to Climacus, this view of morality generates a conflict that results in Socratic ignorance. Climacus says, “Socratic ignorance was the expression, maintained with all the passion of inwardness, of the fact that the eternal truth relates to an existing individual and must therefore be, so long as he exists, a paradox for him” (CUP 170). What is paradoxical about the relationship between an existing individual and eternal truth is that the eternal has to be realized in the temporal in the form of an existing individual. What distinguishes Socrates’ approach to ethics, as well as his claims

to ignorance, is that he understood the tension between trying to transcend the finite particularities of the material world – “forgetting oneself” – and doing so as a finite, existing individual, i.e., not being able to forget oneself entirely. “The unending merit of the Socratic was precisely to accentuate the fact that the knower is someone existing and that existing is what is essential” (CUP 174).

We can clarify Climacus’s understanding of Socrates’ “merit” by comparing Socrates’ claim that “knowledge is recollection” to Plato’s (or Hegel’s) speculative interpretation of it. For Socrates, to say that knowledge is recollection meant that the truth ultimately lies within and cannot be taught. To “teach” another what is true is merely to encourage him to introspect and to help him bring forth the truth on his own. This is the essence of Socrates’ maieutic art. By contrast, Plato developed on the basis of this Socratic insight a complete metaphysical theory of the (immortality of the) soul and reality in order to explain how one is able to *know* reality. The important difference between Socrates and Plato is that whereas the claim that knowledge is recollection presented Socrates with a paradox – that absolute knowledge must be pursued by or through an existing, finite individual – it presented Plato with a paradox *that was to be solved*. Socrates, by contrast, was at home in his ignorance.

Why, according to Climacus, does Socrates’ ignorance deserve our respect? Because it expresses Socrates’ *manner* of relating to the truth – i.e. “with all the passion of inwardness.” Unlike Plato, who treats the paradox generated by the claim that knowledge is recollection as a springboard for speculative, dispassionate reflection, Socrates remains

*passionate* about the issue regardless of the possibility of resolving it. And it is the difference in manner that determines to what extent Socrates and Plato were, or were not, “ignoring the ethical” (as described above), since as Climacus says, the truth of ethics has “the remarkable trait that *it can be defined solely by the mode of acquisition*” (CUP 358). On Climacus’s view, what is admirable about Socrates’ ignorance is that it indicates a commitment to the tension (paradox) that characterized his pursuit of knowledge. He did not, as Climacus accuses Danish Hegelians of doing, take the easy way out. Moreover, Socrates’ ignorance is not a milestone on the path to knowledge, in the sense that one must first empty the cup before it can be filled again. On Climacus’s view, it is complete in itself: it *is* Socrates’ passion.

In short, Socrates exemplifies Climacus’s thesis that “truth is subjectivity.” Although both Socrates and Plato *believe* that knowledge is recollection, the truth of what they believe is qualitatively different. For Plato whether this claim is true or false depends on the nature of reality and the soul (e.g., the theory of forms and the immortality of the soul). For Socrates, we might say, the truth of the problem is a matter of volition. Climacus says:

Objectively one always speaks only to the matter at issue; subjectively one speaks of the subject and subjectivity – and then, what do you know, subjectivity is the matter at issue! It has constantly to be stressed that the subjective problem is nothing about the matter at issue, it is the subjectivity itself. For since the problem is the decision and all decision lies, as was shown above, in subjectivity, the important thing is that objectively there be absolutely no remaining trace of the matter at issue, for at that very moment subjectivity wants to sneak its way out of some of the pain and crisis of decision, i.e., make the problem a little objective. (CUP 107)

As I understand Climacus, to say that “subjectivity” is the issue is to say both that the claim “knowledge is recollection” presents the thinker with an occasion to *act in a certain way*, and that the manner of one’s response to the matter at issue is, in some sense, *personal or individual*. The question of whether the claim is true in Plato’s sense, one could say, takes a back seat if it is considered at all.

The claim that “truth is subjectivity,” as Conant points out, emphasizes the first-personal nature of a certain kind of question. “Subjective reflection,” Climacus says, “turns in towards subjectivity, wanting in this inner absorption [or taking to heart] to be truth’s reflection, and in such a way that, as in the above, where objectivity was put forward and subjectivity disappeared, so here subjectivity itself is what is left and objectivity what vanishes” (CUP 165). What Climacus is suggesting here – albeit not in the clearest terms – is that he is not positing the notion of “subjective reflection” merely as a counterpart to “objective reflection,” as though there were an objective and subjective side to the same coin. Nor is he saying that *besides* the possibility of framing ethical issues objectively – à la Hegel, for example – there is *also* a way of framing them subjectively. Instead, he seems to be making the stronger point that framing ethical issues objectively is incommensurable or fundamentally at odds with framing them subjectively.<sup>13</sup> He says, “*the objective uncertainty maintained through appropriation in the most passionate inwardness is truth, the highest truth there is for someone existing*” (CUP 171, emphasis in the original). In other

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<sup>13</sup> Compare this to Climacus’s earlier claim that what Hegel failed to realize was that the problems of logic (metaphysics) were qualitatively different from the problems of ethics, and that failing to realize the difference could only result in confusion about both.

words, “subjective truth” is a matter of maintaining objective uncertainty and doing so *in a certain way*, i.e. passionately. This is precisely what Hegel and Plato failed to do, since, although they may not have achieved objective certainty regarding ethics, they thought they (or we) could. They did not (wish to) maintain objective uncertainty, and certainly did not remain objectively uncertain *on purpose* or *passionately*. Conversely, through his ignorance, and by holding fast to it, that *is* precisely what Socrates did.

The operative term here is ‘maintain,’ for, especially regarding the truth of ethics and religion, one is always at some point ignorant by default. And if one is honest with oneself, one is also aware of one’s own ignorance. However, in saying that subjective truth is a matter of *maintaining* objective uncertainty, Climacus is saying, to put it negatively at first, that what is essential to subjectivity is that one does not write off one’s ignorance as the default position. To put it positively, Climacus says:

Contained in the principle that subjectivity, inwardness, is truth, is that Socratic wisdom whose underlying merit is to have heeded the essential significance of existing, of the fact that the knower is one who exists, for which reason Socrates, in his ignorance, was in the truth in the highest sense within paganism. (CUP 172)

Socrates’ ignorance is different from ignorance by default, then, in that it heeds the essential significance of existing, that the knower is one who exists, or is a finite individual. What this amounts to, as I understand Climacus, is that *maintaining objective uncertainty* (Socratic ignorance) is a matter of committing to the problems of existence – ethics, aesthetics, religion – and to the task of becoming a whole human being, without fleeing down the “easy path of speculation.”



At this point, one might worry that this way of characterizing subjective truth is “too negative” and that it would help if there were criteria for distinguishing Socratic ignorance from the less flattering kind. However, it is important for Climacus to cast his “definition” of subjective truth negatively since he believes that, in opposition to objective truth, subjective truth cannot be communicated directly in ordinary language, or at least that it should not be. He says, “When Socrates . . . isolated himself from any external relationship and, for instance, took it as a *posito* [premise] that everyone must do the same, such a view of life would become essentially a secret or an essential secret, for it cannot be imparted directly” (CUP 67). To repeat, what Socrates achieved – truth as subjectivity – was not that he did *something* spectacular (an action) but *how* he did whatever he did or did not do or said or did not say (a qualification of an action). Not only did he maintain his ignorance, but he also did so with *all the passion of inwardness*. And it is this qualification that cannot be communicated directly.

Thus Climacus is able to explain Socrates’ use of irony. He says, “But why does the ethicist use irony as his incognito? Because he grasps the contradiction between the manner in which he exists inwardly and the fact that he does not express it outwardly” (CUP 422). In saying that Socrates cannot explain the manner in which he exists inwardly directly or “outwardly,” Climacus is implying, first, that “it” can be expressed somehow or to some extent, and second, that doing so requires some sort of mask or “incognito.” But again, one wants to know what the “it” here refers to and in what sense it *can* be expressed, and further, why a mask is needed. To address these questions –

though, again, I believe Climacus is trying to show that they cannot be answered completely in the way we might like – I suggest we return to an example of Socratic irony introduced in the last chapter.

Again, Socrates is (in)famous for saying that he had never been anyone's teacher. As we saw in the last chapter, this was ironic in the early sense (*eironeia*) in that it was clear that he could not have meant exactly what he said, not to mention that he also says that he *was* a teacher, and so it was clear to someone like Thrasymachus that he must have been dissembling. However, Vlastos argues that we do not need to conclude that Socrates is trying to deceive his interlocutor – though his interlocutor might allow himself to be deceived – since Socrates both means what he says *and* the opposite of what he says. Not only is he not being inconsistent by saying that he is not a teacher and then saying that he is, but he is also inviting or challenging his interlocutor to think about the meaning of 'teacher.' And Socrates does so, according to Vlastos, because he believed it was important that his interlocutor ruminate about the meaning of a concept as important as *teacher*, and that she does so *on her own*. At this point, I would like to suggest that the tension Vlastos tries to resolve by punning on 'teacher' represents the tension between existing inwardly or maintaining Socratic ignorance and doing so regarding non-private questions, such as those of ethics and religion – i.e. those that strike us as especially important to have opinions about.

Climacus says very clearly that Socrates is a "*teacher* in the ethical" (CUP 207). And he also suggests that Socrates is not a teacher in the traditional sense – the sense

according to which someone claims to be able to augment his student's body of knowledge – for he says that “in order to study the ethical, every human being is assigned to himself” (CUP 118). So Socrates must be a teacher in a different sense, one that allows someone to study the ethical by attending only to oneself. To explain the sense in which Socrates is a teacher, Climacus says:

It is only by attending closely to myself that I am able to become familiar with the conduct of a historical individuality at the time he lived; and I understand him only when I keep him alive in my understanding and do not, as children do, knock the clock to pieces in order to understand the life in it; and do not, as speculation does, change him into something quite different in order to understand him. But I cannot learn from him, any more than from the dead and gone, what it is to live. (CUP 122)

To learn from Socrates, then, is to learn from myself. One sense in which he is a teacher of ethics, or how to live well, is tied to the degree to which he does not stand in the way of my ability to learn from myself, for instance by telling me what I should look for. Climacus seems to be claiming that Socrates, in a way, is the best teacher of the ethical because he is not a teacher at all – or perhaps it is better to say, not a *preacher* at all – and that to convert him into one is to misunderstand him, and potentially oneself.

To illustrate the sense in which Socrates is a teacher by not teaching, Climacus says in a slightly more humorous tone:

I wonder, now, why that old *teacher* was so happy over his favourable appearance,<sup>14</sup> if it was not because he realized that it must help to put the learner at a distance, so that the latter was not caught up in a direct relation to the teacher, perhaps admiring him, through the repulsion of the contrast, which in a

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<sup>14</sup> By “favourable,” Climacus means “favourable *for teaching ethics*” which, as he explains earlier, amounts to the fact that Socrates “was very ugly, had clumsy feet, and above all a number of bumps on the forehead and elsewhere, which must have been enough to convince anyone that he was a bad character” (CUP 203).

higher sphere was in turn his irony, that it is with himself that the learner has essentially to do (CUP 208).

Simply, Climacus thinks that the fact that Socrates was ugly helped to make him a better teacher of the ethical. He thought this because he thought that to appeal to another as an authority of the ethical – which, of course, is easier to do when the authority is handsome and charismatic – is to “cease to be spirit” or authentically engaged in the project of becoming a self on one’s own.

Moreover, we must remember that what defines subjective truth, the truth appropriate to ethics and religion, is that “just as important as the truth, and the more important of the two, is the manner in which the truth is accepted” (CUP 207). However, it should be clear by now that if one cannot define (offer criteria for) the truth for another existing human being, neither can one define the *manner* of appropriating it. Central to Climacus’s account of Socrates and the ethical, then, is that the project of becoming a self is always *experimental* or an *experiment*.

Nowadays everyone dabbles in a few proofs; one person has several, another not so many. But Socrates! He submits the question in what is objectively a problematic way: *if* there is an immortality. Does that mean that compared with one of the modern thinkers with three proofs he was a doubter? Not at all, he invests his entire life in this ‘if there is.’ He dares to die, and with the passion of the infinite he has so ordered his entire life to make it likely that it must be so – *if* there is an immortality. Is there any better proof of the immortality of the soul? (CUP 170)

How does Socrates approach the question of the immortality of the soul? *Subjectively* – in the form of an experiment: “if there is,” “he invests,” “he *dares* to die.” That is his “proof.”

### *Indirect Communication*

Although, as I suggested in the last section, Climacus offers *an* account of Socrates and ethics, it should be kept in mind that his account is almost entirely negative. That is, we are forced to understand it from what he says Socrates did *not* do and what ethics is *not*. The truths of ethics are not part of the “*easily* grasped surveys of everything worth knowing” (CUP 466, my emphasis). They are not something one knows nor are they in any sense easy to come by. So, although we might want criteria by which to distinguish Socratic ignorance and the sense in which Socrates is a “historical individuality” in the history of ethics, Climacus does not offer them to us or, in his own language, keeps what he might have to say, if anything, “an essential secret.” Moreover, given his account, it follows that in order to learn about Socrates from Climacus, we must learn about Climacus, since in order to learn about Socrates, Climacus only attended closely to himself. And, further, if we accept his account, it seems to follow that if we wish to learn from Climacus as a historical individuality, we must attend closely to ourselves. So, to learn about Socrates through Climacus is still to learn from and about ourselves.

What Climacus does *not* do is give us one more theory to add to the list of ethical theories, and in a certain sense, he does not say anything positive about ethics at all. But, for the careful reader, there are a number of clues on the basis of which we might infer what he thinks about the nature of ethics. For instance, Climacus says:

Putting it as plainly as possible (to make use of myself experimentally): ‘I, Johannes Climacus, born in this city and now thirty years old, a quite ordinary

human being like anyone else, assume that for me, as much as for a serving man and a professor, there awaits a highest good called eternal happiness.’ (CUP 16)

At first, this ordinary statement might not strike us as philosophically significant. However, if we compare it to what Climacus says about Socrates’ “proof” of the immortality of the soul above, we will notice that like it the *Postscript* is experimental and personal. Similarly, like Socrates, Climacus says that he is “never a teacher but a learner” (CUP 72; 207-08; 234; 273; 524-525). What we start to notice if we pay attention to these points of comparison, I believe, is that rather than simply tell us what he thinks about Socrates – which he should not do given what he *does* say about Socrates – he attempts to *show* us indirectly through the structure and aim of the *Postscript*. If this is correct we should not read the *Postscript* as offering an account of inwardness or subjective truth, but as an attempt to exemplify it. The confusion lies in the fact that he tries to exemplify it by talking about it.

Evidence for my reading, moreover, can be found in the fact that Climacus claims that this is the only possible way of communicating ethical matters *subjectively*: “When I grasped this, it also became clear to me that, if I wanted to communicate anything on this point, the main thing was that my exposition be in the *indirect* form” (CUP 203).<sup>15</sup> What Climacus learns from Socrates about ethics is that the appropriate relation to the ethical cannot simply be handed over to another (i.e. “taught” in the simple sense). If one “lectures” or pretends to be an “authority,” “His inwardness is not inwardness but

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<sup>15</sup> Climacus reiterates the same point as follows: “since the misfortune of the age is in my view precisely that it had acquired too much knowledge and forgotten what it is to exist and what inwardness means, the form therefore had to be indirect” (CUP 217). He also repeats the same passage, verbatim, on p. 220.

[demands] immediate devotedness, for it is precisely the pious and silent accord by which the learner by himself assimilates what is taught, distancing himself from the teacher because he turns inwards to himself, that is inwardness” (CUP 203). So, in order to teach ethics, one must attend to oneself in the form of an experiment:

By taking place in the form of the experiment, the communication creates a clash for itself, and the experiment establishes a yawning gap between reader and author, places the divorce of inwardness between them, making direct understanding impossible. The experiment is the conscious, teasing revocation of the communication, which is always of importance to someone existing who writes for those who exist, in case the situation be changed to that of a patterer writing for patterers. (CUP 221)

On my reading, what we are supposed to learn *about Socrates from Climacus* is nestled in between the lines. Like Socrates, according to Climacus, Climacus self-consciously tries to establish a gap between the author and the reader. He, in effect, makes it virtually impossible to say, once and for all, that *this* is substance of Climacus’s view of ethics, or Socrates, or faith. If this is correct, not only does Climacus try to show us the ethical *implications* of believing that Socrates is an irresolubly complex figure, in the sense articulated in the last chapter, but he is also trying to show us that one important implication is that the rest can only be *shown*.

#### IV. Kierkegaard’s Silence

Despite Climacus’s attempt not to “lecture” at us about Christianity, ethics, or Socrates, he nevertheless says quite a lot and is often quite direct. He says, for example, that the truth *is* subjectivity, and although we did not pursue many of the theoretical

commitments that follow from this definition, the author of the *Postscript* does. Moreover, although we may not end up with a complete, positive portrait of the historical Socrates, by juxtaposing Climacus's scattered remarks about Socrates next to the Socrates we find in Kierkegaard's dissertation, with which Climacus was obviously familiar, we can delineate the contours of *an* account of the historical Socrates on behalf of Climacus. At the very least, his understanding of Socrates is consistent with his basic objection to "the Hegelian philosophy." In short, neither Climacus's account of Socrates nor his view of ethics suggests interpretive nihilism.

Moreover, assuming that Climacus's understanding of Socrates can be made sense of – i.e. there is an account of Socrates – we find ourselves with a problem similar to that raised by TLP 6.54: Climacus's conclusion seems to contradict the path to it. Roughly, Climacus claims that we cannot learn the truth from Socrates, but maintains this on the basis of the claim that truth is subjectivity, something which he apparently learns from Socrates. So, it is unclear what to make of Climacus's account, other than that it attempts to say or exemplify what he claims cannot be said.

Climacus tries to wiggle out of this potential inconsistency by claiming, in the "Appendix," that the book ought to be read with a revocation. He says, "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" (CUP 522). That is, Climacus is alive to the fact that he has, in a way, said more than he should have by his own lights and that he needs to remind the reader



that the essence of what he wishes to communicate, indirectly, requires the reader not to appeal to him as an authority or teacher, as he claimed we should not appeal to Socrates as an authority. To understand the book – to be its only reader as Climacus says on the following page – is to allow him to take it all back and to realize that “to write a book and revoke it is something else than not writing it; that to write a book which does not claim importance for anyone is something else than leaving it unwritten” (CUP 523). But Climacus’s revocation ultimately fails to settle the basic interpretive question of what to do with the doctrine he advances throughout the *Postscript*. In general, it is unclear what he means by ‘revoke’ and how exactly we are supposed to read the text that we know (upon a second reading) is supposed to be revoked.

In the end, I do not think that this inconsistency can be settled on behalf of Climacus. I do believe that Climacus tries to show us what he claims cannot be said, but I believe that to the extent that he tries to *show* what cannot be said by *talking* about what cannot be said, the reader will inevitably be left with a certain amount of intellectual discomfort. However, I also believe that Climacus is sincere when he says that to write a book and revoke it is different from leaving it unwritten, and there is potential value in a book that, so to speak, cannot stand on its own two feet. But to determine the purpose of the *Postscript* in particular, and to ease some of the intellectual discomfort that results from reading it, we must bear in mind that although Climacus does the talking, Kierkegaard is ultimately its “author.”

*“A First and Last Declaration”*

To many readers, Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms may not appear to problematize his texts in any way. As is clear by now, Kierkegaard was not the first to voice his own opinion through the mouth of fictional characters. But, lest we confuse what he is up to with, say, Plato or Hume’s use of characters, Kierkegaard makes a point of differentiating his own voice from those of his pseudonyms, including of course Climacus. In “A first and last declaration,” which he adds as a supplement to the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard says:

My pseudonymity or polyonymity has had no *accidental* basis in my *person* . . . but an essential basis in the *production* itself. . . . What is written is indeed therefore mine, but only so far as I have put the life-view of the creating, poetically actualized individuality into his mouth in audible lines, for my relation is even more remote than that of a poet, who *creates* characters and yet in the preface is *himself* the *author*. For I am impersonally, or personally, in the second person, a *souffleur* [prompter] who has poetically produced the *authors*, whose *prefaces* in turn are their production, yes, as are their *names*. So in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by myself. I have no opinion about them except as a third party, no knowledge of their meaning except as reader. (CUP 527–28, emphasis in the original)

Unlike Hume, then, who created the characters but who remained the author, Kierkegaard wants to remove himself once more, saying that he created the author, not as a character under his control, but as an authority with an opinion of his own. Although Kierkegaard physically put the pen to paper and is the author “in the legal sense,” as he says, he begs the reader to “do [him] the favour of citing the name of the respective pseudonymous author, not [his]” (CUP 529).

Now, this is a strange move for any author, but it is especially strange for a *philosopher*, who, we assume, writes in order to tell us what *he* thinks. Kierkegaard makes it clear, moreover, that his use of pseudonyms is not merely an expression of his personality or a kind of poetic device, but is essential to the significance of the text. That is, he tries to make it clear that it is essential that the pseudonymous “author” of the text is “himself” a fictional character, and that his opinions, whatever they are, are not *necessarily* Kierkegaard’s own. Of course, Kierkegaard does not say that he does not share the opinions his pseudonymous authors: that *would* be a way of telling us what he thinks about a given topic. Instead, he says only that the pseudonymous works, at least as they are considered individually, are not evidence for what he believed himself. And I believe that, in distinguishing himself from his “authors,” in particular from Climacus, Kierkegaard gives us what we need to alleviate some of the discomfort involved in wrestling with the inherent inconsistency between Climacus’s view and the way he presents it. We simply should not be bothered as much by the fact that a *character* who is merely trying to understand himself ends up with a thoroughly inconsistent text. We can even say, “He tried and he failed, but it was interesting nonetheless.” The discomfort results from the belief that the author is real and thus that in drafting the text, he must be trying to assert his authority in the form of a positive and potentially true point of view.

In what remains, I will try to tie Kierkegaard’s pseudonymity and the distance *Kierkegaard* (as opposed to Climacus) creates between himself and the reader back to his mature “view” of Socrates, silence, and ethics.

“*The Kierkegaardian Problem*”

Ultimately, I want to argue that Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms is his attempt to re-create Socrates’ silence and “the Socratic problem.” As far as I know, Kierkegaard does not say explicitly that he attempted to mimic Socrates’ elusive historical and philosophical identity. The closest he comes to this is when he says, in the *Attack on Christianity*, “The only analogy I have before me is Socrates. My task is a Socratic task.”<sup>16</sup> But there is a sense in which, if I am correct, he could not have *said* that he was trying to re-create Socrates’ silence or exactly what he meant by “a Socratic task.” If Socrates’ enduring legacy is, on Kierkegaard’s account, that he left *nothing* by which a later age can judge him, then presumably the goal of “a Socratic task” is not to leave anything behind as well, not even a clear account of the fact that this is the goal or what its value is. If we notice, moreover, this is precisely the result of the *Postscript*: unlike his dissertation, which is written in his own voice and does present a clear account of Socrates, neither the *Postscript* nor any of his other pseudonymous works presents a direct account of the life and thought of Socrates. Nevertheless, I think that by comparing what Climacus says about Socrates and ethics to Kierkegaard’s earlier view, and by noticing that Kierkegaard does not offer an account of Socrates on his own behalf, we can make the case that one difference between Kierkegaard’s dissertation and the pseudonymous literature is that in the latter, the thought of Kierkegaard becomes irresolubly complex or radically undecidable.

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<sup>16</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Attack on Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 283. Henceforth, AC.

What I have tried to show is that Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates developed in stages. In the first stage, represented in his dissertation, Kierkegaard extends Hegel's critique of romanticism by arguing that Socrates' subjectivity is the negative element of a dialectical process, not the radical freedom from actuality that the romantics claimed defined poetic existence. For both Hegel and the young Kierkegaard, Socrates' subjectivity was ultimately driven by a positive goal. Kierkegaard did express reservations about Hegel's understanding of ethics early on, specifically by emphasizing subjectivity as the beginning of "a personal life," but in his dissertation he does not specify the criteria of a genuinely personal life and is ultimately under the sway of Hegelianism.

It is not until the second stage, which on my account culminates in *Climacus's Postscript*, that we are offered a positive attack on Hegel's notion of "the ethical" and the corresponding understanding of Socrates.<sup>17</sup> At this stage, Socrates represents the idea that the highest task of ethics is to become a whole human being or self. While a version of this idea was expressed earlier in Kierkegaard's dissertation, the important qualification of Climacus's later view is that to become a whole human being contradicts objective certainty, and is subjective in that it qualifies the manner of appropriating objective *uncertainty*. What is important about the task is not *what* can be applied to everyone in general, or subsumed under the rubric of logic, but one's appropriating the task *in a certain way* – i.e. passionately, inwardly, authentically. For Climacus, the task of

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<sup>17</sup> There is, it should be noted, another and perhaps clearer attack on Hegel's notion of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling*. But, as Socrates does not play an essential role in this earlier attack, we can overlook it in the present context.

becoming a self is the *activity* of relating properly to objective uncertainty. So, although Climacus, like Hegel and the young Kierkegaard, continues to attribute Socrates' ethical greatness to his "subjectivity," he begins to think of it, not as the negative element of a dialectical process, but as the rejection of Hegel's dialectical understanding of ethics.

However, Climacus faces the expository conundrum of explaining the nature of the ethical as that which cannot be put into words (i.e. taught directly). He says that the *Postscript* is entirely about himself, that it is only an experiment, and that whatever doctrine it contains ought to be revoked. But this is bound to cause some intellectual discomfort in the reader who takes seriously the possibility that Climacus has something important to say about the ethical as it applies to everyone. Moreover, despite what Climacus says in the "appendices," the text itself is in fact full of claims about the nature of ethics, the ethical superiority of Socrates, and many definitions and arguments besides. So, as far as I can tell, there is and always will be some inconsistency inherent in Climacus's attempt to *explain* what ethics is not and why it cannot be put into words. And it is here that I think we should mark the third stage of Kierkegaard's developing account of Socrates.

Although, as we have already said, Kierkegaard *pens* the *Postscript*, which is full of the sort of arguments and explanations that characterize "the Hegelian philosophy," *he* is not doing the explaining. Instead, he creates what is basically a fictional account of what it would be like for someone to try to explain the full extent of Socrates' negativity and the corresponding view of ethics. And, in this way, Kierkegaard succeeds where Climacus

fails. Unlike Climacus, he actually becomes a learner, not a teacher, since, if we heed his request not to cite him as the author, the *Postscript* is not Kierkegaard's attempt to tell us or teach us what he thinks. Insofar as he claims that with respect to the text he is simply another reader, Kierkegaard really is only in the position of being a learner. Also, rather than simply *say* that the text is only about himself and his own effort to become a whole human being, as Climacus does, there is really no way to know on the basis of the text just what the *Postscript* meant to Kierkegaard. So, he actually achieves the distance from the reader that Climacus talks about as crucial to his understanding of Socratic ethics.

The trouble begins only when *we*, as interpreters, insist on attributing the ideas presented in the *Postscript* to Kierkegaard. We do this because we tend to assume that philosophy is valuable only if it offers a positive theoretical account of us and the world. And, if we focus on Climacus's account of ethics and Socrates, although we get a rejection of Hegelian philosophy, which may be useful to some – and which may have been useful to Kierkegaard – we are not given a clear alternative account of ethics. The book, again, is supposed to be entirely about Climacus. So, we want to know what *Kierkegaard* was trying to tell us through Climacus's abortive attempts to define subjectivity in clear terms once and for all. But, I hope it is clear by now that Kierkegaard, insofar as his task was *Socratic* and not to explain Socrates, allows his pseudonymous works to be enigmatic *on purpose* and perhaps, even, radically undecidable. That is, on my view, by distancing himself further and further from the reader – by creating an author whose thought is difficult to discern and then by making it clear that we are not to

attribute the author's view to him – Kierkegaard in effect sows the seeds of “the Kierkegaardian problem.”

What I have tried to show in this chapter is that now we have not just one, but two great ethicists who found it necessary not to state their own positive opinions. As I said at the beginning of the chapter, one of the challenges “the Socratic problem” creates is that it is unclear what, if anything, we are supposed to learn from *Socrates* (as opposed to Plato). What I have tried to show here is that Kierkegaard shows us that it is possible to reflect on Socrates and his ethics, not despite the fact that he did not write his own philosophy, as Vlastos and Lippitt do, but by showing the way in which not writing one's *own* philosophy might be essential to what counts as the philosophy of life. On my view, moreover, Kierkegaard made an important advance on Socrates in that he achieves Socratic silence on paper or as an “author.”



### CHAPTER THREE

## The Ethical Aim of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: The Practice of Not Preaching

*Question: But in that case why is this Scripture so unclear? If we want to warn someone of a terrible danger, do we go about it by telling him a riddle whose solution will be the warning?— But who is to say that the scripture really is unclear? Isn't it possible that it was essential in this case to 'tell a riddle'? And that, on the other hand, giving a more direct warning would necessarily have had the wrong effect?*

– Wittgenstein

At the end of the first chapter, I said that the aim of the dissertation was to juxtapose three like-minded philosophers and the trouble they generate for secondary literatures, in order to help the reader to “see what I see” regarding the difficulty and ethical nature of the *Tractatus*. I suggested, moreover, that I would try to show not only that there is an interesting parallel between Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein, but also that the particular parallel I wanted to examine – in short, that they are all irresolubly complex philosophers – presents a limit to how much we can actually *say* about it. That is, I claimed that the parallel is such that it can only be shown *through* the comparison. So, now we will turn our attention to Wittgenstein who, like Socrates and Kierkegaard before him, creates a strange puzzle for interpreters. Hopefully by the end the reader will start to see the importance of the method of comparison.

In the next two chapters, I attempt to show that like Socrates and Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein produces a kind of silence, and that irony and the form of the *Tractatus* help him to achieve that silence. As with our discussion of Socrates, I will focus on the

exegetical difficulties that characterize the secondary literature regarding the *Tractatus*, since I believe that an examination of that literature, looked at under a certain light, again raises the question of interpretive nihilism. It is not for nothing, I claim, that Wittgenstein scholars cannot agree on even the most basic interpretive questions regarding the *Tractatus*. And hopefully with Socrates and Kierkegaard in mind, we might be able to appreciate the *possibility* that (1) Wittgenstein's unique voice is nowhere to be found in the text, and (2) that the aim of Socratic silence (or Kierkegaardian and Wittgensteinian silence) might in fact be ethical.

But first we must address one important difference between Wittgenstein, Socrates and Kierkegaard. Unlike Socrates' conversations and Kierkegaard's *Postscript*, the *Tractatus* is not ostensibly about ethics. It is a work in the philosophy of logic and language. So, first we need to say something about the sense in which the *Tractatus* might be considered a work of ethics. In this chapter, I will try to show that although it is not *about* ethics – Wittgenstein does not treat ethics as a particular subject matter, and even if he did, he does not have much to say about it – it is *ethical*. Not only does it reflect the existential conflicts that drew Wittgenstein to philosophy, but also, like Climacus's (and Kierkegaard's) *Postscript*, the *Tractatus* is a *deed* or *experiment*, which is ethical in part because it represents a conscious decision not to condense the problems of life into a

system of internally consistent propositions, à la Hegel (or, in Wittgenstein's case, Russell).<sup>1</sup>

Now, let us turn to the secondary literature in order to examine, first, just what is so difficult about the *Tractatus*, and second, the various ways of approaching Wittgenstein's view of (what) ethics (is not). Again, although I am focusing specifically on the *Tractatus*, I ask the reader to keep our discussion of Socrates and Kierkegaard in mind. I will try to note points of comparison as we go.

### I. "The Central Difficulty"

As some commentators have noted, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is perhaps the most enigmatic work of philosophy ever published. Ray Monk, for example, says that it is "too mystical for logicians, too technical for mystics, too poetic for philosophers, and too philosophical for poets."<sup>2</sup> To some extent, this is true: it is not clear for whom Wittgenstein wrote the *Tractatus*, exactly what his aim was, or even whether he hoped to prove anything at all. Matters are further complicated by a secondary literature that, despite its various attempts to solve the enigma, has succeeded in showing just how elusive and flexible the *Tractatus* can be. For instance, whereas the logical positivists found in it a wholesale rejection of ethics and metaphysics, others have

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<sup>1</sup> Recall from the last chapter that one of confusions surrounding Climacus's account of Socrates and the ethical was that although it is something that can only be shown (e.g. through the form of the *Postscript*), Climacus nevertheless says quite a bit about both ethics and Socrates. Here I am suggesting that if Wittgenstein succeeds in *showing* the ethical, it will be because he, like Kierkegaard (as opposed to Climacus), does not *say* much about the ethical on his own behalf or as an authority.

<sup>2</sup> Ray Monk, *How to Read Wittgenstein* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), 30.

found in it just the opposite.<sup>3</sup> But more problematic than the fact that it lends itself to apparently contradictory interpretations, in my view, is the fact that it is not clear what it is about or what counts as its “central” difficulty.

Interpreters have, no doubt, established that there are many “peripheral” difficulties in reading the *Tractatus*, such as its aphoristic style and lack of clear transitions or explanations, as well as the fact that it purports to solve *all* the problems of philosophy in fewer than a hundred pages. There is also its byzantine structure, the purpose of which is unclear, and its prohibitive jargon which requires an education in logic to read through with understanding. But, again, what is most troubling in my view is that commentators have yet to settle on the correct interpretation of the overall aim of the text, or whether Wittgenstein took himself to be engaged in the same philosophical project as their own. In short, the *Tractatus* makes it unclear whether Wittgenstein even meant the same thing by “philosophy” as his interpreters do.

In their philosophical biography of the early Wittgenstein, Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin argue that Wittgenstein did *not* share the widely held conception of philosophy and that the central difficulty of the text is precisely to “heal over the incision that subsequent academic surgery has made in our views both of the man and his work.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, according to Janik and Toulmin, the central difficulty of the *Tractatus*

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<sup>3</sup> For the former view, see Rudolf Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language” in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Glenoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959). For the latter, see Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*.

<sup>4</sup> Janik and Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*, 26. For a discussion of what Janik and Toulmin consider the conception of philosophy that “we” share and which debars us from understanding Wittgenstein, see their first chapter.

consists in our coming to understand Wittgenstein's philosophical ambitions apart from our own, and even apart from those of Frege and Russell, since, as they say, "one of [the] implications [of their biography] will be that the preconceptions with which his English hearers approached him debarred them almost entirely from understanding the point of what he was saying."<sup>5</sup> Commentators, of course, *do not* consider themselves debarred from understanding Wittgenstein, so perhaps it is better to rephrase Janik and Toulmin's sentiment in the form of the following question: what are the preconceptions that English readers assume they do share with Wittgenstein?

For the majority of commentators, including Diamond, Conant, Anscombe and Hacker, the central difficulty of the text is captured in TLP 6.54, where Wittgenstein says, "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical." As Diamond says, the central difficulty consists in understanding "its use of the notions of what cannot be said and of nonsense."<sup>6</sup> The other difficulties, that is, can be explained away in terms of how one interprets Wittgenstein's distinction between sense and nonsense. Some commentators, however, have argued that its central difficulty is not "in" the text, nor simply a matter of understanding the difference between sense and nonsense. For instance, regarding interpretations of Wittgenstein's logical analysis of language, Paul Engelmann wrote that "more than enough has been written in the meantime. It may be of advantage, however,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>6</sup> Cora Diamond, "Ethics, imagination and the method of Wittgenstein's Tractatus," in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Cray and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), 151.

to have a key to a deeper understanding of the *reasons* why he wrote the book.”<sup>7</sup> For commentators such as Engelmann – and, for reasons we shall see, it is probably better not to consider Engelmann a “commentator” in the way Conant and Diamond are – the central difficulty of the text consists in understanding *why* Wittgenstein was interested in logic at all: “Yet we do not understand Wittgenstein unless we realize that it was philosophy that mattered to him and not logic, which merely happened to be the only suitable tool for elaborating his world picture.”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, these approaches to the *Tractatus* are not mutually exclusive, as is evidenced by the attempts to reconcile them. A good example of such an attempt to connect Wittgenstein’s world picture to his use of nonsense is the work of Michael Kremer, who writes:

Any account of the point of Wittgenstein’s use of nonsense must have something to do with language. Yet exclusive attention to language is bound to lead to a misrepresentation of Wittgenstein’s aim. . . . Our account of Wittgenstein’s use of nonsense must bring this ethical point of the book to the fore and relate it to the work’s overt focus on language.<sup>9</sup>

So, for a commentator like Kremer, the central difficulty of the book does not consist solely in ascertaining the proper account of Wittgenstein’s theory of language, nor solely in an account of his reasons for constructing one, but in understanding the relation between the two – what Kremer calls “the ethical point of the book.”

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with A Memoir* (New York: Horizon Press, 1968), 74. My emphasis. Engelmann was a very close friend of Wittgenstein while he wrote the *Tractatus*, and while Engelmann is not an academic philosopher himself, his memoir of Wittgenstein represents a subtle and important approach to the text.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Kremer, “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense,” *Noûs* 35, no. 1 (2001): 47.

Again, the disagreement among commentators is often subtle and no one denies that *some* ethical intention is buried in the text. Everyone acknowledges, for instance, the existence of Wittgenstein's letter to von Ficker mentioned in the introduction, that Wittgenstein says the *Tractatus* is not a textbook (TLP, p. 3), and that he is concerned with "the problems of life" (TLP 6.522). So, the disagreement among commentators does not consist in *whether* ethics is important to Wittgenstein, but rather in how the ethical aim might inform the way we read the text or what we take from it. When Wittgenstein says to von Ficker that there is an "ethical part" to the *Tractatus* and that it is the more important part, is he suggesting that we ought to expend more effort to understand how the ethical remarks in particular are nonsensical, as Conant and Diamond argue; or that the personal struggle that results in the text is essential to its meaning, as Engelmann argues; or that behind the logical analysis of language, there is a fundamental truth about Christianity and life, as Kremer argues?

Before moving on, I should mention that I am putting aside another way of considering the ethical remarks in the *Tractatus* and their relation to the overall aim of the text. Some have argued that we ought to treat them as *orbita dicta*. For example, Peter Carruthers says that "the doctrine of philosophy as nonsense [including ethical nonsense] may simply be excised from [the *Tractatus*], without damage to the remainder."<sup>10</sup> Representing a slightly more moderate position, Edward Kanterian says "we could understand the logical part [of the *Tractatus*] very well without the ethical one, but not

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Carruthers, *The Metaphysics of the Tractatus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5.

vice versa. Wittgenstein's work had extended to the foundations of logic to the nature of the world, and further to mysticism, but only in that order."<sup>11</sup> And some commentators who attempt "to provide a fully worked out version of this interpretive approach to Wittgenstein's *early work*," such as Marie McGinn, simply do not discuss Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics. That is, even though McGinn says that she is providing a fully worked out version of the entire "early work," she also says:

There are a number of topics in the *Tractatus* that I do not discuss: I touch only briefly on the treatment of arithmetic and the laws of science and I do not discuss the remarks on ethics and aesthetics at all. This is partly because I have already written a long book, but mainly because I wanted to focus on what I believe to be the heart of the work: its treatment of the nature of a proposition and the nature and status of logic.<sup>12</sup>

I am putting aside interpretations of the *Tractatus* that do not consider Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics as part of "the heart of the work," or those that dice the *Tractatus* into palatable pieces, since, in my view, we cannot advance our understanding of Wittgenstein's "early work" on the whole if we do not consider all of it. Besides, although McGinn succeeds in demonstrating just how important and sophisticated Wittgenstein's early philosophy of *logic and language* is, without incorporating the remarks on ethics and aesthetics, in my view, we are not fully appreciating the enigmatic nature and novelty of Wittgenstein's *philosophy*.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to demonstrate that it is indeed the ethical aim of the *Tractatus* that makes it one of the most enigmatic works of philosophy ever

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<sup>11</sup> Edward Kanterian, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 86.

<sup>12</sup> Marie McGinn, *Elucidating the Tractatus: Wittgenstein's Early Philosophy of Logic & Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), xi-xii.



published. However, I hope to show that its central difficulty is not that we have yet to settle on the correct interpretation of Wittgenstein's *view* of ethics, but rather that Wittgenstein intentionally does not say enough to settle the disagreement. In other words, on my reading, what makes the *Tractatus* especially enigmatic is not that we have yet to understand the details of its aim or its thought, but that its ethical aim and thought are potentially incompatible with the aim of a secondary literature.

## II. 'Ethics'

Before considering interpretations of Wittgenstein's views of ethics, we should call attention to Wittgenstein's unusual use of the word 'ethics.' In the *Tractatus*-inspired "A Lecture on Ethics," published in 1929, Wittgenstein tells us that he uses 'ethics' metaphorically. In contrast to G.E. Moore, who says roughly that "Ethics is the general enquiry into what is good," Wittgenstein says, "Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, *or*, into what is really important, *or* . . . into what makes life worth living, *or* into the right way of living" (LE 38, my emphasis).<sup>13</sup> In other words, Wittgenstein does not offer a definition of 'ethics' but says that we can understand what he means only by juxtaposing these and other synonymous expressions. Ethics does not constitute a single subject matter, but rather, as he says in both "A Lecture on Ethics" and in the *Tractatus*, it is what ethics, aesthetics, and religion share in common. One might object, then, that

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<sup>13</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," in *Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951*, ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993). My emphasis. Henceforth, LE.

Wittgenstein is not really talking about ethics, but perhaps about value more generally, and so that it might be better to say that he is interested in axiology or value theory.

However, Wittgenstein was very deliberate with his word choice and I imagine that in choosing to use the word ‘ethics’ in particular, and by contrasting his use of it with Moore’s, he is suggesting something particular about the use of the word ‘ethics.’ Either way, it is unclear whether Wittgenstein is stipulating a definition of the term, or what exactly he is talking about, and so I would like to offer this preliminary observation: before we decide what the aim of the *Tractatus* is, or whether it is “ethical,” we must determine how Wittgenstein is using the word ‘ethics,’ as when he says, “ethics and aesthetics are one and the same” (TLP 6.421). That is, if we are not clear about what the term ‘ethics’ refers to, we cannot decide whether in saying that the ethical part of the book is its most important part, Wittgenstein is referring to what he hoped to *do*, how it represents how he hoped to *live*, or what it is *about*.

James Conant bases his interpretation of Wittgenstein’s ethics on a similar worry.<sup>14</sup> He says that the primary mistake commentators make in trying to understand Wittgenstein’s view of ethics is that they assume that by ‘ethics,’ Wittgenstein refers to a particular subject matter, which is represented in the remarks of the *Tractatus* that are ostensibly “about” ethics (the 6.4s, for example). Instead, Conant thinks that the ethical aim applies to the text as a whole, and that the challenge is to figure out what ethics has in common with the other parts or aspects of the text, such as what it says about logic.

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<sup>14</sup> James Conant, “What ‘Ethics’ in the *Tractatus* is *Not*,” in *Religion and Wittgenstein’s Legacy*, ed. D.Z. Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

He says: “one can make sense of the various remarks in Wittgenstein’s corpus which touch upon the ethical . . . only if one comes to appreciate that the ethical and logical concerns equally pervade the whole of the *Tractatus*. . . .”<sup>15</sup> Janik and Toulmin also maintain that the challenge of reading Wittgenstein “is to reconcile the ‘ethical’ Wittgenstein with the ‘logical’ Wittgenstein.”<sup>16</sup> So, by claiming that the aim of the *Tractatus* is ethical, Wittgenstein is not only inviting us to question *what the Tractatus is about*, but also (and first) to ask what he means by ‘ethics’ – that is, exactly *what* he thinks ethics, logic, aesthetics, and religion have in common.

### III. Two Readings

At TLP 6.421, Wittgenstein says “It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.” It is one of those “things” that “make themselves manifest” (TLP 6.522). Ethics, in other words, is an example of “nonsense.” But it is not the only example of nonsense that Wittgenstein discusses in the *Tractatus*, so the reader wonders what the relation is between ethics and other examples of nonsense, such as the propositions of metaphysics and the propositions of the *Tractatus*. The answer, of course, depends on how one understands the meaning of ‘nonsensical’ in TLP 6.54, where Wittgenstein says that his propositions are elucidatory in that anyone who understands him will come to recognize them as nonsensical – as having, in a way, failed to say anything (TLP 6.53). More specifically, the answer depends on how one resolves the dilemma raised by TLP 6.54.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>16</sup> Janik and Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*, 26.

Remember, if the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense, then by its own theory of sense and nonsense, the *Tractatus* fails to say anything; however, if it fails to say anything, then how does it distinguish sense from nonsense; but if it does not distinguish sense from nonsense, then maybe it makes sense after all, and so on. This dilemma suggests that either Wittgenstein undermines the validity of his own conclusion or that he does not really mean what he says at TLP 6.54. In the effort to settle this issue, two interpretations have become standard interpretative options: the so-called “resolute” and “irresolute” readings of the *Tractatus*.

The irresolute reading argues for what Conant calls the “substantial conception of nonsense,” according to which there are kinds or degrees of nonsense. There is ordinary nonsense, which is conceptually on a par with ‘piggly wiggle tiggles,’ and there is what Hacker calls “illuminating nonsense,” which conveys truths about the world even if – or, rather, precisely because of the way in which – they fail to meet all the conditions of sense laid out in the *Tractatus*.<sup>17</sup> As we saw in chapter one, Anscombe endorses such a view of nonsense when she says that the *Tractatus* demonstrates “things which, though they cannot be ‘said’, are yet ‘shewn’ or ‘displayed’. That is to say: it would be right to call them ‘true’ if, *per impossible*, they could be said.” And one such kind of “thing,” according

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<sup>17</sup> For the most thorough account of “substantial nonsense,” see James Conant, “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” in *From Frege to Wittgenstein*, ed. Erich H. Reck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). The phrase ‘piggly wiggle tiggles’ is a reference to a similar account found in Diamond’s “Ethics and Imagination,” 151. For Hacker’s view, see P. M. S. Hacker, “Was He Trying to Whistle It?,” in *The New Wittgenstein* ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000 and *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

to the irresolute reading, are the truths of ethics, which are like the truths of metaphysics inasmuch as they would be true if, *per impossible*, they could be said.

Although the irresolute reading, among other things, offers a positive interpretation of famously cryptic remarks, such as “What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said” (TLP 4.1212) and “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words” (TLP 6.522), it faces at least one obvious, and potentially insurmountable, complication. Russell was perhaps the first to notice this worry, and raises it in his “Introduction” as follows:

What causes hesitation [in accepting Mr Wittgenstein’s position] is the fact that, after all, Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said, thus suggesting to the sceptical reader that possibly there may be some loophole through a hierarchy of languages or by some other exit. The whole subject of ethics, for example, is placed by Mr Wittgenstein in the mystical, inexpressible region. Nevertheless he is capable of conveying his ethical opinions. (TLP xxiii-xxiv).

To put it one way, what distinguishes the irresolute reading from the resolute reading is that the former is looking for the loopholes that save Mr Wittgenstein from the inconsistency of saying a good deal about what cannot be said (e.g. the ethical). But, and here is the complicating question, can one maintain *both* that what cannot be said really cannot be said *and* say, consistently, what Wittgenstein’s ethical opinions are?

The resolute reading thinks not. Simply put, it denies that the aim of the *Tractatus* is to express ethical, metaphysical or philosophical “opinions” and claims that when Wittgenstein says that ethics cannot be put into words, he means that it is conceptually on a par with ‘piggly wiggle tiggly.’ According to Conant, the irresolute

reading takes “the bait for the hook”<sup>18</sup> by failing to realize that the theory and set of opinions it purports to offer, as well as the view of philosophy they represent, are presented in order to disabuse the reader of her tendency to take them for sense. As for TLP 6.54, there is no dilemma because it is part of what resolute readers call the “frame” of the text, which instructs us how to read the “body.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Wittgenstein can maintain consistently that at TLP 6.54, he means what he says, which is that “everything else” is nonsense. TLP 6.54 itself, however, like the rest of the frame, is an instance of ordinary, that is, pre-theoretical or pre-Tractarian language. It is not itself the target of Wittgenstein’s criticism.

The main difficulty facing resolute readers is that if they deny that Wittgenstein aims to convey ethical and metaphysical “truths,” they have to explain what we are supposed to learn from a book that, on their view, neither says nor shows anything. According to Diamond, although we do not learn anything about metaphysics or ethics from the body of the *Tractatus*, by understanding the purpose of the frame we may learn something about ourselves. We may learn, for example, *that* we are willing to entertain some “pieces” of nonsense and not others.<sup>20</sup> In other words, although all nonsensical

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<sup>18</sup> Conant, “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” 381.

<sup>19</sup> In general, resolute readers refer to the frame as those sections of the *Tractatus* that are not nonsense and which are thus able to instruct us how to read its “nonsensical propositions.” These framing remarks include the preface, TLP 4.112–4.116, 5.61, and the “concluding remarks” (the last 12 or so).

<sup>20</sup> It is important in trying to grasp Diamond’s position that we do not unwittingly commit her to an irresolute reading by slipping in “kinds of nonsense” through the back door. Hence we have to talk about differences in nonsense with scare quotes in order to distinguish the view being criticized from the criticism.

propositions are *internally* or logically the same,<sup>21</sup> some are *externally* different in that they attract us or create in us the illusion of understanding. Diamond says, “What Wittgenstein means by calling his propositions nonsense is not that they do not fit into some official category . . . of intelligible propositions but that there is at most the illusion of understanding them.”<sup>22</sup> So, the *Tractatus* can show us that we are tempted by *its* nonsense, even though we are not tempted by ‘piggly wiggle tiggles,’ and this, on the resolute reading, is the first step in overcoming the illusion of thinking we understand what cannot be put into words.

According to Diamond, as well as resolute readers in general, the *Tractatus* does not articulate a pre-established distinction between sense and nonsense. Rather, it demonstrates that the attempt to establish the distinction itself results in nonsense, leaving us only with our ordinary conception of nonsense.<sup>23</sup> We might, then, understand the *Tractarian* task in the following way: assuming that the *Tractatus* does not defend a theoretical distinction between sense and nonsense, and assuming that we do not already have one ourselves, then we as readers are forced to decide for ourselves whether the propositions of the *Tractatus* are in fact nonsensical. Without a pre-established rule for distinguishing sense from nonsense, one must try to make sense out of the *Tractatus* in

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<sup>21</sup> Whether or not a “proposition” shares the general form of a proposition, it is nonsense only if it fails to assign meanings to all of its words. Cf. note 23 below.

<sup>22</sup> Diamond, “Ethics, imagination and the method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” 150.

<sup>23</sup> Continuing the definition begun in note 21 above, the ordinary conception of nonsense is defined at TLP 6.53, also part of the frame, where Wittgenstein says that “whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.” So, ordinary nonsense, the only kind of nonsense according to the resolute reader, results when someone fails to give meaning to certain signs in his proposition.

order to determine whether it makes sense. One has to, as it were, assume that it does make sense in order to find out whether it does. And, if one is unwilling to read it as though it does make sense – if one starts by assuming that it does not – then it cannot show us that it does not, since it shows us that only by our coming to realize that we were unable to make sense out of it ourselves. So, borrowing the metaphor from TLP 6.54, we can throw away the ladder only if we climb it on our own.

As Diamond notes, on the *Tractarian* account of nonsense, if ‘p’ is nonsense, then so is “He is inclined to say that ‘p.’” In other words, all propositions (or propositional attitudes) containing nonsensical propositions are themselves nonsensical. However, there is an important difference between ‘p’ and “He is inclined to say that ‘p’”: whereas the former is utterly uninformative (because it is nonsense), the latter *is* informative in that it tells us that so-and-so was inclined to speak nonsense. (And if by ‘nonsense’ one means something like ‘piggly wiggle tiddle’ or ‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves /Did gyre and gimble in the wabe,’ that *is* very informative.) This is an important distinction for the resolute reading, moreover, since it claims that although the *Tractatus* is, strictly speaking, nonsensical, it is nonetheless potentially informative. By including “the frame,” Wittgenstein allows himself to “talk nonsense” intelligibly in that he is pointing out that the propositions of the *Tractatus* were not his own, or meant as assertions about the world, but rather examples of what he was inclined to say. In that way, Wittgenstein can, so to speak, (invite us to) work through nonsense intelligibly, which one *cannot* do with a long string of piggies, wiggles, and tiggles. Moreover, since Wittgenstein tells us in the



frame that he could not make sense of the nonsense he was inclined to spout, he cannot save us from having to try for ourselves. That is, according to resolute readers, since Wittgenstein concludes *for himself* that the *Tractatus* is nonsense, what he does *not* do is give us, either in the frame or the body, a theory by which we can judge, once and for all, whether the philosophy it appears to contain is nonsense or not.

Thus, according to resolute readers, the value of the *Tractatus* is that it guides the reader in his effort to make sense of “traditional philosophy” – construed as the effort to view the world *sub specie aeterni* in order to make general metaphysical claims about it as a whole<sup>24</sup> – without inadvertently committing itself to that traditional picture. Even to say that such a picture of philosophy is wrong presupposes the intelligibility of the very picture the criticism aims to reject. By contrast, resolute readers understand the *Tractatus* as an exercise in imaginatively taking nonsense for sense, without prejudging that it is nonsense, or that nonsense is an “official category,” in order to see whether anything comes of it. In the end, as Michael Kremer puts it, we should read the *Tractatus* “ultimately [as] a test of what counts as the frame and what counts as the ladder to be discarded.”<sup>25</sup> To put it another way, it is an individual exercise of trying to make sense out of the *Tractatus* in order to examine whether we can. When Wittgenstein says (in the frame) that the point of the *Tractatus* is to help the reader see the world aright (TLP 6.54), all he means, according to the resolute reading, is that the text may help us realize that we were tempted into mistaking disguised nonsense for sense.

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<sup>24</sup> Diamond, “Ethics, imagination and the method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” 160.

<sup>25</sup> Kremer, “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense,” 43.

#### IV. What Ethics Is Not

As we examine how resolute readers apply their interpretation of TLP 6.54 to what Wittgenstein says about ethics, keep in mind that ethics is an example of the attempt to express what is “outside the world” (TLP 6.41) or “what is higher” (TLP 6.42) or mystical things “that make themselves manifest” (TLP 6.522). Again, what is clear from what Wittgenstein says “in” the *Tractatus* is that if there are any truths in ethics, they are, like the other propositions of the *Tractatus*, nonsensical. They cannot be put into words. However, as resolute readers wonder, if ethics cannot be put into words, by virtue of *what* does one distinguish ethical nonsense from non-ethical nonsense? In other words, resolute readers such as Conant believe that the fundamental error of the irresolute reading of ethics is that it unduly helps itself to criteria to pick out the “ethical remarks” of the *Tractatus*. The irresolute reader says that Wittgenstein shows us that “they” cannot be put into words, without realizing that by distinguishing the ethical remarks from the non-ethical remarks of the *Tractatus*, she is implying that the ethical remarks make some kind of sense.

An irresolute reader might respond that she is only discussing what we ordinarily call “ethical remarks,” namely those that employ “ethical vocabulary,” such as ‘good,’ ‘value,’ and ‘the will,’ but Conant argues that it is impossible to specify what makes a remark ethical, as opposed to metaphysical or factual, without attributing sense to it. So, either the irresolute reader is simply offering empirical observations of the (“ordinary”)

practice of calling some remarks ethical, or, in supposing that a remark really is ethical, she is presupposing that it makes sense.

Conant adds that by maintaining that ethical remarks *in particular* fail to make sense, irresolute readers attribute distinctive *internal features* to ethical vocabulary and thus to the propositions that contain it.<sup>26</sup> For example, in “The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language,” Rudolph Carnap says that ethical remarks, like those of metaphysics, are purely nonsensical (because there are no empirical criteria for correct usage), but he also says that there are no empirical criteria because they express an “attitude” toward the world. They are pseudo-statements whose significance is personal, emotional, or psychological – three regions outside the scope of the hard sciences. In fact, Carnap took himself to be employing the very same argument he attributed to the *Tractatus*: “either ethical propositions are a kind of descriptive proposition, and thus are not ethical, or they are not descriptive propositions, and in that case, they are nonsensical.”<sup>27</sup> So, in order to show that they are nonsensical, Carnap argued that they are not descriptive.

But, as Conant points out, it is impossible to show that ethical remarks are not descriptive without attributing to them some sort of content. The problem with an argument like Carnap’s is that if what Carnap wants to say about ethics is that ethical propositions attempt to transcend the world, then by his own lights he has no right to say

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<sup>26</sup> Conant, “What ‘Ethics’ in the *Tractatus* is *Not*,” 60.

<sup>27</sup> For a comparison between Wittgenstein and Carnap’s accounts of “the higher,” including this form of the argument, see Piergiorgio Donatelli, “The Problem of ‘The Higher’ in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” in *Religion and Wittgenstein’s Legacy*, ed. D.Z. Phillips; Mario von der Ruhr (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 20.

anything about them (legitimately), for presumably in attempting to transcend the world, they either succeed or fail. If they succeed (in transcending the world), then there are no criteria by which to assess their truth value, and they are thus meaningless. If they fail, then by his own theory, they are either descriptive or simply meaningless. So, although Carnap can certainly talk about the psychology of ethical expressions – he can describe what we do with “ethical expressions” or what they do to us – he cannot talk about ethical *propositions*, at least not without attributing sense to them and thereby rendering them unethical. And this is Conant’s bottom-line argument against all irresolute readings of the ethical remarks in the *Tractatus*: by distinguishing ethical propositions from metaphysical or philosophical propositions, one’s options are either to establish some criteria by which to distinguish them (i.e. to attribute sense to them) or to admit that there are no criteria and thus to give up talking about “them” (i.e. because they are simply nonsense). What one *cannot* do is argue that a specific kind of remark – one represented by a particular vocabulary – is nonsensical *because* it is ethical. That, indeed, would be to attempt to talk about what cannot be put into words.

It seems, then, that Wittgenstein’s argument that either a proposition is descriptive and not ethical or ethical and nonsense rules out talking about ethical propositions altogether, since there is no way of distinguishing them without attributing sense to them and thus making them unethical. However, on the basis of her interpretation of ‘nonsense’ – as it applies to the propositions of the *Tractatus* and the propositions of metaphysics – Diamond believes that she has shown us a way out of this

dilemma. She says that although *all* nonsensical propositions are internally the same – i.e. they are nonsense because we have failed to give a meaning to every word – they may differ externally. Again, some propositions may exercise our imagination in ways that teach us something about ourselves through our willingness to take them, and not others, for propositions with sense.

Although Diamond warns “against any idea that we should take Wittgenstein’s remarks about ethics to constitute philosophical analysis of a kind of discourse,” so that we do not make the same mistake as Carnap, she does think that ethical remarks “aim at bringing a kind of self-understanding through the reader’s imaginative activity,”<sup>28</sup> and that we can distinguish them by the kind of self-understanding they have the capacity to cultivate. Moreover, Diamond claims that she is not talking about the empirical psychological effect that “ethical propositions” have on us. Instead, she is saying that although there is no official category of ethical nonsense, we may talk about “it” in terms of the way in which we have to exercise our imagination in the effort to make sense out of “it.” In this sense, it is a logico-linguistic exercise as much as any, not just a psychological one. One thing we learn about ethical nonsense, for example, is that unlike philosophical nonsense, our attraction to ethical remarks survives (and should survive) the recognition that they are nonsense.<sup>29</sup>

What is it that continues to be attractive about our attempt to make sense out of “ethical nonsense,” as opposed to philosophical or metaphysical nonsense? On Diamond’s

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<sup>28</sup> Diamond, “Ethics, imagination and the method of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus,” 164.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 161-62.

view, we can understand the upshot of continuing to allow ourselves to be taken in by ethical nonsense if we compare Wittgenstein's use of 'transcendental' to Kant's, as when Wittgenstein says that "Ethics is transcendental" (6.421):

What 'transcendental' means in the *Tractatus* is that the 'sign' for whatever is called transcendental is the general form of a proposition, not some particular proposition or set of propositions that says something in particular. The only thing that could be said to do any meaning here – in logic or in ethics – is a sign that *says* nothing, but which contains (in a sense) every combination of signs to which we do give sense, every combination of signs that does say something, and no one of which expresses a logical state of affairs or an ethical one.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, what continues to attract us to "ethical nonsense" is similar to or the same as what attracts us to logical propositions even though they lack sense, too. Although neither succeeds in saying anything about the world, both are implicit in all that is said about it. They both, moreover, represent conditions for the possibility of sense while distinguishing the *expression* of those conditions from the attempt to *say* exactly what they are. On Diamond's view, we continue to be attracted to the propositions of both ethics and logic because they serve as a *technique* for demonstrating the limits of language from within, a technique that is useful in helping us distinguish certain discussions, such as one about the nature of radical evil, from more mundane, non-ethical discussions, such as one about the psychology of coping with radical evil. What is the difference? In the case of the former, it is impossible to make sense out of it without realizing that one would have

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 168.

to change the world as a whole, whereas in the case of the latter, one realizes that only a small piece of reality is under discussion.<sup>31</sup>

One might object here that Diamond is saying *something* about “ethical remarks” and thereby picking them out somehow. In response, I believe Diamond would simply say that she is not saying anything about ethical remarks. In general, all the resolute reading claims is that there are some propositions that attempt to speak about the world as a whole and thus fail to say or represent anything particular about it. Or, there is a cluster of propositions, rather, since this is part of what the so-called propositions of ethics, logic, aesthetic, and religion have in common and why they cannot, in the end, be distinguished from one another.

## V. The Problems of Life

Conant and Diamond try to resolve what they take to be the two main challenges of speaking about Wittgenstein’s view of ethics. The first is to speak about the remarks that are ostensibly about ethics without presupposing that they constitute a special subject matter; the second is to do so while appreciating that they are nevertheless important. In other words, they reject the substantial conception of nonsense, according to which there are internal differences between ethical and non-ethical nonsense, but they also reject the

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<sup>31</sup> Conant draws a similar parallel between ethics and logic. He says that the discussion of ethics in the 6.4s is an example of the many ways of combining words without the aim of representing. Following Wittgenstein’s *Grundgedanke* or “fundamental thought” – that logical constants do not represent (4.0312) – the discussion of ethics is part of his overall aim to show that philosophical problems arise when one tries to make language do something extraordinary. This is important because it follows that the “solutions” to the problems of ethics, like those of logic, consist in the vanishing of the problem. Like logic, ethics takes care of itself. See Conant, “What ‘Ethics’ in the *Tractatus* is *Not*,” 69.

idea that in rejecting the substantial conception of nonsense they have reached the end of the conversation about ethics. ‘Nonsense’ does not mean “not worth talking about.” And this seems to me a helpful way of handling the dilemma raised by TLP 6.54, without having to adopt a Carnapian understanding of ethical propositions. However, I do not believe that they have adequately explained the ethical *aim* of the book. For Conant, the ethical aim seems to consist in elucidating the parallel between the ethical remarks and the *Grundgedanke* of the *Tractatus*, but anyone familiar with Wittgenstein’s biography and personality is left with the nagging feeling that there is more to the ethical aim of the *Tractatus* than demonstrating the incoherence of a certain view of philosophy.

In Diamond’s case, although she explains the ethical aim of the book as a corollary to the correct interpretation of “nonsense,” she (like Conant) does not explain *why* we should care about elucidating the nature of philosophical problems in the first place. Kremer expresses this complaint about Diamond’s interpretation as follows:

Similarly Diamond suggests that the *Tractatus*’ aim will be achieved when the self-understanding of those attracted to philosophy leads to their losing that attraction. Yet this leads one to wonder what the source of this attraction *is*, and why bringing about the end of such an attraction is the aim of a book with an *ethical* purpose.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, although Conant and Diamond explain how they think we should read the remarks that are ostensibly about ethics, in part as an example of the larger *Tractarian* effort to elucidate the distinction between sense and nonsense, they do not explain the way in which that effort is itself *ethical*. It is one thing for someone to have an inkling

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<sup>32</sup> Kremer, “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense,” 46.



that the problems of philosophy are hollow, or that they arise as a misunderstanding of language; it is another thing for an *author* to care to make this point publicly. Or, as Climacus says, “to write a book and revoke it is something else than not writing it; that to write a book which does not claim importance for anyone is something else than leaving it unwritten” (CUP 523). In short, what bothers me about the majority of resolute readings regarding Wittgenstein’s “ethics” is that they do not make it clear in what sense Wittgenstein’s discussion of ethics is *ethical*.

In an attempt to explain the ethical aim of the *Tractatus*, Kremer argues in “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense” that the *Tractatus* ultimately represents Wittgenstein’s attempt to solve – or dissolve – the fundamental problems of life. According to Kremer, Wittgenstein (like many of us) was drawn to philosophy by a profound insecurity and need to justify his life. Often, he says, we philosophize because “we feel ourselves to be out of harmony, not at peace, with ourselves, others, or the world,”<sup>33</sup> and Wittgenstein was certainly no exception.<sup>34</sup> Even without studying his biography, we can gather a sense that these larger existential questions are buried deep in the purpose of the *Tractatus*, as when he says, “The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man” (TLP 6.43), “Death is not an event in life” (TLP 6.4311), “The solution to the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem” (TLP 6.521). So I believe that

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>34</sup> For example, in a letter to Russell, Wittgenstein talks about the *effect* reading William James had on him: “Whenever I have time I now read James’s ‘Varieties of Religious Experience.’ This book does me a lot of good. I do not mean to say that I will be a saint soon, but I am not sure that it does not improve me a little in the way in which I would like to improve *very much*: namely I think that it helps me to get rid of the *Sorge* (in the sense in which Goethe used the word in the Second Part of *Faust*).” (LW to BR 22.6.12)

Kremer is right: any account of the ethical aim of the *Tractatus* is incomplete if it does not explain or at least discuss the personal or existential issues that motivated Wittgenstein to write the *Tractatus* at all, and to write it as he did.

To explain how Wittgenstein's existential conflicts inform how we ought to read the *Tractatus* – almost all of which, after all, really *is* about the nature of symbolic representation – Kremer suggests that we compare the *Tractatus* to the epistles of St. Paul and to the philosophy of St. Augustine since they share the same paradoxical structure. In his attempt to articulate the path to eternal salvation, for example, St. Paul maintains that although salvation requires faith, the pursuit of faith cannot be motivated by a desire for salvation, since that desire turns faith into something else. Although one is required to have faith to get into heaven, one should not pursue it *in order to* get into heaven. Similarly, St. Augustine argues that humility is the key to eternal salvation, but again, that one cannot become humble in order to secure eternal salvation, since nothing is more arrogant than the belief that it is possible to secure your own eternal salvation. What St. Paul and St. Augustine are trying to show us is that eternal salvation, by its very structure, is not a game that we can win on our own, or without the grace of God. Moreover, they both emphasize this aspect of eternal salvation because they believe that it is precisely our striving to save ourselves, or to justify our lives on our own, that pushes us deeper into despair. It is precisely the fact that we are the sort of creatures that cannot justify our own lives or achieve our own eternal salvation that causes us to despair in the first place.

On Kremer's reading, then, the paradoxical structure of TLP 6.54 indicates that the purpose of the *Tractatus* is to teach us humility.<sup>35</sup> Although the *Tractatus* is *about* the need to establish a logically perspicuous language and the methods of constructing a *Begriffsschrift*, its *aim* is to demonstrate the futility of seeking an ultimate justification for life and happiness. Employing the basic conclusion of the resolute reading – that the body of the *Tractatus* shows us that the propositions of philosophy are nonsense, ordinarily construed – Kremer argues that the aim of the exercise is not just to undermine our attraction to irresolute readings of 'nonsense,' but to show us that philosophy, however formal, cannot provide a set of rules to live by.<sup>36</sup>

So, what Kremer adds to Conant and Diamond's attempts to show what ethics is *not*, is an explanation of *why* Wittgenstein tempts us with a certain view of philosophy. To be sure, he is making certain logical points about the limits of language and philosophy – perhaps that there are no criteria by which to distinguish ethical from non-ethical nonsense – but Wittgenstein also seems to want to show that we are the sort of creatures that are tempted by the hope of exceeding those limits. Perhaps like St. Paul and St. Augustine, he is addressing the problems of life by helping us see the hubris

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<sup>35</sup> Kremer, "The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense," n. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Kremer thus offers an interesting reading of the optimism motivating Frege and Russell's logicism, or their belief that with the help of a logically perfect language, philosophy would become a maximally general science that provides its own justification and which is able to offer a model for all other forms of justification. I am not exploring the details of this reading here since, besides the fact that it is not directly relevant to understanding the *purpose* of Tractarian nonsense, I think that an adequate account would require comparing Frege and Russell to Leibniz and his notion of a *lingua characteristica* (a language in which all knowledge could be formally expressed and subjected to the rules of inference) as well as to Plato's philosophy and the idea that justification is a matter of "sharing in" the forms, two points of comparison that would take us well beyond the scope of this dissertation.

involved in trying to settle them once and for all. If Kremer is right, this would help us to understand one of Wittgenstein's more cryptic, but important, remarks: "The solution to the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem" (TLP 6.521).

## VI. An Ethical Deed

In my view, there are at least two main virtues of Kremer's reading. The first is that it draws a connection between Wittgenstein's work in logic and Christianity, which as I suggested in chapter one, any comprehensive interpretation of the *Tractatus* should not ignore. In my mind, it is beyond doubt that the *Tractatus* is in part a product of Wittgenstein's encounter with Kierkegaard's religious writings and Leo Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief* and Wittgenstein's belief that "Christianity is indeed the only sure way to happiness."<sup>37</sup> Second, it does a much better job of showing that, or perhaps how, the *Tractatus* reflects Wittgenstein's concern with "the problems of life."<sup>38</sup> However, one main obstacle facing Kremer's reading – and, for that matter, any reading that wishes to explain Wittgenstein's religious point of view – is that it needs to explain why it is that even though the aim of the *Tractatus* may be *consistent* with the lessons of St. Paul or St. Augustine, or inspired by the religious works of Kierkegaard and Tolstoy, Wittgenstein does not say so explicitly or mention them by name, as he does Frege and Russell. In

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Monk, *The Duty of Genius*, 122. Also, see Leo Tolstoy, *The Gospel in Brief*, trans. Isabel Hapgood (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

<sup>38</sup> Although Conant also suggests that what we learn about ethics is that, like logic, it takes care of itself and thus that the problems of ethics only have the illusion of depth – the solution is seen in the vanishing of the problem – he fails to explain what this means for anyone who does not already think the problems of philosophy are serious.

other words, even though I am sympathetic with Kremer's reading, and think that it is interesting in itself, I wonder whether, in our attempt to attribute it to the *Tractatus*, it can ever rise above the level of speculation.

Another issue I have with Kremer's reading applies equally to all resolute readings. In short, I do not yet see how they do not fall prey to the same criticism with which they indict the irresolute reading. If one shows that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are in fact nonsense, and if it is true that if "p" is nonsense then so is "Wittgenstein says that 'p'", then so is "Wittgenstein does *not* say that 'p.'" Perhaps a reading like Diamond's, which insists that the *Tractatus* illustrates merely what one is *inclined* to say, really does avoid attributing a particular thesis or view to the *Tractatus* and thus does not sneak a little nonsense in through the back door. But it seems to me that the more one interprets the *Tractatus* along the lines of "Wittgenstein rejects *that* view" or "He believed *this* about humility," the more one is trying to make sense out of nonsense or show how nonsense is, in rival terms, "illuminating." Moreover, similar to the claim that if "p" is nonsense, so is "He is inclined to say that 'p'", it seems to me that if attempting to justify our lives is arrogant (not humble), then so is the claim that the aim of the *Tractatus* is to teach us not to justify our lives – as they both imply that there is a (partial) solution to the problems of life which *we* can determine. Kremer suggests that now, at least, we know what *not* to do or hope for.

Admittedly, this kind of criticism is potentially unfair to Kremer and other resolute readers, as it implies that the only other option is not to defend any

interpretation at all. That is, I am claiming that to say on Wittgenstein's behalf, "This is what he thought," "This was his aim," "This is what he hoped to teach us," even if the thought or lesson is a product of distinguishing the frame from the body (i.e. not a lesson "within" the text), is to read sense into a work that these interpreters insist is plain, garden-variety nonsense. It is potentially unfair in the sense that it raises the (rhetorical) question: "What else is an *interpreter* of nonsense to do?" But, having introduced the notion of interpretive nihilism in the previous two chapters, it may already be clear that my answer is "nothing" – at least nothing in the sense of not attributing clear views, theses, or points of view. Of course, I do not want to claim that there is no purpose in reading and trying to understand irresolubly complex philosophers – I hope that is clear by now, too – but I am wary of offering interpretations in the form of clear theses or views or targets on behalf of someone who avoided offering them on his own behalf. Before I develop this response in more detail – it is the subject of the next chapter – I want to mention briefly one other way of understanding the ethical aim of the *Tractatus*, which does not fall directly into the resolute/irresolute dichotomy.

This reading can be found in Paul Engelmann and Janik and Toulmin's shared idea that the *Tractatus* represents a kind of anti-intellectualism. Rather than read the *Tractatus* as "arguing" for the existence of ineffable truths, as the irresolute reading does, or against that very view, as the resolute reading does, they claim that we should take seriously Wittgenstein's remark that the person who is shown that his propositions are nonsensical "would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy" (TLP

6.53). Conant and Diamond argue that although we are not being taught philosophy *qua* metaphysics – which would be true if it could be said – we are being taught something about ourselves, namely that we are seduced by certain instances of nonsense (and not by others). However, Engelmann and Janik and Toulmin suggest that it was not Wittgenstein’s aim to teach us anything in particular, either about metaphysics or about ourselves (in Conant and Diamond’s sense). They claim, and I follow them in claiming, that though the *Tractatus* is certainly enigmatic and riddling, it is not necessarily a riddle with a clear or single (kind of) solution.

Engelmann and Janik and Toulmin are not claiming that there is nothing to learn from the *Tractatus*, and certainly not that it was Wittgenstein’s aim to stop us from talking about ethics. They were aware of the fact that at the end of “A Lecture on Ethics,” for example, Wittgenstein says that although discussing ethics and religion “does not add to our knowledge in any sense . . . it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it” (LE 44). The point, according to Janik and Toulmin, is that “we must, at all costs, avoid over-intellectualizing and so misrepresenting the true character of the issues involved.”<sup>39</sup> This may sound very close to the resolute reading, especially Diamond and Kremer’s varieties of it, but they are importantly different, at least in emphasis. Whereas resolute readers argue for a specific interpretation on the basis of some understanding of Wittgenstein’s view of language or the paradoxical truth of Christianity, Janik and

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<sup>39</sup> Janik and Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*, 195.

Toulmin leave the correct reading of the *Tractatus* open-ended, since they argue that the ethical aim of the *Tractatus* requires us to read the text as a work of art. They argue that Wittgenstein, a product of fin-de-siècle Vienna, was developing the view that “only art can express moral truth, and only the artist can teach the things that matter most in life” and that “To be concerned merely with form [à la Diamond], like the aesthetes in the 1890s, is to pervert art.”<sup>40</sup>

Janik and Toulmin claim that the *Tractatus* exemplifies the view that art is not only a medium for conveying moral truths, but that art and ethics are essentially one and the same. Art without a moral aim is not art; and becoming moral *is* a work of art. This seems to be at the center of Engelmann’s interpretation of the *Tractatus* as well, as he says, “I guess the statement of the *Tractatus*, ‘Ethics and Aesthetics are one,’ is one of the most frequently misunderstood propositions of the book.”<sup>41</sup> But what, then, is the correct understanding of this proposition? According to both Engelmann and Janik and Toulmin, by identifying art with ethics, Wittgenstein is reminding us to think of ethics as a *deed*, something one *does*, not something one thinks about. Engelmann says, “The view of the *Tractatus* in this respect can be summed up briefly by saying: ethical propositions do not exist; ethical action does exist.”<sup>42</sup> On their view, then, the *Tractatus* is an artistic representation of Wittgenstein’s attempt to live well, to be better.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>41</sup> Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein*, 125.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 110.



Although this interpretation is *consistent* with Kremer's reading, it does not necessarily support it, since Kremer encourages us to believe something propositional. Similarly, although it may sound consistent with Diamond's interpretation of the ethical remarks and constituting an imaginative exercise, it does not necessarily support it either, since Diamond has us exercising something *in particular*. That is, as a work of art, the *Tractatus* does not rule out the object of Diamond's criticism, but neither does it clarify exactly what Wittgenstein's deed consists in. Even the phrase, "what the deed consists in" is strange and should lead us to think that by calling attention to the sense in which the *Tractatus* is a *deed*, its aim cannot be summarized, in the same way it is impossible to summarize what is beautiful about the elderly woman's praying the same prayer every day in the same pew at the same time, come rain or shine, war or peace, sickness or health.

The question that we would like to put to Engelmann and Janik and Toulmin is this: how are we supposed to understand all that Wittgenstein *does* say about ethics in the *Tractatus* and elsewhere, in light of the claim that the ethical aim consists in Wittgenstein's *not* talking about ethics? And I think their response would be that insofar as the *Tractatus* was an ethical deed, the challenge consisted in not saying too much. Explaining the ethical aim of the *Tractatus* does not consist in extrapolating a theory, view or criticism on the basis of what Wittgenstein *does* say about ethics, but in explaining why Wittgenstein says anything at all about ethics (i.e. does not say less than he does). Janik and Toulmin suggest that this is the correct way of approaching the remarks on ethics, and the text as a whole, when they say, in response to the question of

why Wittgenstein did not make himself clearer, either in or out of the *Tractatus*, “Indeed, the closest we may be able to come to understanding Wittgenstein’s mind, at this point, is to call to mind the aphorism of Karl Kraus: ‘Why does a man write? Because he does not possess enough character not to write.’”<sup>43</sup>

## VII. Conclusion

What the secondary literature about Wittgenstein’s early view of ethics shows us, albeit indirectly, is just how elusive and enigmatic the *Tractatus* is. By emphasizing the importance of the term ‘nonsensical’ for understanding the aim of the *Tractatus*, the resolute and irresolute readings demonstrate that the text can be read both as endorsing and rejecting a particular view of philosophy. By emphasizing the importance of understanding what is *ethical* about endorsing or rejecting the conception of philosophy under discussion, Kremer draws our attention to the fact that there is an existential aspect of the text that is central to understanding both its aim and what it is about. And whether Kremer’s interpretation is ultimately correct – I claim that we can never know – it reminds us that we are discussing a profoundly conflicted soul who was wrestling with the problems of life by solving the problems of logic – a strange combination indeed.

Engelmann and Janik and Toulmin, on the other hand, claim that the ethical aim of the *Tractatus* is reflected in its aesthetic aspect, which is not directly stated or state-able, and certainly not didactic. Perhaps Wittgenstein had St. Paul in mind or wanted to

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<sup>43</sup> Janik and Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*, 201.

disabuse us of a particular view of philosophy, but according to Janik and Toulmin, these possibilities are not what the ethical aim consists in. The *Tractatus*, like any other work of art, is an expression of life *and* a conscious decision not to try to condense it into a set of internally consistent propositions. Of course, almost everyone would agree with the latter point as I just formulated it, but by comparing ethics and art, as opposed to ethics and logic, Engelmann, Janik, and Toulmin raise a question about the aim and limitations of the secondary literature. If we read the *Tractatus* as a work of art, and if Wittgenstein was making a point about what we cannot say *by not saying it*, then the degree to which he was successful challenges our aim to attribute any one view to the *Tractatus*. In other words, I wonder whether, if its ethical aim is reflected in what Wittgenstein does *not* say, it makes sense to *say* what the ethical aim of the *Tractatus* is.

What this literature also shows us is that the text would be much less enigmatic if we ignored its “ethical part” altogether and focused instead on what Wittgenstein does say in the *Tractatus*, including what he says about ethics and nonsense. We would not be forced to grasp in the dark at occasional clues or empathize with Wittgenstein’s existential angst or his demands of art and culture. It would be enough to reconstruct his critique of logical representation and test his solutions to the logical and philosophical puzzles that stumped Frege and Russell. But I imagine, on the basis of the literature, that we would not be satisfied with the idea that the *Tractatus* does not teach us anything that we cannot now learn from a logic textbook or from one of the many “Introductions” to the *Tractatus*.

The fundamental or central difficulty of the *Tractatus*, then, is that despite first appearances, it is not a book *just* about symbolic representation. Wittgenstein tells us that it should not be read as a textbook and that “its *purpose* would be achieved if it gave *pleasure* to one person who read it and understood it” (TLP, p. 3). We may not understand why he thought this book would give anyone pleasure, or why we ought to think that success in philosophy is a matter of pleasure, but then again, not everyone thinks of philosophy as an existential project. So, when we think about the *Tractatus* as a whole, with all the clues that Wittgenstein leaves us, and with the variety of possible interpretations, the question we keep coming back to is this: what is this book really about? My claim is that *if* the *Tractatus* is the most enigmatic work of philosophy ever published, it is because it does not give us enough to settle this, the most basic interpretive question. It is yet another example of a text that leads to interpretive nihilism, but with two important differences from Socrates and Kierkegaard: it is a text (and thus different from the (non-)expression of Socrates’ philosophy) and it is very much situated in the tradition of early analytic philosophy, the tradition of Frege and Russell, in which linguistic clarity is the aim (an importantly different context from that in which Kierkegaard wrote his pseudonymous literature). In short, the *Tractatus* might be the *most* enigmatic text ever published because (1) it does not represent Wittgenstein’s point of view and intimates that he may not have one in particular, and (2) we expect that, following Frege and Russell, he does or should. But it also might be just as enigmatic as the philosophy of Socrates and Kierkegaard.

Moreover, the reason to think that it is the *ethical aim* that makes it the most enigmatic work of philosophy ever published is the possibility that Wittgenstein did not say more *on purpose*. In the very last line of the *Tractatus*, he says, “What we cannot speak about we *must* pass over in silence” (TLP 7, my emphasis). And while the resolute and irresolute readings compete over the correct interpretation of “what we cannot speak about,” too little attention in my opinion is paid to the “must” in TLP 7 or to what Wittgenstein’s silence, assuming he practiced what he preached, means for the secondary literature. That is, whether “what we cannot speak about” refers to ineffable truths or to garden-variety gibberish, nobody has yet to give an adequate account of why we *must* not say what cannot be spoken about. For me, the primary thing to ask is about what kind of normative force TLP 7 has and whether, if Wittgenstein really insisted on silence and practiced it himself, we *should* continue to say on Wittgenstein’s behalf what he was unwilling to say on his own.

Again, this threatens to undermine the rationale for a secondary literature about the *Tractatus*, as well as the purpose of this chapter and dissertation. But I think it is precisely this possibility that trying to determine the ethical aim of the *Tractatus* forces upon us. Conant and Diamond, too, have recognized this as a consequence of trying to fix *the* ethical aim of the *Tractatus*. Diamond says, for example, “The book’s ethical intention includes the intention of the book not to be interpreted,”<sup>44</sup> and Conant says,

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<sup>44</sup> Diamond, “Ethics, imagination and the method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” 169.

“There can be no specialists in ‘Wittgensteinian ethics.’”<sup>45</sup> I cannot see, however, how they are able to get around Russell’s reservation – that they manage to say a good deal about what cannot be said, or manage to interpret what should not be interpreted, or to specialize in what cannot be specialized in. In their own defense, they might point out that their interpretations do exemplify a kind of silence, insofar as they claim that the *Tractatus* shows us that there is nothing behind irresolute readings of nonsense. But I think that they cannot defend the existence of their own interpretations without “chickening out,” as Diamond would say, since despite their insistence that the *Tractatus* does not defend a particular view or set of truths about metaphysics, they nevertheless pit him against a specific conception of philosophy.<sup>46</sup> In other words, though Conant and Diamond claim that they are not advancing a view on Wittgenstein’s behalf, it is clear who they think misunderstands Wittgenstein and how; and to me, for all intents and purposes, this amounts to attributing a view to Wittgenstein, even if only negatively.

In the end, I think the central difficulty of understanding the *Tractatus* consists in the fact that rather than practicing what it preaches, it practices the art of not preaching. If this is right, then we should not try to infer what we think Wittgenstein is preaching from what we think he is practicing, just as we should not read Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous literature as evidence for what *Kierkegaard* believed. But again, a work

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<sup>45</sup> Conant, “What ‘Ethics’ in the *Tractatus* is *Not*,” 69.

<sup>46</sup> “Chickening out” is a phrase Diamond uses throughout her work to criticize the resolute reading. She says that resolute readers “chicken out” in the sense that they do not take the notion of “nonsense” seriously enough. To take it seriously, not to chicken out, is to appreciate that there is only one kind of nonsense – garden-variety nonsense.

that does not want to be interpreted *in a certain way* – i.e. as evidence for what the author believes – is not necessarily a work that does not want to be read at all. Perhaps in saying that we must pass over in silence what we cannot talk about, Wittgenstein is harking back to the kind of silence we attributed to Socrates, and which I argued was re-created by Kierkegaard, the aim of which is not to stand in the way of learning ethics on one's own or for oneself. But even this may be saying too much, for as I have been trying to show by comparing Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein, the practice of not preaching is not only a challenge for the original authors (or interlocutor in the case of Socrates), but also and particularly a challenge for commentators who attempt to trace their own views back to a very cryptic source.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

## Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, and Socrates: On Irony, Humor, and Silences

*If we now say that irony constituted the substance of his existence, and if we further postulate that irony is a negative concept, it is easy to see how difficult it becomes to fix a picture of him; indeed, it seems impossible or at least as difficult to picture a nisse with the cap that makes him invisible.*

– Kierkegaard

In the previous three chapters, I have tried to distinguish the three philosophers I am considering as much as possible in order to examine each on his own terms. However, I have not kept them entirely apart. In chapter one, I employed Kierkegaard's early interpretation of Socrates in order to help us see the complexity of "the Socratic problem" and the nature and purpose of what I call Socratic silence. In chapter two, I claimed that Kierkegaard's pseudonymity is his attempt to re-create *Socratic* silence. And in chapter three, Socrates and Kierkegaard are clearly in the background of my attempt to show that the ethical aim of the *Tractatus* is what makes it one of the most enigmatic texts ever published. Nevertheless, the comparisons and parallels that I have been drawing among the three philosophers so far are indirect, muted, or assumed. So, in the final chapter, I would like to make them more explicit.



To do this, I will consider a different interpretation of the ethical aim of the *Tractatus* from those I considered in the last chapter – namely, that of James Conant.<sup>1</sup> I have saved Conant’s reading for the present chapter because Conant defends it by comparing Wittgenstein to Kierkegaard, and thus provides us with an occasion to do the same.<sup>2</sup> Before I discuss Conant’s reading in particular, however, I would like to provide a general outline of four features that characterize Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard’s philosophy, and which I and Conant, along with Genia Schönbaumsfeld and Stanley Cavell,<sup>3</sup> can presuppose as common ground.

The first is that both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard were clear that philosophy is not one of the natural sciences or a body of doctrine, but an activity. Wittgenstein says exactly this at TLP 4.111-4.112, and I hope it is clear from chapter two that, in challenging the Hegelian philosophy, Kierkegaard might have said exactly the same thing. The second feature is that they both thought that philosophical problems (especially philosophical problems relating to ethics, religion, and aesthetics) are

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<sup>1</sup> Conant develops this interpretation in the following series of papers: “Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors.”; “Must We Show What We Cannot Say.”; and “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense.” Henceforth, I will refer to these in text as PTTT, MWS, and KWN, respectively

<sup>2</sup> Conant, of course, was not the first to compare Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard. Even before the *Tractatus* was published, commentators had noticed Wittgenstein’s admiration and sympathy for Kierkegaard. For example, even before the *Tractatus* was published, Russell says that “[Wittgenstein] reads people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silesius, and he seriously contemplates becoming a monk.” Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life. Young Ludwig 1889–1921* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1988), 112. Several other authors have drawn out the comparison more explicitly. See, for example, Richard H. Bell and Ronald E. Hustwit, eds., *Essays on Kierkegaard & Wittgenstein: On Understanding the Self* (Wooster: The College of Wooster, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> A similar account can be found in Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres.*, specifically the first half of chapter two. See also Cavell, “Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy” and “Kierkegaard’s *On Authority and Revelation.*”

essentially or internally related to the problems of life. Kierkegaard suggests this connection when he says, for example, in *The Book on Adler* that “the profound mind is not an aesthetic qualification with regard to genius but is essentially an ethical qualification.”<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, Wittgenstein writes (albeit several years after the *Tractatus* was published) that what makes a philosophical problem hard to understand has “to do with the will, rather than with the intellect” (CV 17). That is, as I understand Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, “profundity” (as opposed to the ability to calculate, compute, and measure) is essentially tied to one’s character.

The third feature is that both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard believed that the aim of philosophy is to clarify conceptual confusion, not to teach someone something that she did not already know. On this view, the job of the author is to diagnose and remove illusions, generally the illusion that the problems of life and philosophy can be resolved outside the context of individual lives. Fourth, they both emphasized that there is an important difference between *what* one says and *how* one says it. Kierkegaard says in the *Postscript*, for instance, “Wherever the subjective is of importance in knowledge, and appropriation the main thing, the process of communication is a work of art” (CUP 66). Engelman, Janik, and Toulmin attribute a similar idea to Wittgenstein when they claim that the *Tractatus* is better read as a deed or work of art.

In short, these features might be summarized in the claim that the aim of philosophy, as Wittgenstein says in *Culture and Value*, is “to be no more than a mirror”

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<sup>4</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, ed. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

(18e), a mirror in which the reader can catch her own reflection and potentially recognize the source of her own confusion. However, it is important to emphasize, as Schönbaumsfeld does, that “just as a looking-glass has no ‘point of view’ and ‘adds’ nothing to the way things are, so Wittgenstein’s and Kierkegaard’s writing simply ‘puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything’ (PI §126).”<sup>5</sup> This is an important point because it encourages us to ask whether Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, and Socrates were operating with the same conception of philosophy that motivates a secondary literature which attempts to determine the author or speaker’s point of view once and for all – one which seeks the “correct” interpretation.

Conant, then, is an especially good interlocutor at this point in our discussion because he is sensitive to the possibility that neither the *Tractatus* nor the *Postscript* purports to offer a point of view or theory. But, as I hope to show here, he also fails to resist the same tendency that I argued motivates Vlastos and Lippitt’s account of Socratic irony – namely, the desire to avoid what Lippitt calls interpretive nihilism. That is, although Conant claims that the texts do not represent a point of view, I will argue that he unwittingly attributes one to them anyway. Regarding the ethical aim of *Tractatus* in particular, I will argue that he fails to appreciate the possibility that the *Tractatus* is ironical in the Socratic sense, and thus that his attempt to fix a picture of Wittgenstein only illustrates further the challenge of handling an author whose work can be described as a kind of silence.

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<sup>5</sup> Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres*, 41.

A similar criticism of Conant's interpretation has been offered, ironically enough, by Lippitt himself.<sup>6</sup> According to Lippitt, by misunderstanding the role of humor in the *Postscript*, Conant makes Kierkegaard out to be more authoritarian than he actually is. Kierkegaard does not, as Conant believes, make it obvious how we ought to read the text or what we ought to get out of it. Similarly, I argue that by misunderstanding the role of irony in both the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*, Conant makes Wittgenstein out to be more authoritarian than he actually is. That is, although Conant maintains that there can be *no* experts in Wittgenstein's ethics, none, he unwittingly and mistakenly treats Wittgenstein as one, i.e. as having the last word on how we ought to understand the ethical aim of the *Tractatus*.<sup>7</sup>

The present chapter consists of four more sections. In the first, I present Conant's account of the parallel between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, and the sense in which the aim of their philosophy is ethical. Then I turn to Lippitt's criticism and a discussion of humor in the *Postscript*. While the discussion of humor may seem like a diversion at first, it is essential to understanding how the *Tractatus* might be considered ironical, which I turn to in the next section. Not surprisingly, Socrates should be kept in mind during our discussion of irony. Finally, in the last section, I offer a few brief and concluding remarks about the dissertation as a whole.

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<sup>6</sup> John Lippitt, "A Funny Thing Happened to Me on the Way to Salvation: Climacus as Humorist in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997).

<sup>7</sup> The reader may object that of course he has the last word: he is the author. However, I want to show that he does not necessarily have the last word, even if he is the "author," for the meaning of 'author' is precisely what we are reconsidering.

## I. The Ethical Purpose of Nonsense

In order to understand Conant's account of the ethical aim of the *Tractatus*, it is important to keep in mind what motivates it. Beginning with the first paper in which he compares Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say," he offers the parallel in defense of the resolute reading of the *Tractatus*, or the "new Wittgenstein" as it is also called, which as we saw in the last chapter is a rejection of the "traditional," "standard," or "irresolute readings."<sup>8</sup> In this paper, for example, Conant says, "The 'what' in 'what cannot be said' refers to nothing" (MWS, 244), and "All the nonsense there is old-fashioned, straightforward, garden variety, completely incomprehensible gibberish" (MWS, 253) – direct attacks on those readings that claim that the 'what' in "what cannot be said" refers to "things" that would be true if they could be said.

Conant compares Wittgenstein to Kierkegaard, moreover, because he thinks that the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus* have been misread in perfectly parallel ways. That is, according to Conant, standard interpretations of the *Postscript* are typically "irresolute" in the exact same way as standard interpretations of the *Tractatus*. And this is because both texts purport to talk about or communicate "what cannot be communicated":

The parallel moment . . . is summarized in the *Postscript* by the formula that 'what can be indirectly communicated cannot be directly communicated,' and in the *Tractatus* by the famous and equally cryptic remark that 'what can be shown cannot be said.' The parallel is generally made out along something like the following lines: each of these works argues for a distinction between what can be

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<sup>8</sup> For a general introduction to "the new Wittgenstein," see Alice Cray's "Introduction" to Alice Cray and Rupert Read, eds., *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2000).

said (or directly communicated) and that which cannot be said (or directly communicated) and that each work undertakes to exhibit the unsayable through this delimitation of the sayable. (KWN, 197)

So, although the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus* are ostensibly about different subjects – the former is ostensibly about the difficulty of becoming a Christian; the latter, about the fundamental nature of language and the world – they are both understood as endorsing the possibility of “illuminating nonsense,” i.e., that there are some truths that can be shown but not said. Conant argues, by contrast, that they are parallel in that they both tempt us with the possibility of illuminating nonsense, but only in order to expose that possibility as itself nonsensical (ordinarily construed).

In saying that the aim of the *Tractatus* and *Postscript* is to expose the incoherence of the notion of illuminating nonsense, Conant does not imply that there are *no* arguments or theses to be found in the *Tractatus* and *Postscript*, but rather that standard interpretations have misunderstood the significance of the “doctrines” one *does* find in them. What commentators do not appreciate, according to Conant, is the conception of philosophical authorship that underlies the *Tractatus* and *Postscript*. He says, “unless we come to terms with his conception of philosophical difficulty – where the pressure of this conception is reflected in the peculiar form of the author’s text – we shall fail to understand his thought” (PTTT, 250). In other words, it is not that under one conception of philosophy – “in which the accent falls on putting forward substantive views by means of arguments” (KWN, 195) – there are no views or arguments to be found in the *Tractatus* or the *Postscript*. Rather, Conant maintains that Wittgenstein and

Kierkegaard did not share this conception of philosophy, and that the views or arguments which *can* be found in their works are in the service of a different activity. What needs to be understood, then, is the nature of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard's philosophical activity.

According to Conant, the purpose of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein's philosophical activity is twofold: to expose the incoherence of the "doctrines" that one finds in their respective works and to diagnose the source of one's attraction to them (KWN, 196). In other words, Conant thinks that the *Tractatus* and *Postscript* present arguments and theses in order to show not only that they are incoherent but also that we are nevertheless seduced by them. Following Henry Allison, he says that the *Postscript* is a *reductio ad absurdum* of "the philosophical project of clarifying and propounding what it is to be a Christian" (KWN, 207), and he seems to think that *mutatis mutandis* the same is true of the *Tractatus*.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, insofar as what is reduced to absurdity is not a particular belief but an entire point of view or conception of philosophy, the aim of the texts is not to prove anything to the reader, but to get her to see that she is entangled in a confused way of looking at the world.

To clarify Conant's view in more detail, specifically the difference between disproving a *belief*, on the one hand, and exposing the confusion of an incoherent *point of view*, on the other, let us consider an example of "what cannot be communicated" from

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<sup>9</sup> Allison, "Christianity and Nonsense," 433.

the *Postscript*. One question we would like answered is why we ought to care about a text whose aim is to expose its own incoherence.

### *The Absolute Paradox*

According to Conant, the aim of the *Postscript* is to dispel the illusion that the difficulty of becoming a Christian is a philosophical or epistemological problem. To accomplish this, Climacus begins with what Conant calls a “grammatical investigation” (which is an allusion to the later Wittgenstein’s practice of showing that philosophical puzzles arise from confusing conceptual with empirical questions).<sup>10</sup> In particular, Climacus examines the grammatical difference between asking questions about salvation or the good life and questions about what we can know, in order to show, first, that there is indeed a difference, and second, that failing to appreciate the difference leads to confusion. For instance, when we ask about the significance of the claim that “objective reasoning cannot attain the pitch of certainty that is appropriate to religious faith” (KWN, 207), someone (most likely a philosopher) might interpret the claim as suggesting that faith requires a special *kind* of evidence other than objective reasoning. However, someone else (a priest, perhaps) might interpret the claim as claiming that “appeals to evidence have no role to play of the sort that [she] imagines in the logic of religious concepts such as faith and revelation” (KWN, 209). In other words, what the philosopher might interpret as an empirical question – What *would* count as evidence for

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<sup>10</sup> Cavell makes a similar comparison earlier in his “Kierkegaard’s *On Authority and Revelation*.”



faith? – might also be understood as a rejection of (empirical) appeals to evidence. And the difference between these two interpretations is clearly not empirical itself, for whether empirical data is appropriate is precisely what is being disputed. It is “grammatical.”

At bottom, grammatical investigations examine how *language is used* – as opposed to (1) examining what is true of the *world* or reality, and (2) examining the *essence* of language or words. So, the aim of a grammatical investigation of religious language, as above, is to help the reader to reflect on whether she is under “the illusion that one can avail oneself of religious categories simply by using certain words, that the words carry their (religious) meanings with them, regardless of how they are used” (PTTT, 281). In other words, a grammatical investigation aims to show that although the philosopher and the priest use the same words – ‘certainty’ and ‘faith,’ for example – they are not necessarily talking about the same thing. They may be but the point of the investigation is to show that they are not *necessarily*: there is nothing intrinsic to the language or the world that determines whether they are or not. And, more importantly, assuming that they are, and must be, talking about the same thing often leads to misunderstanding and confusion. Conant says:

Climacus says that in our reflective age we have simply “forgotten” what it means to be a Christian—we no longer have a religious use for these terms. Yet we continue to employ a term such as ‘faith’ in purportedly religious contexts as if we knew what we meant by it. In such a pseudo-religious employment, the term no longer has any clear meaning. We do not realize that we have failed to give the term a clear sense, for we are not aware that we have lost our hold on any religious sense it might once have been able to have. (KWN, 209)

The aim of the grammatical investigation, then, is to illustrate or determine whether someone is using language in the appropriate context – religious language in religious contexts, secular language in secular contexts. And it is to show, indirectly, that the significance of language is context-dependent: using the same words does not guarantee meaning the same thing. Moreover, to use language in an *inappropriate* context, according to Conant, results in nonsense (i.e. a situation in which a word has not been assigned a meaning *in that particular context*).

As the quote above suggests, however, Climacus is not trying to settle disputes between philosophers and priests by showing that their misunderstanding is the result of their, so to speak, speaking nonsense to each other. His effort seems directed particularly against the philosopher, the representative of “our reflective age,” who has forgotten what it means to be a Christian – i.e. who lives in a secular world and thus whose “religious” language is really pseudo-religious or nonsense.<sup>11</sup> So, rather than illustrate what words are appropriate to what contexts – the aim of a grammatical investigation – Climacus seems to make the stronger claim that the philosophical or epistemological context is decidedly *not* religious, and thus that the philosopher is condemned to use religious language nonsensically. In other words, although Climacus begins his examination of religious language with a grammatical investigation, he seems to do so in order to defend the *thesis* that faith is incommensurable with objective, speculative, or philosophical thought. But,

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<sup>11</sup> For that matter, Climacus’s attack is directed equally (and perhaps more pointedly) at the Danish priest who he believes has forgotten what it means to be Christian – i.e. who has unwittingly become a speculative philosopher himself.

as Conant points out, if the philosopher's approach to religious faith results in nonsense, so does a philosophical attempt to negate it, for "the attempt to negate a piece of nonsense results in another piece of nonsense" (KWN, 210). So, insofar as Climacus's investigation is directed *against* the philosopher, and thus assumes the form of a thesis, it is also nonsensical.

Conant, however, says that Climacus's "thesis" is not utterly nonsensical, for it is the affirmation of what the grammatical investigation shows to be the case – that a pseudo-religious employment of religious concepts results in nonsense. Instead, as Conant puts it, "it is teetering on the brink of sense" (KWN, 223n85). Unfortunately, however, Climacus continues. Not only does he investigate the grammar of religious language (which neither makes sense nor nonsense), or direct his investigation against the philosopher (which pushes it to the brink of nonsense), but he also *argues* that faith is maximally indigestible to reason. To have faith in Christ, Climacus says, is and always will be paradoxical and thus cannot be the object of philosophical investigation. That is, Climacus does not think that faith in Christ is a challenge to the intellect (or imagination) but argues that it results in what he calls a "crucifixion of the understanding" (CUP 472). In the terminology of the *Postscript*, it is "the absolute paradox."

In short, Climacus argues throughout the *Postscript* that faith is incommensurable with reason and philosophical reflection. (For this reason Kierkegaard is often considered

a fideist or even an irrationalist.<sup>12</sup>) Moreover, in calling faith in Christ “the absolute paradox,” Climacus distinguishes it from other, “lesser” paradoxes, which the philosopher *might* resolve. As Allison puts it, “It would appear that it is only when the ‘what’ becomes objectively absurd, *and the more absurd the better*, that the maximum degree of [faith] is attainable.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, by distinguishing “the absolute paradox,” Climacus seems to be arguing for a hierarchy of nonsense or paradoxes, as when he says:

Nonsense . . . [the believer] cannot believe against the understanding . . . for the understanding will precisely see nonsense for what it is and prevent him from believing it; but he makes as much use of the understanding as is needed to become aware of the incomprehensible [the absolute paradox], and then relates to this, believing against the understanding. (CUP 476)

And it is on the basis of this hierarchy that Climacus believes that he can say, consistently, that although faith in Christ is “a crucifixion of the understanding,” it is not nonsense. Although it is incommensurable with reason, one can attain to it nonetheless. In the context of the *Postscript*, the contrast is clearly the philosopher’s nonsense, which is merely, for lack of a better term, empty.

However, there is a problem with Climacus’s distinction between faith and nonsense. Conant points out that, by Climacus’s own lights, the distinction itself is nonsensical. Nonsense does not come in a “spectrum of degrees” and it makes no sense to speak of nonsense that is “qualitatively more repellent to reason than ordinary nonsense” (KWN, 215). So, rather than read the *Postscript* as arguing for the truth of “the absolute

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); and Alvin Plantinga, “Religious Belief as Properly Basic,” in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Allison, “Christianity and Nonsense,” 442-43. My emphasis.

paradox,” and thus implicitly for the hierarchy of nonsense(s), Conant reads it as Climacus’s attempt to show the transition from what begins as a grammatical investigation (no violation of sense here), to *stating* what he takes his investigation to show (a point which itself teeters on the brink of nonsense), to a philosophical analysis of the difference between “the absolute paradox” and mere nonsense (which, given the point of his grammatical investigation, is itself sheer nonsense). He writes:

The level of unintelligibility gradually rises to a shriller and shriller pitch as it moves from propositions for which a clear sense can be given (depending upon whether we construe them aesthetically or religiously), to ones which teeter on the brink of sense (when mere truisms are insisted upon) to sheer nonsense (an affirmation of objective absurdity). (KWN, 223n85)

In other words, rather than read the philosophical arguments in the *Postscript* at face value, Conant understands them as part of an elaborate *reductio* (or parody) of the philosophical project of clarifying the truth of Christianity. The *Postscript* does not offer an argument for a hierarchy of nonsense, as “standard” readings suppose, but attempts to show that “the terms in which [the philosopher] was tempted to pose the difficulty come apart on him” (KWN, 207).

#### *A Work of Ethics*

At first, Conant’s reading suggests that the aim of the *Postscript* is entirely deflationary – that is, designed only to show the philosopher the error of her ways. He says, for example, that the entire text functions as a ladder which “culminates in a demonstration and declaration of the nonsensicality of its doctrine. Its doctrine turns out

to be a pseudo-doctrine. It is a ladder which once we have climbed up it, we are asked to throw it away” (KWN, 216). However, Conant reassures us that recognizing the self-destructiveness of the text is a potentially useful and important exercise, and thus not *entirely* deflationary. In particular, he claims that the text works to dispel the illusion that “there is a species of thought in the face of which human powers of comprehension suffer from a kind of impotence. . . . [and that] the very philosophical exercise of identifying the limits of thought itself imparts to us a glimmer of comprehension into that which is incomprehensible” (PTTT, 292). In other words, the *Postscript* tempts us with the promise of comprehending the incomprehensible – by drawing a limit to thought, it imparts a glimmer of what lies on the other side of the limit – but does so only *in order to* show that a certain tendency in the philosophy of religion results in plain, garden-variety nonsense. And *that*, according to Conant, is not nothing.

At this point, one wonders why Climacus feels the need to let us suffer the twists and turns of his own thought, the lengthy (600 pages) process of transitioning from sense to nonsense, and why he needs the expository device of a “ladder.” Why doesn’t he simply tell us what he thinks? In response, Conant reminds us to keep in mind the difference between disproving a false belief and dispelling an illusion. Whereas the former presupposes the meaningfulness of the thought and the possibility that it is true, the aim of the latter is to show that a set of beliefs lacks sense – that what is “believed” is unintelligible. He writes:

To attack an illusory point of view directly is precisely to concede that it is a point of view. It is to concede the intelligibility of what is under attack. A direct attack

only reinforces one's interlocutor's conviction that what is at issue is a matter about which one can, at least provisionally, agree or disagree. (PTTT, 273)

So, the argument goes, Climacus cannot simply say that he thinks his reader is captivated by an illusory point of view because, strictly speaking, there is no point of view for him to call illusory. Moreover, as Kierkegaard makes clear in his *The Point of View of My Work As An Author*, to try to attack an illusory point of view directly is counterproductive: "A direct attack only strengthens a person in his illusion. . . . There is nothing that requires such gentle handling as an illusion, if one wishes to dispel it. If anything prompts the prospective captive to set his will in opposition, all is lost" (PV 25).<sup>14</sup>

Another worry Conant's (or Kierkegaard's) reader may have is that "the handling of an illusion" seems a little too deceptive for good philosophical taste. After all, Conant is claiming that Climacus is basically trying to trick the reader out of an illusory point of view. Again, this is consistent with what Kierkegaard says: "one does not begin *directly* with the matter that one wants to communicate, but begins by accepting the other man's illusion as good money" (PV 40). But Conant, following Kierkegaard, thinks that we should not be discouraged by the deceptiveness, for, as Kierkegaard says, it is not necessarily "an ugly thing":

One can deceive a person for the truth's sake, and (to recall old Socrates) one can deceive a person into the truth. Indeed, it is only by this means, i.e. by deceiving him, that it is possible to bring into the truth one who is in an illusion. . . . For there is an immense difference, a dialectical difference, between these two cases: the case of a man who is ignorant and is to have a piece of knowledge imparted to

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<sup>14</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as An Author: A Report to History*, ed. Benjamin Nelson, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). Henceforth, PV.

him . . . and the case of a man who is under an illusion and must be delivered from that. (PV 39-40)

So, in response, Conant argues that, yes, we should understand Climacus as assuming the point of view he wishes to attack – the reflective or philosophical point of view – in order to *deceive* the reader into the truth. And, following Kierkegaard, this is not necessarily reprehensible. In fact, according to Conant, it is potentially admirable. At bottom, the *Postscript* is designed to help the reader achieve clarity about what is required to live an ethical or religious life. Climacus does not *argue* for a truth about Christianity, but rather aims to clear “up confusions about what sort of life a religious life is (and thereby clearing certain obstacles from the path of his readers if they wish to embark upon such a life)”; therefore, “The aim of the authorship is to mark out the path of such a life more clearly” (PTTT, 279).

As we noted in chapter two, clarity about the ethical is important because a lack of it, according to Climacus, makes it easier for one to “forget oneself” or “ignore the ethical,” as Hegel had done.<sup>15</sup> In particular, one may ignore the strenuousness of taking responsibility for one’s point of view and of *not* fleeing down the easy path of speculation. What Climacus achieves in the *Postscript*, according to Conant, is “a form of expression which resists the reader’s temptation to assimilate [the author] to one of the two poles of the dialectic between rationalism and anti-rationalism in the philosophy of religion”

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<sup>15</sup> In the preceding discussion in this chapter, we have focused on Climacus’s discussion of “the absolute paradox,” that is, a *religious* matter. So the reader may worry that I am uncritically slipping in the discussion of the ethical, which may lead to confusion. However, on both Climacus’s and Kierkegaard’s account, nothing is lost by conflating the ethical and the religious here, since it is a point about “subjective matters” or the “ethico-religious.”



(PTTT, 295). Climacus does not say that faith is a matter of reason, or not a matter of reason, since his aim is to force the reader to decide for herself, and to recognize that philosophy offers a welcome distraction from having to decide. In sum, Conant writes:

Kierkegaard traces the source of his reader's tendency to hallucinate sense to his reader's inclination to evade all that is 'existentially strenuous' in the religious life. The illusion of sense is generated . . . by trying to construe faith as a matter of ordinary belief. But this conflation, in turn, generates puzzles which are a welcome distraction. (PTTT, 282-83)

So, in the end, Conant argues that Climacus's aim and strategy is ultimately ethical – albeit convoluted and deceptive – since he aims not only to achieve clarity about an ethical and religious existence, but also, and more importantly, since he does so in a way that does not distract the reader from having to take responsibility for herself. As Vlastos would have put it, Climacus's reader may be deceived by the text, but the question is, “By whom?” By Climacus or by herself?

To sum up our discussion so far: Conant argues that the *Postscript* is a *reductio* (or parody) of the inclination to philosophize about faith. It assumes what it takes to be an illusory point of view in order to show that it *is* an illusory point of view. And while this strategy may seem unnecessarily complicated or deceptive, it indicates that Climacus does not want to show that a philosophy of faith is *false*, but that it is *illusory*. And this, Conant maintains, makes the aim of the *Postscript* ethical insofar as its aim is to achieve clarity about life – in what kind of life ethical and religious concepts are in fact meaningful – and to do so without denying the reader the opportunity to decide for himself.

*Replacing Nonsense with Nonsense*

What motivates Conant to compare the *Postscript*, which is ostensibly about the challenge of becoming a Christian, and the *Tractatus*, which is ostensibly about the nature of logic, language and thought, is his dissatisfaction with those who maintain that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard both “try to show that there is some particular thing (or things) that cannot be said” (MWS, 244). Admittedly, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein do encourage this interpretation: for example, Wittgenstein says, “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words” (TLP 6.522). But, again, Conant argues that commentators take the bait for the hook and do not realize that the “view” one *does* find in the text is meant to be thrown away at the end. So, Wittgenstein says there are things which cannot be put into words, but then he says that “anyone who understands me eventually recognizes [my propositions] as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)” (TLP 6.54). Climacus distinguishes the absolute paradox from nonsense, but then he says that “the book has not only a Conclusion but a Revocation” (CUP 547). What commentators do not (fully) appreciate, according to Conant, is that both works

attempt to enter into and participate in the philosophical illusion to which they take their reader to be subject in order to lead [the reader] to the point where he is able to recognize it as an illusion. Both works therefore have the structure of a ladder which the reader is invited to ascend in order to reach the point where he is ready to throw it away. (PTTT, 292)

Again, there are at least two reasons commentators take seriously Wittgenstein's claim that there are, indeed, "things" that cannot be put into words. The first is that if there are not – if everything that cannot be put into words is, strictly speaking, nonsense, and there is only one kind of nonsense – then it becomes unclear what the reader is supposed to do with a text that says, at the end, that it is an example of nonsense, or with a text that says, at the end, "The book then is superfluous; so let no one take the trouble to appeal to it [as doctrine]; for anyone who thus appeals to it has *eo ipso* misunderstood it" (CUP 521). The second reason is that it is hard to accept that works as important as the *Tractatus* and *Postscript* do not advance positive views or accounts of anything. However, what Conant hopes we come to see is that a work can be valuable even if it is deflationary, and that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard do not aim to explain the nature of logical, ethical or religious truth, but to make us aware of a particular trap built into trying to explain their nature: "Both the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus* are directed against certain philosophical efforts to explain the nature of ethical and religious truth . . . efforts that explain the ethical and the religious in terms of that which lies beyond the limits of human comprehension or logical thought" (PTTT, 292).

Sometimes, in other words, the job of a philosopher is not to "give" but to "take away." In the case of the *Postscript*, for example, rather than argue that faith requires a special kind of evidence or understanding – that which distinguishes the object of faith from mere nonsense – the truth is, according to Conant, that "with respect to the activity of becoming a Christian, there is nothing further [the reader] needs to *know*" (KWN,

205). The aim of the text is not to distinguish “the absolute paradox” from mere nonsense, a distinction the reader may have been ignorant of, but to “*deprive* the philosopher of the illusion that a well-conducted speculative inquiry will equip him with a deeper understanding of what it is to be a Christian” (KWN, 206). Climacus captures the difference between “giving” (knowledge) from “taking away” well when he says:

And far from the book being written for the uninformed to give them something to know, the one to whom I introduce myself conversationally in the book is always well informed, which seems to indicate that the book is written for the knowledgeable whose misfortune is that they know too much. . . . This being the case, being able to impart becomes in the end the art of taking away, or tricking a person out of something. . . . When a man has his mouth so full of food that he cannot eat and it can only end with him dying of starvation, does feeding him consist in stuffing still more into his mouth, or not rather in taking some of it away so that he can come to eat again? (CUP 230-231n)

In the end, a nonsensical text may be just what the doctor ordered. Not all philosophy needs to articulate what is true or false, or what we do or do not know; sometimes it is helpful to point out that we think we need something more, something special, when in fact what we need is less of something or something ordinary.

Ultimately, and despite the understandable resistance to his interpretation, Conant really does want to say that the propositions of the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript* are plain, garden-variety nonsense. They are not a new, higher kind of nonsense which we learn to distinguish on the basis of the “theories” one finds in the texts. However, although the nonsense of the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript* is *internally* the same as all nonsense, including ‘piggly wiggle tiddle,’ it is *externally* and importantly different in the following sense: “The difference between the sort of nonsense these authors themselves

cultivate and the sort they see their readers talking is the difference between the self-conscious and an unwitting employment of nonsense” (PTTT, 282). What distinguishes Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard’s nonsense, to put it simply, is that Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard are aware of their employing it and that they are trying to make their reader aware, too.

To indict the reader for her unwitting employment of nonsense, however, is not to point out a *cognitive* failure. Again, on Conant’s reading, there is nothing the reader needs to *know*. As Wittgenstein puts it, “I do not try to make you *believe* something you do not believe, but to make you *do* something you won’t do.”<sup>16</sup> And: “Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity” (TLP 4.112). If anything, it is to warn the reader against a potential *ethical* failure, which Climacus captured in the phrases “ignoring the ethical” or “forgetting oneself.” Conant says, “It is, I believe, against the background of such a vision of us in flight from our lives (and hence ourselves) that one should first attempt to understand what Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard each might have meant by the claim that what he had written was a work of ethics” (MWS, 254). To replace (self-conscious) nonsense with (unwitting) nonsense, which, on Conant’s account, is all Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard try to do, is part of an ethical task of reminding the reader that we can, and often do, “forget ourselves.”

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Rush Rhees, *Discussions of Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

## II. The Role of Humor

In the summary of our discussion of Conant's reading above, I claimed that Conant argues that the *Postscript* is designed to be an elaborate *reductio* and added, parenthetically, "or parody." Now that we have the basic outline of Conant's criticism of the standard reading, and of the parallel between the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*, we can discuss the importance of parody and humor in more detail. For Conant, humor is essential to his reading because it is the humor of the *Postscript*, as opposed to a logical argument (*reductio*), that demonstrates the absurdity of trying to comprehend the incomprehensible. He says, "The humour of Climacus's doctrine is that it gradually subverts any possible hope for a ground upon which the integrity of a distinction between the absurdity of the paradox and mere nonsense could be drawn" (MWS 261). And it is important to our discussion, since I will argue, following Lippitt, that Conant misunderstands the nature and implications of humor and irony, and that, as a result, his reading is fundamentally untenable. But first, since both humor and irony are technical terms in the *Postscript*, we should discuss their special use in more detail.<sup>17</sup>

Humor is one of two species of "the comic"; the other is irony. Climacus says, "The comic is present in every stage of life . . . for wherever there is life there is

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<sup>17</sup> I should add, however, that although they will strike *us* as technical terms, they were not entirely technical for either Climacus or Kierkegaard. That is, in discussing the role of humor in philosophy, Climacus was not only using 'humor' in the service of his particular interests, but also thought that he was explaining an important phenomenon in human understanding. The reader may, then, compare the following discussion to his own understanding of humor, comedy, satire, irony, and so on.

contradiction, and where there is contradiction the comic is present” (CUP 431).<sup>18</sup> The comic, moreover, is one of two possible ways of expressing the contradictions in life: the other is “the tragic.” The difference between the tragic and the comic is simply that the latter is painless (CUP 431). So, humor is one of two ways of expressing, painlessly and often funnily, life’s contradictions, which include, according to Lippitt, “everything from strictly logical contradictions such as non sequiturs to mere inappropriateness, such as what one commentator calls ‘the obtrusion into one context of what belongs in another’ – for instance, the four-year-old who says to a child of three-and-a-half ‘Come now, my little lamb” (CUP 432).<sup>19</sup>

Second, besides the linguistic function of expressing life’s contradictions, humor and irony also function existentially as *confinia* or border-territories between the three spheres of existence (the aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres or modes of life). (Although we have not discussed Kierkegaard’s notion of “spheres of existence” explicitly, it was implied in our discussion of a grammatical investigation, since they (very roughly) capture the difference a way of life makes to the meaning of a word. ‘Love,’ for instance, means something different to the aesthete, ethicist, and Christian. Moreover, as our discussion of a grammatical investigation suggested, it is not the sort of difference that is reconciled by further discussion – the aesthete or Christian is not going to “convince” the

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<sup>18</sup> By emphasizing the centrality of “contradiction” in the comic, Climacus suggests the parallel between parody and a *reductio*: both amount to exposing the contradiction built into a course of activity and thought, respectively.

<sup>19</sup> John Lippitt, “Humor and irony in the *Postscript*,” in *Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript: A Critical Guide*, ed. Rick Anthony Furtak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 151.

other to adopt *his* understanding of the word or concept – but by a fundamental change in how one lives. To understand what the Christian means by ‘love,’ you have to become Christian.) Whereas irony is the border-territory between the aesthetic and ethical spheres of existence, humor is the border territory between the ethical and religious. They are “in between” in the sense that they reflect a dissatisfaction with one sphere of existence or way of life, but have not yet made a transition to the other. For example:

The ironist has seen the limitations of the aesthetic life – a life which involves endless evasive toying with existential possibilities – but has not yet made the movement to the ethical, in which ethically serious choices and commitments for one’s own life are made. The ironist possesses a partial insight into the stage ‘beyond,’ and thus occupies a transitional position in between the two spheres of existence: aware of the limitations of the former, but unable or unwilling to make the move to the latter.<sup>20</sup>

This, moreover, is consistent with Kierkegaard’s (and even Hegel’s) understanding of Socratic irony, since what made Socrates ironic in part was that he represented a dissatisfaction with classicism, which he expressed without offering an alternative. With regard to humor, the humorist detects certain incongruities in the ethical (non-religious) life – for instance, that the non-religious ethicist seeks eternal truth or consciousness without God – but he is unable or unwilling to make the move to the religious himself.

Third, irony and humor function as incognitos, i.e., “a kind of existential disguise [that] allow[s] such individuals to protect their ‘inwardness.’”<sup>21</sup> On Climacus’s view, what distinguishes the ethico-religious spheres from the aesthetic sphere (thus dividing the three spheres into two main divisions) is that whereas the former is characterized by

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 151-52.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 161.



subjective reflection, or passionate inwardness, the latter is characterized by objective reflection. The ethico-religious sphere, to borrow from our discussion in chapter three, captures the forms of life whose categories, concepts, and language reflect the task of becoming a self. (Presumably a computer can reflect objectively but it cannot worry about its own identity. It cannot genuinely worry at all.<sup>22</sup>) Thus irony and humor serve the existing individual in the process of becoming a self inasmuch as they provide the ironist or humorist a little privacy to reflect inwardly. (It is certainly easier to be ourselves when there is no one looking.) And again, it helps to remember Socrates whose individuality, as I suggested in chapter one, is shrouded in and thus protected by his irony.

Let us now return to Conant's reading of the *Postscript*. First, according to Conant, it is important to realize what contradiction Climacus's humor aims to expose:

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. The contradictions that particularly preoccupy Climacus arise when the neo-Hegelian speculative philosophers of his day attempt to comprehend and clarify the nature of Christianity. (KWN, 203)

Second, it is important to notice that Climacus aims to expose the ludicrousness of neo-Hegelian attempts to comprehend the nature of Christianity *humorously*. Consider the following example. Central to Hegel's systematic account of "the absolute," the truth and objectivity of which encompasses the truths of Christianity, is the possibility that "the

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<sup>22</sup> What is confusing about this distinction is that objective or scientific reflection is attributed to the "aesthete," who one might expect to be the least interested in science of the three. But, keep in mind, first, that 'aesthetic' is not synonymous with 'artistic,' and second, that none of the three spheres suggests a more natural fit. If the "artist" is not likely to be concerned with science, neither is the ethicist nor the religious person.

system” will eventually be completed. (A system is not a system or “a science” if it in principle cannot be completed.) But, to become a Christian or not, according to Climacus, is part of the task of becoming an existing individual. It is part of “existing,” which Climacus says (correctly) is a task for at least as long as you are existing. Now, with Hegel in mind, he says, “Suppose someone were given the task of amusing himself the whole day and that he was through with the amusement already by noon . . . . Likewise where life is the task: for you to be finished with life before life is finished with you is precisely not to have finished the task” (CUP 137-138). Presumably, according to Climacus, Hegel did not realize the contradiction in claiming that the difficulty of becoming a Christian, a life-task, might be “solved” once and for all, and he (Climacus) illustrates it *with a joke*.<sup>23</sup>

Conant’s point, however, is not that Climacus is funny throughout the text, but that the text as a whole is one big parody or *reductio*. (Recall that the aim is not to illustrate the falsity of particular beliefs, but to show the illusory nature of an entire point of view.) Thus, Conant says, “The work, nevertheless, presents itself to the reader initially as one that is difficult to understand. The difficulty lies in grasping the contradiction inherent in the relation between the work’s form and its content” (KWN 207). In other words, although there are many “jokes” throughout the text, as in the above paragraph, the text as a whole is an example of Climacus’s humor. Through the “contradiction” between its form and content, it illustrates that “the work as a whole [is] an elaborate

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<sup>23</sup> Again, Climacus’s understanding of *humor* is not entirely technical: I do find the quote just above funny.

*reductio ad absurdum* of the philosophical project of clarifying and propounding what it is to be a Christian” (KWN, 207). Humor, on Conant’s view, is Climacus’s manner of demonstrating the incoherence of trying to comprehend the incomprehensible.

### *The Author’s Lack of Authority*

In response to Conant’s reading, Lippitt has argued that although Conant is right in emphasizing the role of humor in the *Postscript*, he has misunderstood the nature of Climacus’s humor. For Conant, the main contradiction between the form and content is reflected in, among other places, the final revocation of the whole text. However, whereas Conant understands Climacus’s humor as a rejection of his own “doctrine” – a way of telling us that it is “pseudo-doctrine” and thus that it is meant to be thrown away – Lippitt argues that we ought to read the revocation rather as “a statement of *modesty*; not, as Conant reads it, as an *instruction* to throw away the main body of the text.”<sup>24</sup> In short, Lippitt argues that Conant’s interpretation of the revocation is too authoritative for a humorist of Climacus’s stripe.

Lippitt wonders why Conant thinks we ought to read the revocation – or, as the resolute reader puts it, “the frame” – straight, when we are supposed to read the rest of the text – “the body” – as the object of Climacus’s humor. That is, although Conant argues that the humor consists in revealing the contradiction between the form and the content, he fails to offer criteria for distinguishing “the content” from “the form.” For

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<sup>24</sup> Lippitt, “A Funny Thing,” 191.

instance, in “the revocation,” which Conant clearly reads as part of “the form” that contradicts the content, Climacus says “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” (CUP 522, my emphasis). But Conant reads this as saying that everything *else* ought to be revoked, without telling us why we should make the distinction.

Lippitt also points out that there is a sense in which reading the revocation straight, that is, as a clear instruction on how we are supposed to read the rest of the text, is incongruous with Climacus’s request not to be appealed to as an authority and the idea that “to be an authority is much too burdensome an existence for a humorist” (CUP 521). According to Lippitt, the basic problem with Conant’s reading is that regardless of how he understands the revocation – whether or not it is a rejection of the point of view one is likely to attribute to it – it mistakenly gives Climacus the last word on the matter, a heavy burden indeed. Also, it fails to appreciate the disguising role of irony and humor and attributes to Climacus a certain transparency that defies the very deceptiveness that, even on Conant’s reading, characterizes the *Postscript*. Conant might respond to this criticism by saying that one criterion for distinguishing the frame from the body is that the frame *is* transparent in a way that the body is not. But, this assumes that the frame is free of Climacus’s humor, which is precisely what, on Lippitt’s account, Conant needs to show.

So, rather than read the revocation as a claim that the text is “self-annihilating,” Lippitt says that “[Climacus] is simply denying that he is an authority on the matters

about which he has been ruminating.”<sup>25</sup> At most, Climacus is telling us how another *humorist* might read the text, but not how everyone, despite what sphere of existence they currently occupy, ought to read it. Lippitt says:

Pace Conant, I would support Evan’s view that Climacus’s revocation must be taken as expressing his own attitude toward the book, not as an ‘objective’ judgment that the book contains no serious content. A humorist will therefore read the book in the same spirit as it was written, a [Christian] religious individual rather differently.<sup>26</sup>

Climacus does not insist that it is the only way to read the text, and should not, since to insist on anything as though it were *absolute* goes against his own understanding of humor. Moreover, Conant’s unwillingness to read the revocation as a suggestion that this is how a humorist might read the *Postscript* is a failure to apply Climacus’s idea that the text, like any expression, could mean different things to different people – one thing to the humorist, another to the ironist, and still another to the aesthete, ethicist, or Christian.

Finally, that Conant reads the *Postscript* as a *reductio* in particular (not just a parody) indicates that he understands Climacus’s notion of “contradiction” too narrowly. As Conant knows, to insist that the text works as a *reductio* implies that there is a particular set of beliefs that Climacus intends to reduce to absurdity. But this begins to make Climacus sound too much like the philosopher he is working against. (Again, Conant might respond that this is one way in which Climacus “pretends” to be a philosopher – to take the philosopher’s currency as good money – in the effort to

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 200.

undermine the intelligibility of the philosophy of religion. But, again, Conant does not provide non-circular criteria to distinguish when Climacus is pretending to be a philosopher and when he is telling us that he is pretending.) In fact, it begins to make Climacus sound like the neo-Hegelian who, by confusing logic with ethics, “ignores the ethical” or “forgets himself.” However, if we widen “contradiction” to include the many “incongruities of life,” such as the four-year-old saying to the three-year-old, “Come now, my little lamb,” and if we remember that Climacus is discussing the messy and interminable business of trying to become a Christian, we will not say, or at least should not say, that the *Postscript* is an elaborate reductio.

In short, rather than read Climacus’s revocation as the final indication that the *Postscript* is a perfectly planned parody of a particular philosophical point of view, Lippitt reads it as a final attempt to deny that Climacus is an authority on his own text, much as Kierkegaard denies his own authority on his pseudonymous literature in “A First and Last Declaration.”<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard says that in one sense, the legal sense, “The responsibility [for what my pseudonym has written] is mine” but in another sense, the literary sense, the pseudonymous literature is a “poetic production,” an “experiment,” and although Kierkegaard no doubt “know[s] [the pseudonym] after all from intimate association, he does not claim to know [him] best of all” (CUP 528-530). Moreover, Lippitt reminds us that in the chapter of the *Postscript* titled “A Glance on Danish Literature,” Climacus praises Kierkegaard’s other pseudonymous authors because they

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. the end of chapter two.

have “not said anything or *misused a preface to take an official position on the production*, as if in a purely legal sense an author were the best interpreter of his own words” (CUP 252, my emphasis). Lippitt says, I think correctly, that “If issuing ‘directions’ on how to read a work would be a ‘misuse’ of a preface, clearly the same would apply to doing so in an appendix [in which we find Climacus’s revocation].”<sup>28</sup>

### III. “The Wittgensteinian Problem”

Now, let us return to Conant’s understanding of the parallel between the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*. In this section, I claim that a criticism similar to Lippitt’s can be applied to Conant’s reading of the *Tractatus* as well. Although I do not want to claim that the *Tractatus* is specifically an example of humor, I do believe that it (especially TLP 6.54) is an example of irony, and thus that Conant makes the same mistake with TLP 6.54 as he does with Climacus’s revocation – namely that he interprets a gesture of modesty as the opposite, an authoritative position on the text as a whole.

I am not suggesting that Conant simply overlooks the role of irony in the *Tractatus*. In fact, and somewhat ironically, Lippitt and Daniel Hutto claim that he defends an ironical interpretation of TLP 6.54 and the *Postscript*: “Hence Conant damns virtually all previous commentators for having totally overlooked the ‘incessant activity of irony’ in the *Postscript*, and the significance of the fact that the book is revoked.”<sup>29</sup> (They

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<sup>28</sup> Lippitt, “A Funny Thing,” 201.

<sup>29</sup> John Lippitt and Daniel Hutto, “Making Sense of Nonsense: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 98 (1998): 278.

also say the same of Cora Diamond's reading of the *Tractatus*: "[Diamond's] recommendation is that insofar as the *Tractatus* gestures towards something metaphysically external to language, we must read it in an ironic sense."<sup>30</sup>) Instead, I believe that, regardless of whether Conant would admit to emphasizing the importance of irony in the *Tractatus*, he understands the concept of irony too narrowly (because he understands the notion of contradiction too narrowly), and thus he does not see the limit on how much we can or should attribute to Wittgenstein.

Conant's explicit discussion of irony in the *Postscript* occurs when he compares Climacus's predilection for theorizing (as opposed to only investigating the grammar of language) to what he says about the theory or theses of Lessing in the chapter titled "Theses Possibly or Actually Attributable to Lessing." In this chapter, Lessing purports to present some of the same theses as Climacus, about which Conant says:

The irony embedded in the title of the chapter lies in the fact that the attribution of "theses" to Lessing will prove to involve, on Climacus's reading of Lessing, a misunderstanding—it fails to take into account Lessing's employment of a strategy of irony. Once again, Climacus is providing the reader with directions for how to read the book before him. (KWN, 211)

That is, in saying "theses possibly or actually attributable to Lessing," Climacus appears to be instructing us to doubt whether his own theory or theses should be attributed to him (Climacus) in the way he encourages us to doubt (through his title) whether we should attribute the theses in question to Lessing. Climacus's "theses" are, after all, the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 264-65.



exact same as those Lessing purports to advance; so Climacus seems to be suggesting, *ironically*, that to attribute theses to him will equally involve a misunderstanding.

Of course, the chapter title alone is not ironic; it is only by juxtaposing what else is ironic about Lessing's essay, according to Conant, that the parallel between Lessing and Climacus's ironies reveals itself. Conant says, similar to Climacus's essay, "if one scratches the surface of Lessing's essay one finds, concealed within it, a parody of the philosophy and theology of his day" (KWN, 212).<sup>31</sup> So, not only is there a hint of irony in Climacus's title, but Climacus's over-arching irony (his parody of contemporary philosophy) is also revealed if we compare it to Lessing's ironic parody of philosophy.<sup>32</sup> According to Climacus, "Lessing's irony comes out superbly" in his famous last discussion with Jacobi, by which point Lessing had become "aware as he presumably is that when you are to [make the leap of faith] you must surely do it alone, and also be alone in properly understanding that it is an impossibility." However, in response to Jacobi's impassioned and eloquent effort to *assist* Lessing in making the "leap of faith," Lessing says, "Good, very good! I can use all of that, but I cannot do the same with it. Altogether I quite like your *salto mortale* . . . take me along, if at all possible" (CUP 86). So, even though Lessing had already decided that no one could help him make the leap of faith,

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<sup>31</sup> Notice, moreover, that Conant is twice removed from Lessing's irony if we consider Climacus the author of the *Postscript*, thrice removed if we consider Kierkegaard the author.

<sup>32</sup> One might point out that 'parody' suggests humor, not irony. But the difference between irony and humor does not matter in our discussion, as I am focusing on the way in which they are structurally the same – i.e. as two species of "the comic."

he leads Jacobi to believe that he could be persuaded, and Climacus says, “His answer is therefore a joke. It is very far from being dogmatic” (CUP 87).

This exchange between Lessing and Jacobi is important in Conant’s reading because, as Conant says, “The same charge, I submit, is to be directed against Climacus’s own dialectical construction [ladder] in the *Postscript*” (KWN, 214). Like Jacobi, Climacus purports “to offer an objective argument for why objective reasoning should transcend itself and embrace the rationally inassimilable content of Christian faith” (KWN, 213). But he also says that “the last thing that human thinking can will to do is will to go beyond itself in the paradoxical” (CUP 88). So, in light of constant incongruities, the ironic title, and the parallel between Lessing and Climacus’s “theses,” Conant maintains that in offering an objective argument for the conclusion that reason can transcend itself in order to achieve faith, Climacus is in fact toying with us as Lessing was toying with Jacobi. That is, a literal interpretation of Climacus’s irony would reveal that he is trying to show us that reason *cannot* (ever) transcend itself into the paradoxical – that is, into Christianity. Thus, on Conant’s reading, all these clues *instruct* us to believe that Climacus’s “theses” are self-annihilating with an ironic twist.

#### *Back to Socrates*

Harking back to our discussion of irony in chapter two, I would now like to discuss Climacus’s account of Lessing’s irony in more detail, in order to examine whether Conant’s reading follows as naturally as he supposes. The line Climacus refers to when he

says, “Here Lessing’s irony comes out superbly,” is “I can use all of that. . . . Take me along with you if it works.” Note that the point of this remark is much subtler than Conant concludes. What is ironic about it – and, in fact, what is ironic about everything else that Lessing says with “Socratic colouring” (CUP 87) – is that “it is very far from being dogmatic.” Lessing does not make his point by saying, “You *cannot* help me make the leap of faith,” or even, “I do not think it is possible for anyone to help someone else make the leap of faith,” but “That also takes a leap, *which I may no longer expect from my old legs and my heavy head*” (CUP 87, my emphasis). In other words, what is ironic about Lessing’s words is that it is unclear *exactly* what he means. He *seems* to think that it is impossible to use reason to transcend itself into Christianity, but we are left wondering whether the same is true for someone whose legs are new and whose head is light. Similarly, when Climacus says “theses possibly or actually attributable to Lessing,” assuming that the parallel between Climacus’s irony and Lessing is intentional, as Conant believes, should we understand Climacus as raising a doubt about the validity of his own theses, which he undoubtedly is, or as saying clearly, albeit indirectly, that his theses are *in fact* ironic jokes not to be taken seriously, as Conant seems to think?

We should also keep in mind in evaluating Conant’s interpretation, as Lippitt reminds us, that irony and humor are meant to work as “incognitos” or “existential disguises.” Conant has an inkling of this, as when he notes that Climacus calls Lessing “an ironical *personality*” and says about him that “his references to earnestness are droll, that under the *guise* of advancing a doctrine he is making fun of people” (KWN, 212, my

emphasis). However, by emphasizing the ironic nature of Lessing's personality, as opposed to what Lessing says, it becomes less clear whether advancing a doctrine *in order to* make fun of people is the same as believing that the doctrine he is making fun of is false or plainly nonsensical, as Conant seems to assume. Consider, by way of comparison, what Allison says about the ironist:

Like Socrates . . . Kierkegaard believed that his task was not to expound but to sting, and hence any attempt to pin him down, to look for results in the form of an existential philosophy or Christian apologetic in his writings is, to use Climacus's analogy, "like trying to paint Mars in the armor that made him invisible," the supreme irony being, as Climacus points out and the whole history of Kierkegaard scholarship verifies, that such efforts seem to have "a partial success."<sup>33</sup>

On my reading, what is crucial about Socrates, Lessing, Climacus, and Kierkegaard's irony is that although there is undeniably a certain amount of teasing, deception even, their exact view about the doctrine or point of view in question is irresolubly complex and, in Kierkegaard's language, "lost to history." They certainly tease, and do so in the medium of philosophical theory, and they are undeniably critical of doctrine in *some* sense, but what is ultimately ironical is that the exact sense in which they are critical is unavailable. What Conant seems to miss is that the notion of "stinging," which is certainly a feature of the kind of irony in question, is much less authoritative than claiming, or even trying to show, that a *particular* point of view is nonsensical or wrong. Like Vlastos, Conant mistakenly interprets irony as consisting entirely in what

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<sup>33</sup> Allison, "Christianity and Nonsense," 460.

one says, and does not consider the possibility that it may consist in one's not saying more. As Kierkegaard says in his dissertation:

If we now say that irony constituted the substance of his existence, and if we further postulate that irony is a negative concept, it is easy to see how difficult it becomes to fix a picture of him; indeed, it seems impossible or at least as difficult to picture a nisse with the cap that makes him invisible. (CI 12)

So, if Climacus *is* mimicking Socrates or Lessing, as Conant says, and if we keep in mind that Kierkegaard's hand is hovering above the entire project, we should not try to force Climacus's irony into a title or anything else that he says, but should allow for the possibility that his irony consists, like that of Socrates, in his becoming invisible to the reader. In short, Climacus's chapter and title may be ironic in the sense that Conant claims, but they may also give away another sense in which Climacus is ironic – namely that he is an ironic personality who uses rhetorical devices to renounce and keep a distance from the position of authority. The latter interpretation may not be a tenable (non-)position to attribute to most authors, but it certainly is a possibility for an admirer of Socrates and Kierkegaard's interpretation of Socratic irony, which Climacus most certainly was.

### *Tractarian Irony*

What our discussion has shown is that determining *whether* something or someone is ironic depends in part on *what* is considered ironic. I disagree with Conant that Climacus's *title* is ironic – in the sense that it instructs us to read Climacus as showing that he means the opposite of what he says – because I believe that he is an

ironic *personality*, who masks his thought, making it virtually impossible to say what he means, once and for all. Now I would like to apply the same reading to Conant's parallel reading of the *Tractatus*. For Conant, "the incessant activity of irony" in the *Tractatus* consists in the fact that the text is a *reductio ad absurdum*, which attempts to draw out the contradiction between its form and content. That is, like the *Postscript*, although the *Tractatus* appears to explain the nature of "what is higher" (TLP 6.42), if one scratches the surface and takes into consideration that it is a text which revokes itself, it is ultimately directed against the activity of explaining the nature of what is higher. It is ironical in that it is *indirectly* self-annihilating, that it means to undermine what it appears, on the surface, to endorse.

Following Lippitt, however, I think that we should read the revocation differently: not as an attempt to show that the "doctrine" of the *Tractatus* is *in fact* a pseudo-doctrine, but as Wittgenstein's attempt to distance himself from the position of authority. It is undeniable that the *Tractatus* is an expression of Wittgenstein's disappointment with a certain way of thinking and perhaps a certain way of living. It is not clear, though, whether Wittgenstein aimed to undermine the intelligibility of a particular point of view. (The lack of clarity on this point is indicated, as I tried show in the last chapter, by the multiplicity of potentially contradictory interpretations of the *Tractatus*.) Following Lippitt's interpretation of the *Postscript*, I claim that if the *Tractatus* is ironic, rather than indicate that Wittgenstein means the opposite of what he says throughout the *Tractatus*, we should understand him as gesturing toward a kind of

modesty – i.e. that he does not want to be considered an authority on the matter dealt with in the *Tractatus*. (Note the slight similarity to the reading offered by Kremer: whereas Kremer says that the *Tractatus* aims to teach us humility, I claim that it is an exercise of humility or modesty.)

Moreover, Conant's related interpretation of what makes the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus* ethical is inconsistent with his reading of irony and humor. On the one hand, he says that the aim of the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus* is to expose the illusoriness of a particular point of view, to show that *it* is nonsensical. On the other hand, he says that the works are ethical in that they do *no more* than hold mirrors to their readers so that they can examine their own reflection (PTTT 249). The problem here is that by saying that their aim is to expose the incoherence of a *particular* point of view, Conant is suggesting, despite himself, that the mirrors one finds in the texts have a unique point of view. That is, they are not *just* mirrors. In short, by reading the respective revocations as instructions to throw away the "doctrines" one finds in the texts, after they have served their purpose, Conant turns Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein's mirrors into something else – veiled portraits perhaps. Besides being inconsistent with the metaphor of the mirror, Conant's interpretation is also potentially ethically problematic, insofar as it suggests that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein were willing to save the reader some responsibility in the process of determining their own confusions *completely on their own*.

As was the case with Conant's reading of the *Postscript*, he seems to understand the object of Wittgenstein's alleged *reductio* too narrowly. He insists that the 'what' in

“what cannot be said” refers to nothing, and that it is the point of the *Tractatus* to demonstrate the nonsensicality of the propositions that purport to say otherwise; but Wittgenstein says, “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical” (TLP 6.522). For Conant, this is the last rung on the ladder we are instructed to throw away, and it may be true that if by ‘what,’ we understand specifiable, cognitively significant thoughts, Conant is right. But the ‘what’ can refer to something more vague, such as *what* we get when we get a joke, which is mystical in some sense and, for anyone who has ever been the only one in the room not laughing, manifest. It may also refer to “the ethical life,” for as Lippitt says, “irony and humor can function as forms of ‘indirect communication,’ potentially drawing those with the relevant sensitivity toward an ethical life.”<sup>34</sup> So, whereas Conant says that the ‘what’ and ‘the ethical’ refer to nothing, I want to say that they do not refer to anything *articulate*, but that is not the same as *nothing*, and we do not want to discount the possibility of “drawing someone closer” to our own point of view or way of life. Again, the comparison to comedy or “the comic” is helpful because we can and do say that there is an “it” that cannot be said but which can be shown or made manifest, just as there is an “it” when the one person who was not laughing finally says, “Okay, now I get *it*.”

Again, what Conant and I disagree about is the answer to the following question: what makes the *Tractatus* ironic? Conant believes that Wittgenstein’s irony consists in indicating the contradiction between the form and the content of the text, which

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<sup>34</sup> Lippitt, “Humor and irony in the *Postscript*,” 161.



Wittgenstein does in “the frame,” specifically TLP 6.54. By contrast and by comparing Wittgenstein to Socrates and Kierkegaard, I believe that its irony consists in whatever it is about the text – and Wittgenstein – that virtually guarantees that *all* our attempts to pin him down have always met, and I suppose will always meet, only with partial success. In sum, I believe the *Tractatus* is ironic, not because it gestures at what it seeks to expose, but because Wittgenstein, like Socrates and Kierkegaard, succeeded in creating what we can now call “the Wittgensteinian problem.” When Wittgenstein says, in the very last line of the text, that what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence, he does not say what he means by ‘silence,’ and more importantly, he does not say whether that silence applies equally to TLP 7. Conant assumes that it does not and that TLP 7 instructs us to read the rest of text as an example of silence, but having discussed the irresolvable complexity of Socratic *silence* and the nature of Climacus’s modesty, I maintain that Conant assumes too much or at least that it is always a matter of interpretation.

#### IV. The Virtue of Silences

As I suggested at the end of the introduction, I am not sure how to summarize the cluster of discussions, literatures, and interests that motivated me to compare Socrates, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein in the first place, or what I expect the reader to take away from this essay. There are certainly a number of related concepts that connect them – irony, silence, the ethical – and I hope it is clear by now that each philosopher presents a similar challenge to commentators who aim to fix a picture of him. In

particular, I believe it is worth comparing “the Socratic problem” to what I have called “the Kierkegaardian problem” and “the Wittgensteinian problem,” insofar as they all indicate a kind of silence. But to say exactly what that silence means or why it is important is not something I wish to summarize. This is in part because silence is not any one thing. As Cavell says:

An examination of the concept of silence will show that the word means different things—that silence is different things—depending on whether the context is the silence of nature, the silence of shyness, the silence of the liar or hypocrite, the short silence of the man who cannot hold his tongue, the long silence of the hero or the apostle, or the eternal silence of the Knight of Faith. And the specific meaning of the word in each of those contexts is determined by tracing the specific contrasts with the others—the way its use in one context “negates” its use in another, so to speak.<sup>35</sup>

That is, insofar as different readers will come to the texts in different contexts and with different contrasts, any summary can only be met with partial success, and I do not want to suggest otherwise, even indirectly by trying to land on the correct interpretation. But I also do not wish to summarize their silences, or the endless possibilities of their silences, because, and more importantly, they really are silences. They are not the temporary silence of an author or interlocutor waiting for the pupil to figure out the solution on his own, as Vlastos, Lippitt, and Conant seem to believe.

I am also willing to accept the possibility of interpretive nihilism, as Lippitt calls it, since I believe that otherwise we risk turning Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein into dry pedants – or “dogmatists” in the ancient sense, as Nehamas says – who conceal what they could have made explicit. I am not completely sold on Vlastos’s notion of a

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<sup>35</sup> Cavell, “Kierkegaard’s *On Authority and Revelation*,” 170.

pedagogical device, Kremer's claim that the *Tractatus* aims to teach us humility, and Conant's claim that the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript* are elaborate *reductios* – mostly because they all imply that the philosopher could have made himself more explicit but did not. Instead, I prefer to think of Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein as genuine artists whose philosophy reflects the human tendency “to run against the boundaries of language,” as Wittgenstein puts it (LE 44). This is not a uniquely philosophical tendency, but rather, as Wittgenstein says immediately before, “the tendency of *all* men who ever tried to write or talk about Ethics or Religion.” What makes them genuine artists, as opposed to teachers, is that they keep their editorial to themselves, hidden from view. They do not tell us what to think, or why, and suggest that they were not entirely sure what to think themselves. They were human beings who could not solve the problems of life, but who also noticed how strangely un-human we become when we pretend that we can.

They are also genuine artists in the sense that their voices are so wrapped up in the form of the texts – nestled somewhere in between the lines, in someone else's voice, in the occasional painfully obvious contradiction, and the many silences – that the voice (or content) and the form are virtually indistinguishable. The aim of the texts, in the case of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, is not transparency – or what some philosophers call “clarity” – which allows the mind of the author to be known without ambiguity. It is honesty, which does not flee from ambiguity where it exists, or choose sides in order to resolve it and have it done with. The virtue of their respective silences is that they do not

oversimplify life in the effort to represent it in clear terms or with an introduction and conclusion, and this is why we find ourselves, not the author, staring back at us in the text.

Vlastos, Lippitt, and Conant resist the possibility of interpretive nihilism because they are worried that if the author's voice is "lost to history," there is nothing there to understand or sympathize with at all. But this simply is not the case. Even Lippitt, who claims that Climacus does not tell us exactly what he thinks or how we ought to read the *Postscript*, says that Climacus's silence "does not rule out the possibility that sufficiently attuned observers might pick up on some vital clues and discern the truth of the matter (as Climacus claims to have done himself with respect to Socrates)."<sup>36</sup> Lippitt is right to say that it cannot be the case that with these philosophers "anything goes." But we do not need to assume that the contrast of "anything goes" is that there must be a discernable and clear voice or point of view. What I have tried to show by comparing Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein is that there is a possible middle way, by which the philosopher is able to sting, provoke, or humble without stating what he or she thinks directly, and that sometimes silence is more revelatory, not less.

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<sup>36</sup> Lippitt, "Humor and irony in the *Postscript*," 157.

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