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Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus on Faith and Reason

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ABSTRACT: Soren Kierkegaard attempts a noble deception through his poeticized pseudonym Johannes Climacus in which he seeks to draw his nineteenth-century, Hegelian reader into an awareness of, and commitment to, Christian faith. Climacus' thought, taken at face value, presents an interesting account of the relationship of faith and reason. Human reason is interested, finite, and limited by sin, but it has a role in leading to genuine faith. Though human reason submits to the object of faith, it continues on in a nuanced, revitalized form, serving the individual's God-relationship for self-knowledge. Climacus' notion of subjectivity reveals the intersection of faith and reason. Christian faith may be viewed as rational through this subjectivity inasmuch as subjective experiences may be a reasonable option and objectively true if stemming from a universal structure of human existence. In the Climacus texts, three important factors emerge which the author argues can dictate whether one interprets Climacus as an irrationalist or not.

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Apart from an absolute fideism or, at the opposite extreme, an absolute rationalism, every attempt at discovering new knowledge and every striving for personal certainty invites the question of the grounding of one's knowledge on reason *and* faith. This is true, it may be argued, in all of the academic disciplines—even in the natural sciences—in spite of the fact that reason alone is commonly thought to yield objective knowledge and that objectivity is the end of academic enterprise.¹ If this observation rings true

¹ In this vein, Michael Polanyi has argued in *Personal Knowledge* that all genuine

in the academic disciplines in general, then it is probably even more so in the interdisciplinary study of religion and theology, where one's religious commitments are directly connected to the task of one's scientific appraisal of religious concepts and practices. In my estimation, Kierkegaard's writings offer insight directed towards the reconciling faith and reason that is applicable to scholars of every discipline. This is due, in part, to the fact that they take a robust account of the complexity of the human agent and his or her circumstances and commitments in the acquisition of religious knowledge. They also stimulate the believing scholar to ponder the distinctive areas of their life and thought that might be reserved for religious practice *vis a vis* scholarly pursuit. Unfortunately, at least a portion of the literature, popular and academic, has obscured these potential benefits through a misunderstanding of Kierkegaard's thought on the relationship of faith and reason.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is often considered an outsider in the history of philosophy. His exclusion by some from what is considered standard fare in western philosophy of religion is probably accentuated by the common view that Kierkegaard's thought promotes an irrational account of religious belief.² This claim appears to gain support by observing tributaries that have appropriated, reinterpreted, or responded to important aspects of the fecund stream of Kierkegaard's thought in order to criticize traditional, western metaphysics. These include atheistic, existentialist philosophy (e.g. Camus, Sartre, etc.), postmodern thinkers (Wittgenstein, Derrida, etc.), and Karl Barth with his stated rejection of natural theology.

A survey of mid-to-late twentieth-century academic literature on Kierkegaard easily discloses a popular view of Kierkegaard as an irrationalist. It is beyond my purposes here to attempt an exhaustive itinerary, and so some notable examples of this will have to suffice. Alasdair Macintyre reflects the popular irrationalist view in an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* when he writes that Kierkegaard's ultimate

scientific research and knowledge is procured with the personal commitments and judgments of the scientist. See Michael Polyani, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

² Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 1, 21.

“criterion of both choice and truth is intensity of feeling.”³ This outlook continues in his *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1984). Brand Blanshard criticizes Kierkegaard in like manner, ascribing a ‘leap of faith’ to Kierkegaard that is an irrationalist movement of the will.⁴ Henry Allison has argued that if Kierkegaard’s *Postscript* is to be considered as a text of religious philosophy “the charge of irrationalism is irrefutable.” The notion that ‘truth is subjectivity’ is at once a “mislogism” and “implies the identification of Christianity and nonsense.”⁵ Allison’s work is significant because he recognizes that the text is not a work of academic philosophy *per se*, but an elaborate attempt at satire. Yet, he seems to think that the ideas at face value still require an irrationalist interpretation.

This author’s anecdotal experience has led him to the conclusion that perhaps the most influential voice in condemning Kierkegaard on this front has been that of Francis Schaeffer. On several occasions I have engaged with Christian clergy who, in relating this view of Kierkegaard, have cited Schaeffer as their authority on the matter. Indeed, Schaeffer did much to popularize difficult philosophical themes and problems with simple, often generalized resolutions in support of his apologetical interests. Kyle Roberts writes in affirmation of this author’s experience that Schaeffer “left a deep and lasting impression on evangelical Christianity in America. The mainly negative portrait of Kierkegaard he put forth was widely disseminated and deeply imbibed.”⁶ In viewing the Kierkegaardian ‘leap’ as the blindfolding of faith, Schaeffer goes so far as to blame Kierkegaard for being the conceptual matrix through which faith and reason were rent in modernity; to the extent that faith and reason “bear no resemblance to each other.”⁷ In more recent times, it seems that Kierkegaard has been rehabilitated and the tide of popular irrationalist readings has somewhat abated (as scholars cited in this paper will suggest).

³ Alasdair Macintyre, “Existentialism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), Vol. 4, 338.

⁴ Brand Blanshard, “Kierkegaard on Faith,” in *Essays on Kierkegaard*, ed. Jerry H. Gill (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co.), 118-120.

⁵ Henry Allison, “Christianity and Nonsense,” *Review of Metaphysics* 20, No. 3, 79 (March 1967): 432.

⁶ K.A. Roberts, “Francis Schaeffer: How Not to Read Kierkegaard,” in *Kierkegaard’s Influence on Theology Tome II: Anglophone and Scandinavian Protestant Theology*, ed. J. Stewart (London: Ashgate Publishing Company), 173.

⁷ Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 1998), 16, quoted in Roberts, *ibid.*, 174.

Yet, the assumption of Kierkegaard's irrationality persists not only among philosophers but in peer-reviewed, philosophical references.⁸

This study is a close analysis of two of Kierkegaard's most important works, the pseudonymous *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846). Through my analysis, I intend to first show that Climacus is not an irrationalist but has a nuanced explanation of the relationship of faith and reason. He shifts the use of human reason in religion to the subjective domain where revelation, finitude, sin, and reason's interested nature condition its role. Kierkegaard scholars will notice that my interpretation of these texts is not entirely original but agrees in many important respects with the work of Merold Westphal, C. Stephen Evans, and others of like mind. I make no apologies for this, as I find this line of interpretation one that most closely follows the text and best takes into consideration the historical, theological, and philosophical context of Kierkegaard's authorship. I also find this interpretation opens to view three conditions that emerge from the Climacian texts—finitude, sin, and interested reason—which are decisive for whether Climacus is viewed as an irrationalist or not. If one rejects as unreasonable, misunderstands, or misapplies these concepts within the Climacus texts, Kierkegaard might best be interpreted as an irrationalist.

Hermeneutical Orientation

There are a number of ways in which Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works have been read, but perhaps three categories are most basic, namely: literary, philosophical, or literary-philosophical approaches. The literary approach is prevalent among post-modern thinkers who recognize the possibilities that the indirect, ironic, and the comic can lend to the construction of meaning. In this thinking, the pseudonymous works have no intentional or discernible system of thought and no didactic purpose.

⁸ See for example *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Faith and Reason." According to the entry, Kierkegaard "prioritizes faith even to the point that it becomes positively irrational." See also Stephen Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism From Rousseau to Foucault* (Rosco, IL: Ockham's Razor, 2011)—specifically the second chapter, "Epistemological Solutions to Kant: Irrationalism from Kierkegaard to Nietzsche," where Hicks argues that Kierkegaard is one among a few who "condemned reason as a totally artificial and limiting faculty, one that must be abandoned in the bold quest to embrace reality" (51).

Moreover, the texts are essentially nonsense and may be handled at the whim of the reader. The philosophical approach, inversely, takes the texts at face value, assuming that the works are intended and should be used as didactic tools to convey information in the form of a philosophical theory. I venture that both of these approaches are misguided: the latter, since it ignores or dismisses the stated wishes (authorial intent) of Kierkegaard and thereby the intensely evangelistic, religious purposes of his indirect communication; the former, because while Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works are intended to be at times psychological and rhetorical, evoking subjective decision, the pseudonyms themselves do not merely present nonsense, but, as with the case of Climacus, often reasonable arguments and claims. The best scholarly reading, in my view, is a literary-philosophical, which takes seriously the indirect and ironic character of the pseudonymous works as a determinant of the actual message of the text, but also recognizes that the pseudonyms themselves raise important philosophical, theological, and religious questions that deserve study on their own merits, and which can sometimes shed light on Kierkegaard's own thought in his direct works. A literary-philosophical reading characterizes the approach of this paper.⁹

Climacus' Epistemology Limits Reason

Climacus' hypothetical foray begins with the question: "Can the truth be learned?"¹⁰ He considers Socrates and his account of the attainment of true knowledge through recollection, but his target is Hegelianism.¹¹ Socrates' doctrine of recollection assumes that the eternal is embedded in the human knower just as Hegel held that through unaided reason one can improve upon revealed religion in the realization of truth. It is only a

⁹ These approaches are discussed in C. Stephan Evans' *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments*, The Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 2-3.

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, Vol. VII, eds. H.V.Hong & E.H.Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 9. [SV, IV, 179].

¹¹ Hegel asserted that the witness of the 'spirit' was responsible for the attainment of truth. By witness, Hegel means recollection (1:412-413), by spirit, Hegel meant the human spirit (1:389), and this means that philosophy is determinant of theology (3:256). Hegel manifestly enunciates in this work the religious immanence that Climacus and Kierkegaard both protest against. See *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985-1987).

matter of drawing out this self-knowledge, or God-knowledge. Recollection then signifies not just *a priori* knowledge of God apart from experience, but the “autonomy of the knower” from reliance on revelation.¹²

The problem according to Climacus is if one can be said to already possess the eternal and only need to become aware of it in time, then this event of recollection must occur in time, in a moment (*Øieblikket*). Yet, in the historical moment one recollects, that eternal God-knowledge is still hidden in the eternal. The knower is unable to find it in history (where he resides) since the eternal is a transcendent “everywhere and nowhere” and any “point of departure in time is *eo ipso* something accidental, a vanishing point, an occasion.”¹³ Climacus’ denies that, in terms of religious truth, the human subject contains innate ideas commensurate with eternal truth.

This is a first major critique of reason by Climacus, that human reason is limited by temporal finitude.¹⁴

Seeing immanence as problematic for true knowledge of God, Climacus imaginatively constructs another way to truth. To distinguish it from the Socratic, it is necessary that the learner of religious truth must begin outside the truth and that the moment in time when they are in the truth must have “decisive significance” so as not to be forgotten. The learner again requires a teacher, yet one different than a Socrates. The teacher must himself bring the eternal truth to the learner. Moreover, since the eternal truth exists outside the learner and it must be brought, “the condition” (*Betingelsen*) for receiving the truth must also come from the teacher. Climacus then deduces that such a condition could only come from a teacher who is also a god. The condition is a gift that functions as a disposition which allows the individual in time to understand eternal truth.¹⁵

Another problem arises, however. If the learner exists, she must have been created and would presumably already have the condition since to lack the ability to know truth would be to equate the individual with an animal. It follows that the condition for eternal knowledge must have been lost in some way so that the individual now may be said to reside in

¹² Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, Kierkegaard as a Christian Thinker, ed. C. Stephan Evans & Paul Martens (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), 125, 129.

¹³ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 13, 11. [SV, IV, 181, 183]

¹⁴ Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, 22.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 13-15. [SV, IV, 183-185]

untruth. **This is Climacus' second major critique of human reason—a not-so-veiled repackaging of the protestant dogma of the debilitating and corrupting, noetic effects of sin.**¹⁶

Sin also implies the learner is in untruth by her own act, and this implies freedom. Yet, the very source of this freedom, the will, has eliminated the learner from eternal truth through the decision to sin. This requires that the god be able to set the learner free. The historical moment (*Øieblikket*) actualized by this savior-god, a necessity for the individual, and in opposition to the moment of recollection, is decisive instead of swallowed up in the eternal. It is made possible by the god coming into history, motivated by love, so as not to scare away the learner, but to woo them. It is the moment (*Øieblikket*) of rebirth whereby, in spite of its becoming past, it is filled with the eternal.¹⁷ This infilling—continually repeated—of the historical subject with the eternal is a requirement if the individual can be said to truly exist. In sum, a way to religious knowledge is opened up through this historical event, but an event that is nevertheless contiguous with eternity.¹⁸

Passionate Reason and the Absolute Paradox

Climacus' project then turns to the comprehensibility of the god in time that he has deduced. The notion of a god who is both eternal and located in time (in human form) presents cognitive difficulties. The god gives, to some at least, the condition (faith) for eternal knowledge, but, can the god-man 'himself' be understood? According to Hegel, speculative philosophy, based upon the movement towards synthesis in his logic, allows the thinker to move beyond the apparent contradiction of the traditional Christian understanding of the God-man. One may mediate between the apparent incongruities the incarnation presents—the either-or of divinity and a particular humanity—and leave the paradox behind. This is because the speculative thinker occupies, as a participant in Absolute Spirit, a

¹⁶ Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, 22.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 23-34. [SV, IV, 192-202]

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 16-19 [SV, IV, 185-189] Evans writes in *The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, 69: "Existence . . . contains momentary unities of the temporal and eternal" which are "renewed and repeated."

presuppositionless, *sub specie aeterni* perspective, achieving the identity of thought and being.¹⁹

Climacus, himself a speculator, nevertheless does not agree with Hegel. Human reason, inasmuch as human beings exist, is passionate. By passion (*Lidenskab*), Climacus does not mean merely raw emotions.²⁰ Passion connotes interestedness, something one values and cares about. Passion is always associated with human existence, and existence means to be in a particular situation oriented towards God, as human values always have an object.²¹ This means that passion is not necessarily subjective in the sense that it cannot have objective validity. The attitudes and emotions that accompany subjective passion may be objectively valid, true or false, if they stem from a value derived from a universal moral code or the created order, and, if the object of passion is intrinsically valuable and truthful, calling forth the passion. "Passion . . . is the driving force," writes Merold Westphal, "of a life lived in touch" with the idea of the object of one's passion.²² The possibility of the objective validity of passion suggests also the possibility of the reasonability of its existence in the individual.

Human, passionate reason fundamentally desires to reach that which it cannot know; hence the common desire in human beings to seek knowledge.²³ This is itself paradoxical, however, as it means that what one

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 51. [SV, IV, 217-218]

²⁰ Evans, *The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, 39: ". . . passion, which is often used synonymously with 'inwardness' and 'subjectivity' is one of the most significant terms in Kierkegaard's authorship, but it is a term that is very apt to mislead the English reader. The term 'passion' is apt to suggest some sort of spontaneous and involuntary emotion that sweeps over a person in a flash, disappearing just as suddenly and involuntarily . . . This is very far from what Kierkegaard has in mind. Though there is certainly an element of passivity in passion, one of the chief characteristics of the highest forms of passion is that they endure . . . To have a passion is to care deeply about someone or something. A passion is the wholehearted realization of what we sometimes call, rather colorlessly and palely, a value."

²¹ Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard on Faith, Reason, and Passion," *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (2011): 89. Westphal writes that "To have a passion for fly fishing is to care about it so deeply that it becomes apart of one's identity. Faith is a passion when we care deeply enough about our God relation that it becomes part of our identity; and faith becomes a 'supreme' or 'highest' passion when the God relation is the most important part of our identity."

²² Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, 46.

²³ The concept of reason's passional nature, in which it exhibits the temperament of a desire to know, is not new in the history of philosophy. For example, Descartes' 'thinking thing,' insofar as it exists, desires: "Well, then, what am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wants . . ." He continues by saying it is this thinking 'I' that "wants to know more . . ." *Meditations* (Second Meditation).

<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/authors/descartes>. William James also affirms the passional nature of human reason in *The Will to Believe*: "Evidently, then, our nonintellectual nature does influence our convictions. There are passional tendencies and volitions which run before and others which come after belief . . ."

irrepressibly seeks and needs is also what by definition confounds the fundamental desire for knowledge. Finite human reason, then, Climacus says, must eventually arrive at a “collision” with an unknown object of knowledge that it can never fully penetrate. This ‘unknown’ is the “passion’s torment . . . [and] its incentive.” Human reason as finite and limited by sin must inevitably will its own “downfall” at the hands of something it both desires and cannot disengage from.²⁴

This collision (*Anstødet*) is not one isolated event. As long as one is capable of thought, reason continually bumps up against the border of this unknown, which Climacus identifies as ‘the god’. When the understanding tries to think the unknown, it is unable to transcend itself to grasp the “absolute difference” between it and the unknown. Thus, it devolves unaware into the phantasies it can create, perceiving likeness where there is only difference. Clearly, according to Climacus’ account of the nature of passionate reason, it is reasonable to hold that human reason must have some limitation for the properly existing individual. It is finite and compromised by sin. To ignore these limitations and speculate on the divine would be for Climacus, to use Calvin’s analogy, to engage the mind in nothing less than the manufacturing of idols.²⁵

If the unknown is not solely the frontier, then the one idea about the different is confused with the many ideas about the different. The unknown is then in *διασπορά*, and the understanding [*Forstanden*] has an attractive selection from among what is available and what fantasy can think of (the prodigious, the ridiculous, etc.)²⁶

Climacus employs a simple analogy of self-love and love to describe a potential, positive relation of reason to the paradox under these constraints. In human relationship, self-love “lies at the basis” of love; but,

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 37-39. [SV, IV, 204-207]

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 44-47 [SV, IV, 211-215]; Robert Roberts explains Climacus’ point here noting that the “highest potentiation of every passion is always to will its own downfall” in the sense that it, by nature, seeks that which it cannot know. The understanding’s passion is generated by paradoxes, and so the “highest potentiation of the understanding’s passion must be to encounter the Absolute Paradox, something that thought cannot think . . .” See *Faith, Reason, and History*, Faith and Philosophy (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 63.

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 45. [SV, IV, 212]

in order for love between two parties to exist, self-love must will its own downfall in order for love to prevail in the union. Similarly, reason's subordinating itself ('willing its downfall') does not mean that it is obliterated or entirely absorbed, but rather, it is "taken captive." Climacus implies here what other pseudonyms and Kierkegaard himself later develop: that the willed subordination of reason to the paradox simultaneously shuts out profane knowledge of God and opens up a vista for a transforming of reason through—and for—sacred knowledge, i.e., a new reasoning and knowledge under the guidance of divine authority (captivity). Finally, Climacus is saying that the rationality of this collision event and the decision for faith stems from reason's becoming something, or part of something (the existing individual in positive relation to God) it was intended to be: as having and fulfilling a higher *telos*.²⁷ **Reason's interestedness, especially as it suggests ontological and epistemological dependence, represents a third major critique of human reason by Climacus.**

Reason may also have a negative relation to the paradox, one engendered by an "unhappy passion," that is, doubt. Whenever this variety of passionate reason collides with the paradox but does not submit, there is offense (*Forargelse*).²⁸ The offended reason views the moment (and the paradox) as foolish since, as in Socratic immanence, it appears to it that no decisive moment of in-breaking eternal truth is needed. Shaped as it is by its passion of self-interest, it cannot accept that there is something that it cannot comprehend. The source of reason's accusations against the paradox that it is nonsense or foolish do not stem from its superior authority or insight, but from the paradox itself. The paradox is superior and willingly admits that it is foolishness from the finite, profane perspective. The paradox has already attempted to enlighten the understanding by making it aware of its absolute difference (guilt/sin) and the absurdity of its situation. The understanding, fueled as it is by an unhappy passion of self-interest and not faith, merely echoes in self-

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 47-48; 59 [SV: IV, 214-215, 224]: This positive relation is a "happy passion," or faith. The 'telos' is the object of faith, the absolute paradox, or more precisely, the fulfillment of which is submission to the authority/superiority of the absolute paradox.

²⁸ *Forargelse* may be translated straightforwardly "scandal" and the connection here to the Greek *skandalon* used by the Apostle Paul is unmistakable.

defense what it has already heard from the paradox. In this instance of unhappy relation, the paradox appears nonsensical to the offended, though it is actually human reason in its unhappy passion—in light of the fact that it has found what it has always wanted but rejected it—that is irrational and foolish: “The expression of offense is that the moment is foolishness,” says Climacus, “the paradox is foolishness—which is the paradox’s claim that the understanding is the absurd but which now resounds as an echo from the offense.”²⁹

The Uncertainty of Historical Evidence Limits Reason/Religious Knowledge

Moving from a critique of speculative reason and innate religious knowledge, Climacus ends *Fragments* by wondering whether his alternative account of religious truth might be invalidated by the situation of those who witnessed the appearance of the eternal god-man in history; or, by later generations of followers in relative proximity to their testimony. In other words, could those more favorably situated in history achieve God-knowledge apart from faith? The issue is one of evidence, for the modern mind the arbiter for what is deemed reasonable and true.

It might seem that the contemporary followers’ point of departure for an eternal consciousness is not a historical one if the eternal has entered history, or, that they have an empirical advantage since they have more accurate historical information about the god-man. But, Climacus observes that the object of faith is not merely the (historical) teachings of the god-man, but the god-man himself. The god-man’s teachings alone do not allow for the contemporary to penetrate the god-man’s incognito (a servant) and impart apodictic knowledge of the god to later generations, even though the figure of the god-man is both eternal and historical. “The

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 49-54 [SV, IV, 215-221]; Though the personal views of Kierkegaard are not exactly the subject of this paper, it is significant to note Kierkegaard’s own view is in line with Climacus in regards to the absurdity of the paradox. The paradox is only nonsensical to the one who does not choose to believe: “The absurd, the paradox, is composed in such a way that reason has no power at all to dissolve it in nonsense and prove that it is nonsense; no, it is a symbol, a riddle, a compounded riddle about which reason must say: I cannot solve it, it cannot be understood, but it does not follow thereby that it is nonsense.” “The absurd is a category, the negative criterion, of the divine or of the relationship to the divine. When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd—faith transforms it . . .” Kierkegaard, *Journals & Papers* I, 7, 10. [SV, XVII, 16-17]

presence of the god,” says Climacus, “indeed, in the lowly form of a servant—is precisely the teaching . . .”³⁰

Neither, on the other hand, do the respective advantages of the 2nd generation or subsequent generations render sufficient historical evidence to justify becoming a Christian. Just as with those who come later, faith is a prerequisite of true religious knowledge for all, and as Climacus has already established, this faith is still a condition given by the god. It is important to note that, in diminishing historical knowledge as a basis for relationship with the god-man, Climacus recognizes that he runs the risk of returning to the Socratic way of immanence. He insists that the historical is not completely insignificant. It contains after all the “occasion” for becoming a follower (both the power for the occasion from the god-man and the “means” of the occasion for later generations consisting of the testimony of early followers—New Testament scripture), but, it cannot be “absolutely decisive.”³¹

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Climacus’ sequel to the *Fragments*, Climacus ventures to personally address the issue of historical knowledge as a basis for religious knowledge: “How can I, Johannes Climacus, share in the happiness that Christianity promises?” As in *Fragments*, Climacus is still a self-proclaimed “outsider” to Christianity and one who honors speculative thought, but he is interested in how he can come into proper relation with Christianity to partake in its benefits. Will reason afford one this relation and so bring him eternal happiness? Or, is faith and a decision of the will required instead? Climacus comically begins his quest with a speculative, objective interest in the question, where only a subjective interest, decision, and belief, he argues consistently throughout the work, will suffice.³²

One objectively interested requires a rational assessment of the objective issue of Christianity: essential Christianity is based on a historical revelation, and to a lesser degree, some argue, a creed, a confession, or a

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 55-66. [SV, IV, 221-231]

³¹ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 89-95, 100, 104. [SV, IV, 252-258, 263, 266]

³² Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 16-17, 21-22 [SV, VII, 7-8, 11-12] ; For Climacus, it is comical for one to be infinitely interested in something that can provide only an approximation of certainty (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 31 [SV, VII, 20]); Climacus, however, is also in a comical position as a humorist who is aware of what is required to appropriate Christianity and come into relation to it, but insists on remaining in a speculative, disinterested sphere of existence.

sacrament. The problem is that the utter reliability of these reports and events must be determined for an assent that is justified in proportion to the eternal ramifications. Climacus is adamant that such research will, at best, turn up knowledge that merely approximates the truth of what it means to be essentially Christian. An approximation of truth is merely a probability of some gradation, and this is not enough (it is irrational!) to base one's eternal happiness on. Scholars will be researching forever with the goal of absolute certainty to ground such belief, and so personal decision on the issue must be forever suspended. With so much at stake, Climacus thinks the issue must be handled subjectively instead.³³

Subjectivity the Locus of the Reconciliation of Faith & Reason

A subjective interest, that is subjectivity, connotes passion, or earnest desire, in one's religious commitment. It is with passion that faith exists. But subjectivity is not a complete disregard for objective knowledge, and Climacus is no irrationalist in spite of the fact that Kierkegaard probably intends for him to appear that way for polemical purposes.³⁴ Climacus' rationality can be seen in his insistence on appropriation. The subjective individual appropriates the proper religious, objective content—the god-man and the doctrines of Christianity that flow from “him”—by means of (continual) decisions in daily life. The process for how this occurs may be summarized as follows: in imagination the individual recognizes the possibility of eternity; she reflects—reflection being an activity of reason—on this possibility for her life in relation to the objective content of

³³ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 24-27, 37-40 [SV, VII, 13-16, 26-29]; William James (*Will to Believe*) echoes Climacus' argument here, saying that when faced with a genuine option (forced, momentous, live) which the intellect cannot solve, it is justifiable to will the decision to believe. This is especially the case if the object of belief is of a personal and relational nature. Using an argument from analogy, James says that for a relationship to exist, trust without certainty is always necessary, and especially to meet the other half-way. If one continually delays the decision to trust without certain evidence, one would never enter into a relationship. This is practically unreasonable for one entertaining the prospects of a social life, and by extension, would be for one given the genuine option of belief in a personal deity.

³⁴ One could argue as, Richard McCombs, does that Kierkegaard (and Climacus) feigns irrationality in the service of reason as part of a pious fraud. See *The Paradoxical Rationality of Soren Kierkegaard*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington, IN: 2013), 2-3. McCombs' interpretation would explain many of the statements by Climacus that support an irrationalist interpretation and are consistent with Kierkegaard's stated method of deceiving into the truth. I think there is much to this line of thinking but still contend that even with these rhetorical flourishes that suggest irrationality, the larger picture presented in his texts do not support an irrationalist reading.

Christianity and according to the power given by God.³⁵ Concomitantly, passion (a value) is brought forth via reflection, and she is constrained to will a decision to believe in the face of objective uncertainty. The individual who embarks on this inward experience will actually reflect truth more fully than the objective propositions of Christianity. This is what Climacus means when he says that “subjectivity is truth,”³⁶ and it is probably this concept which best explains (in a nutshell) the relationship of faith and reason for Climacus. Climacus criticizes the objective, speculative interest, which seeks objective certainty, because it does not move the will to faith, and it is in faith that true religious knowledge emerges. Moreover, the certainty associated with the objective is at odds with faith, its “worst enemy.” The speculative thinker is also at odds with his identity as a synthesis of temporal and eternal, since he seeks to abscond from temporality and thereby ceases to exist. In the end, there is no room for the issue of eternal happiness in Christianity from a merely objective, speculative approach.³⁷

Criticism 1: Reason and ‘The Leap of Faith’

Climacus’ insistence that faith is opposed to certainty and the understanding is in stark contrast to his not-so-subtle indication that faith does have its own form of certitude, “the certitude of faith.”³⁸ But it is important to understand that Climacus is primarily concerned with what he views as comic attempts to find faith through objective knowledge, and there the existing individual must take the historical as their point of departure (since they are historical). If one proceeds this way, it follows that there is necessarily a gap between the objective, historical knowledge they have achieved and their actual, personal certitude. The only way this gap can be spanned by the existing individual is through deciding to make a qualitative leap (*metabasis eis all'genos*).³⁹

³⁵ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 35n [SV, VII, 23] The role of the intellect in reflection is important to Climacus as evidenced by his assertion that it is “superstition” to omit reflection from biblical and confessional faith.

³⁶ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 217. [SV, VII, 182]

³⁷ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 29-34, 55-57 [SV, VII, 18-23, 41-43] As Louis Pojman writes in *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1984): 36) there is a “disjunctive relationship between objective and subjective inquiry” with Climacus—one cannot do both at the same time.

³⁸ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 55. [SV, VII, 41]

Climacus' qualitative leap, enacted by the will and rooted in passionate reason requires explanation. Some have surmised that it demonstrates irrationality in Climacus' (and Kierkegaard's) account of religious belief.⁴⁰ At the outset, it is important to understand that the phrase, a "leap of faith", does not occur in Climacus' texts, nor in Kierkegaard's corpus. I contend here that it would be more accurate to refer to the leap as a "leap to faith".

The accusation is that Climacus' (and Kierkegaard's) leap is non-cognitive, non-rational, or irrational. Though partially blind in the sense that objective knowledge and certitude is lacking, the decision of faith is not necessarily blind to one who, as William James has said, is faced with a live, forced option.⁴¹ One of Climacus' prerequisites of moving to the existence sphere of Christian belief (Religiousness B) is a newly-received consciousness of sin and a new appreciation of the guilt engendered. Sin consciousness gives the individual the awareness of the hopelessness of their situation in terms of achieving that which is most important, an eternal happiness. From this predicament, characterized by guilt, and the attending experiences of anxiety, and despair, Christianity, which offers forgiveness and an eternal happiness, may appear as a viable and reasonable solution to an individual. The subject, through something akin to what Alvin Plantinga would call "doxastic experience,"⁴² has good reason, Climacus' thinking suggests, to will a decision and leap across the chasm of objective uncertainty onto the ground of faith. It is in this vein that F. Russell Sullivan says that for Kierkegaard the leap of faith is the qualitatively transformative event from "sin to repentance."⁴³ This decision

³⁹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 98-99, 104-105. [SV, VII, 78-79, 82-85]

⁴⁰ See, for example, Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, 174. Schaeffer blames Kierkegaard and "his" theory of the 'leap' for the split between faith and reason in modern thought, saying, ". . . what he [Kierkegaard] wrote gradually led to the separation of the rational and logical from faith. The reasonable and faith bear no relationship to each other." Camus has also misrepresented 'the leap' to the religious as irrational in the *Myth of Sisyphus* where he criticizes religious existentialists like Kierkegaard for facing the absurdity of existence with an irrational "forced hope" that is "religious in all of them." See *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 24.

⁴¹ William James, *The Will to Believe* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1897), <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/j/james/william/> (Accessed 4/1/18)

⁴² See Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 109-111.

⁴³ F. Russell Sullivan, Jr., *Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard* (New York: University Press of America, 2010), 62, 38- 39.

to leap is of subjective concern, to be sure, but this subjective concern would not preclude any objective validity if it is demonstrated, for example, that human experience of guilt, anxiety, despair, and the need for eternal security are universally valid.

The leap presents another challenge, however. As we have seen above, when reason has submitted in its collision with the Absolute Paradox it is because objective knowledge is lacking. It might seem that all that is left to drive one forward across the chasm of uncertainty is the arbitrary decision of a "brute will-power."⁴⁴ On the contrary, the passion, or interestedness, that characterizes reason does not cease to motivate the existing individual after reason's submission. The existing individual has an interest (eternal happiness) in attaining to faith (and the Absolute Paradox), and so, as Kierkegaard writes, pathos, passion for the object of interest, is the "substance of the leap." This means that the decision to leap, while free, is motivated by interest (passion) and not arbitrary. It is the fulfillment of reason and stems from the reasonable passion that motivates it.⁴⁵

That the leap is not an arbitrary event is further evidenced by the tension between its active and passive elements. Climacus does state that "the leap is the category of decision," that one must make the leap for oneself without the help or companionship of another person, a lonely proposition.⁴⁶ On the other hand, in *Fragments* Climacus states that the condition, a divine gift, is necessary for a true knowledge and orientation to God:

. . . faith is not an act of will, for it is always the case that all human willing is efficacious only within the condition. For example, if I have the courage to will it, I will understand the Socratic . . . But if I do not possess the condition . . . then all my willing is of no avail . . .⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Jamie M. Ferreira, "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay & Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 207-208.

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, *Journal & Papers* III, 2343. [SV, V B, 49:14]

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 99, 102. [SV, VII, 79, 82]

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 62-63. [SV, IV, 227].

Included in this knowledge and new stance is a personal consciousness of sin. While the power that makes this knowledge possible comes directly from God, the means include the content of the testimony of the first generation of believers (New Testament Scripture) about the Absolute Paradox (Jesus Christ). We have then both revealed knowledge (subjective and objective) and divine aid involved in the personal decision (uncompulsed) to make a leap to faith. In this vein, Climacus approvingly quotes Jacobi (from his dialogue with Lessing) that there is some “elastic spot that catapults” one to leap if they “will just step” on it.⁴⁸ Climacus seems to be saying that the qualitative leap is (a) dynamic event(s) comprising human willing along with divine instigation. Given the important part that the object of interest (the Absolute Paradox) plays in the qualitative leap, this “elastic spot” would naturally be thought to be created by it.⁴⁹ What is most important for our purposes here is to recognize that reason and religious knowledge are vital to making ‘the leap’ from secular, rational uncertainty to the safe ground of faith and sacred knowledge, and that the decision is thus not a merely arbitrary one performed in ignorance or on one’s own.⁵⁰

Criticism 2: Is ‘The Absolute Paradox’ an Illogical Object of Faith?

Another major objection lodged against Climacus (and Kierkegaard) is that he posits the Absolute Paradox with which reason collides as a logical contradiction. If this object of faith is illogical and thereby nonsense, so the argument holds, then religious faith on this account must be irrational. This thinking is problematic for at least two reasons. First, fundamental to Kierkegaard’s issue with the Hegelian philosophy and its synthesis of opposites is precisely that it has annulled Aristotle’s principle of contradiction (think: *Either/Or*). Climacus observes that Hegel has used Aristotle to defeat him, and thereby comically reestablished him again: “. . .

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 102. [SV, VII, 82]

⁴⁹ Ferreira, *Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap*, 225.

⁵⁰ This is echoed by Kierkegaard in *Practice in Christianity*, where the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, the ideal believer, indicates that knowledge is prerequisite to a leap to faith: “. . . even though understanding and speaking correctly are not everything, since acting is also required, yet understanding in relation to acting is like the springboard from which the diver makes his leap—the clearer, the more precise, the more passionate (in the good sense) the understanding is, the more it rises to action.” (158) [SV, XII, 148]

[T]he thesis that the principle of contradiction is canceled,” he quips, “is based upon the principle of contradiction, since otherwise the opposite thesis, that it is not cancelled, is equally true.”⁵¹

Secondly, Climacus’ Absolute Paradox does denote opposites. However, philosophical context is paramount here. Climacus’ dialectical opposites should be understood in the context of the Hegelian sense where they are not logically contradictory but incongruous. Indeed, for Climacus the Absolute Paradox, that is to say, the eternity and temporality, the divinity and the humanity of Christ, cannot be said to be a logical contradiction. To assert as much presupposes that one has discursively defined through speculation and abstraction the respective identities of the natures of divinity and of humanity. From this one supposes they are able to make a definite judgment on the logical validity of the Paradox. Reason is unable to do this for Climacus. What reason is able to do, as we have seen earlier, is recognize the Absolute Paradox in its incomprehensibility and duly submit. That something is incomprehensible does not mean it is illogical.⁵²

Climacus confounds the above analysis, though, by his numerous claims that one believes the Absolute Paradox “against the understanding” [*Forstanden*]. In my view, this is the strongest evidence in favor of the irrationalist interpretation, but nevertheless, not unanswerable. A first response to this language by Climacus is that, as Climacus has established in *Fragments*, human sin and finitude hampers reason and one’s ability to know the Absolute Paradox. This means that the understanding in its speculative capacity is limited and even at odds with the object of faith. Building upon this, another rejoinder is that the understanding’s inability to penetrate the paradox must be understood dialectically with the role reason plays in recognizing the incomprehensibility of, and duly submitting to, the Absolute Paradox. This second pole indicates a positive work that reason must do. Says Climacus:

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 108-109. [SV, IV, 270]

⁵² Evans, *The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, 212-217; As an unbeliever, Climacus is not able to go where Kierkegaard (as a believer) goes. Kierkegaard suggests, echoing the Apostle John (7:17) that for the believer there is some resolution to the incomprehensibility of the Absolute Paradox through the living and doing of Christianity. Kierkegaard writes in a journal entry that for the one who believes the Absolute Paradox is not absurd (*Journals & Papers*, I, 10). [X⁶B 80]

. . . the believing Christian both has and uses his understanding [*Forstand*], respects the universally human . . . but believes Christianity against the understanding [*Forstand*] and here uses the understanding [*Forstanden*]⁵³—in order to see to it that he believes against the understanding [*Forstanden*]. Therefore, he cannot believe nonsense against the understanding [*Forstanden*], which one might fear, because the understanding [*Forstanden*] will penetratingly perceive that it is nonsense and hinder him in believing it, but he uses the understanding [*Forstanden*] so much that through it he becomes aware of the incomprehensible, and now, believing, he relates himself to it against the understanding [*Forstand*].⁵³

To “believe against the understanding” then means that human reason (expressed as the understanding, here)⁵⁴ is indispensable to recognizing the Absolute Paradox for what it is, even while it is this same reason that *cannot fathom the meaning of* the Absolute Paradox and all it represents to the existent. After the collision, the individual must proceed with a decisive “leap” against the speculative, secular understanding’s desire for objectively certain knowledge. The individual’s movement into the sphere of authentic, religious faith then is a continual and repeated believing against this desire of reason to master with “imperialistic” fervor⁵⁵ the unknown of the Absolute Paradox. This interpretation of Climacus is consistent with the observation that faith, though not grounded on a certainty derived from historical, scientific, or philosophical knowledge, may be grounded in the reasonability of a principle that human reason must have some limitation, and it is not “inherently illogical” that human reason has such a limit, nor is it “rationally self-evident” that human reason defies all boundary.⁵⁶

⁵³Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 568. [SV, VII, 495]

⁵⁴Unlike with Kant and Hegel’s *Vernunft and Verstand*, Kierkegaard does not make a distinction between *Forstand* and *Fornunft*. For example, in a journal entry (Pap. VIII A 672), he writes that *thi Fornuft, Forstand, er menneskelig talt, det Seende, men Troen er mod Forstand*. [my translation: “for reason, the understanding is counted as human seeing, but belief is against the understanding”]; See Robert Widenman, “Kierkegaard’s Terminology—and English,” *Kierkegaardiana* VII, 9 (1968): 118-119.

⁵⁵ Evans, *The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, 228, 233-234.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 233-234.

Does Climacus' Faith Seek Understanding?

From what we have seen thus far, it would seem that Climacus does not countenance a 'faith seeking understanding' disposition. Climacus' polemic against objective knowledge in religion, including his derision for arguments for the existence of God and apologetics, positivist scientific and historical knowledge, as well as attempts to prove the scientific veracity of Scripture, all lead one to this conclusion. This is certainly the case if one views the disposition of "faith seeking understanding" only in the traditional sense as a quest for objective knowledge, secular and religious, that strengthens or augments one's faith.

As we have observed, however, subjectivity for Climacus, which includes the appropriation of objective content to have authentic religious faith, cannot be entirely dismissive of reason or objective knowledge, and the same holds true with Kierkegaard in general: "For Kierkegaard objective thought ultimately must be seen as an aspect of human subjectivity."⁵⁷ Indeed, Kierkegaard himself supports this interpretation of Climacus that subjectivity also consists of objective knowledge. These objective concepts, the "what" of Christianity actually come to light for the individual in subjectivity (inwardness), as Kierkegaard writes in a journal entry:

In all the usual talk that Johannes Climacus is mere subjectivity etc. it has been completely overlooked that, in addition to all his other concretion, he points out in one of the last sections that the remarkable thing is that a How is given which has the characteristic that when it is scrupulously rendered the What is also given, That is the how of 'faith'. Right here, at its very maximum, inwardness is shown again to be objectivity.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Evans, *Subjectivity and Religious Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1978), 164-165, 202. Evans elaborates on the complicated relationship of objective and subjective knowledge. Objectivity is a dimension of subjectivity in that theoretical knowing is a practical activity and knowledge that comes from it shapes our values. Further, ideals for subjective belief must be objective ideals (e.g. Christ). Thus, "hard and fast distinctions between 'subjective belief' and 'objective knowledge' do not stand." Knowledge is subjective in the sense of coming from human decision and acts which express fundamental human values. Values (interest) are objective in the sense and to the extent that they are true—if true, they must exist independently of particular human wishes or desires.

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, IV, 4550, as translated and quoted by Sylvia Walsh in *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press,

It is true that for Climacus secular, objective knowledge of God, history, science, and the like are conditioned and limited by a number of factors (e.g., sin, finitude, etc.) and Climacus does think that objective knowledge is too far removed from existence to be of much value to the origination of faith. It also appears to many that he is too dismissive of the prospect that some such objective knowledge could strengthen or enhance faith. In this respect, Robert Adams' criticism of Kierkegaard and Climacus is *prima facie* correct. Adams, however, does not seem to see the (admittedly minor) presence of the objective knowledge of scriptural revelation and the Christian dogmatic concepts—what Kierkegaard in other works calls “sacred history” instead of profane history—as some counterbalance to his predominant emphasis on subjective knowledge. Nor does he consider that subjective knowledge can be objectively true.⁵⁹

Indeed, Climacus' notion of subjectivity as a universally-experienced phenomenon suggests a universal structure of human existence, and these posited together indicate the subjective can have objective reality. Aspects of human experience *qua* human which every existing individual possesses or originates from render it possible that personal religious knowledge could actually be objectively true.⁶⁰ What makes this difficult, if not impossible to verify, is that only one who shares certain values (passions) and rejects certain philosophical commitments (e.g. immanent religious knowledge), in other words, one who comes to see the same religious vision for themselves (“autopsy”) will recognize it as a valid, objective justification for faith in God.⁶¹

2009): 35-36.

⁵⁹ “Kierkegaard's Arguments Against Objective Reasoning in Religion,” *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. L. Pojman and Michael Rea (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 425-428.

⁶⁰ Evans gives a useful delineation of a Christian ‘universal structure’ of the self as follows: 1) the self is constituted by a Creator, 2) must will decisively in freedom, 3) is universally able to actuate possibility, 4) at every moment the person is themselves and the human race; 5) “every [person] has an equal capability and equal need for a God relationship”, 6) and inner-directedness (where the self does not conform to the crowd). He argues further that “the self with its needs, values, and obligations must be taken in a universal and not an idiosyncratic sense if it is to serve as a basis for rational belief. Paradoxical as it may sound, the concept of the individual is a universal concept in the sense that the categories which describe the structure of existence are universal categories. If obligations are to give rise to rational beliefs, those obligations must be taken as objectively valid; if needs are to give rise to rational beliefs, then they must be genuine human needs.” See Evans, *Subjectivity and Religious Belief*, 188-190.

⁶¹ Evans, *Subjectivity and Religious Belief*, 79, 82, 170-171. Note Kierkegaard's rather

So, for example, in *Fragments* Climacus wonders if “this matter of being reborn” is even thinkable. He reasons that the question can only be addressed by first deciding who is able to answer the question. It is nonsensical to the once-born, but to the reborn it must be thinkable. Climacus is effectively saying (hypothetically, of course) that the faith of the reborn gives them some understanding of their encounter with eternity, at least retro-actively speaking. This is one of the rare explicit instances where, for Climacus, the existent with faith is given the status of higher knowledge, at least where attaining subjective (but objectively true) knowledge helps one to understand their religious experience.⁶² Robert Roberts writes to this end of a “grammar of faith” for Climacus where Christianity “in being an affair of the heart (faith is a ‘happy passion’), is a matter of the mind . . . ‘happy passion’ has a dialectic, a logic.”⁶³ But only one who has had a similar experience where their existence was similarly altered—through the phenomena of sin and guilt-consciousness, the felt need for forgiveness, etc.—would recognize this experience in the other individual as objectively true. As with Kierkegaard, so with Climacus: situation and commitment are paramount for recognition of true, religious knowledge.

Three Interpretive Factors for Climacus’ Reasonable Faith

Thus far, I have made an attempt to explicate the nuanced relationship of faith and reason in the Climacus texts, and in so doing, I have argued for a reading that is against the complete irrationality of Climacus’ account of religious belief. In this final section, I would like to recall three factors I have highlighted—Climacus’ critiques of reason—which I believe are pivotal to viewing Climacus’ account of religious belief as reasonable. I do not entertain the illusion that all will be convinced by my interpretation. Surely, some will disagree. What I would like to argue in this last section is that an irrationalist interpretation of Climacus is reasonable to hold if one rejects or misapplies at least one of these factors.

direct expression of this idea in his journal: “. . . first the venture, then the proof comes afterwards—you will experience that the teaching is true.” (*Journals & Papers*, Vol. II, 336, quoted in Sullivan, *Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard*, 102.)

⁶² Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 20. [SV, IV, 189]

⁶³ Roberts, *Faith, Reason & History*, 144.

Finitude/Temporality

The condition of finitude/temporality is an important category of existence for Climacus (and Kierkegaard). It assumes a stark division between deity and creature and between the eternal realm which the deity is supposed to inhabit with the temporal, earthly realm. It limits the creature in all aspects of their being from the infinities of knowledge and power that are usually ascribed to deity. It is unlikely that most western interpreters of the Climacus texts will deny the finitude of humankind. Religiously inclined interpreters in the Western tradition tend to uphold the finite/infinite distinction that Climacus accentuates either because they are influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition or, because as an empirically-minded, pragmatic thinker they observe their world, including their own life, and recognize limitation that is natural to the order of things. Many Western atheists acknowledge, to varying degrees, human finitude, and this belief can form a consistent starting point for moral and epistemological relativism.

The interpreter who denies the rational validity of this aspect of Climacus' thought will be unable, it seems, to accept the need for a new condition of faith as an epistemological key that "opens the lock" to an external, transcendent source of knowledge. These are predicated on the idea that individuals lack the necessary power and knowledge needed to attain an eternal happiness. Climacus' insistence on the historical situatedness of the knower and their inability to both "recollect," that is grasp the eternal knowledge and be in history, would be nonsensical simply because one who is infinite has none of these limitations. A rejection of the concept of human finitude, or a misunderstanding of its application in Climacus' texts, would make it, then, reasonable for the interpreter to see in Climacus an imbalance of a blind faith over reason that amounts to irrationality. The intellectual distance between the rationalist-minded interpreter and Climacus will be most prominent in this factor because for Climacus the speculative use of reason in religion is anathema to accepting the reality of one's finitude in contrast to God.

Radical Sin

The second important factor is radical sin. Climacus (as a pseudonym of Kierkegaard, a confessing Lutheran) clearly has in mind a radical sin which corrupts the human faculties in such a way that reason is inept and confused in the religious sphere. Sin for Climacus is crucial because it establishes the “absolute difference” between God and humankind. The “absolute difference” is not merely a qualitatively ontological notion. It includes the idea that relationship with the divine is broken, and, since the divine is understood personally, there is personal animosity and disjunction. Climacus suggests that the ‘unhappy offense,’ or doubt, to which human reason takes recourse after the collision is caused by pride.

Sin, at least as it is used by Climacus, is a uniquely Christian dogma, and in its radical sense, a protestant one. The use of radical sin as a limitation on reason is essential to Climacus’ entire system of thought. Sin does not necessarily cause the collision (that is finitude), but it is sin which causes the individual to regard the Absolute Paradox as entirely incomprehensible. In other words, if there was no “absolute difference” and sin is not, then the Absolute Paradox as ultimately incomprehensible would not exist, at least in the Nicene form that Christian dogma has presented. It would also not be completely incomprehensible. Moreover, sin, as pride, pushes the individual towards offense. Sin destroys the capacity for and awareness of divine love in the individual. This is the import of Climacus’ parable of the king and the servant girl: Sin makes it impossible (as it was impossible for the servant girl to fathom the king’s love for her) to recognize the character of the Absolute Paradox/object of faith, while it is precisely this character of love which seeks to overcome the “absolute difference.”

Since the assumption of sin is of such importance to what Climacus has to say about the limitations of reason, one who rejects this part of his project as reasonable or who fails to see how it impacts the epistemologically-relevant concepts in his texts, would be logical in supposing that irrationality is pregnant in such aspects of his thought as external revelation, the gift of the condition, and, especially, the identity and use of the “understanding” in achieving faith. To “believe against the understanding” is an indictment of the understanding because it is tinged

with sin, not because the understanding is human or inherently inferior. The understanding is still a faculty of the human subject that makes it possible for the individual to relate to God, and it plays a part in bringing the individual to “collide” with the object of faith so that the ‘moment’ can occur. But if sin is not assumed as compromising the understanding or if this assumption is deemed unreasonable, Climacus’ interpreter will tend to read Climacan faith as posited against a properly oriented (other-interested) understanding, whose rational capabilities can recognize the good and apply themselves to attaining eternal happiness on its own. To reject sin as a defining and comprehensive factor or to fail to apply it properly in the Climacus’ texts will lead, in my view, to an otherwise reasonable conclusion that Climacus is an irrationalist.

Interested Reason

Finally, the interestedness of reason is a third important factor that is requisite to interpreting Climacus as integrating reason into religious faith. This factor is closely related to the first one: finitude. That reason is interested suggests something very important anthropologically for Climacus. That is, that all of human existence for every individual—all actions, thoughts, etc.—is in relation to and directed towards some transcendent, grounding power. We see this in the case of the faculty of human reason for Climacus when he insists that the nature of reason as interested means it is seeking such a fulfillment—the unknown or Absolute Paradox, that which it cannot know. Though reason cannot know the Absolute Paradox, it still takes its cue from it and is bent on finding it by its very nature.

For Climacus, this ideal object of faith is not merely an abstraction. It is a personal deity. But the object of faith does not have to be deity, much less a personal deity. Because the individual cannot fathom the Absolute Paradox, Climacus thinks that if an unhappy relation occurs via offense, the imagination takes over and replaces the Absolute Paradox in consciousness with something it can think, the fantastic. In theological language, the direction of Climacus’ thought here resounds with what theologians would describe as a created disposition of the intellect to worship. The submission of reason by the intellect, Climacus thinks, is a requirement of

the creature in order to approach the deity with reverence in its transcendence.

That interested reason requires finitude does not necessarily bother the atheistic interpreter. The atheistic interpreter may also accept that there is an Absolute Paradox or something unknown which the finite individual cannot know. But the atheistic reader of Climacus would obviously balk at the validity of the notion that reason is by its nature interested in some unknown deity. This would be an unnecessary limitation of reason, since the assumption of deity must be established by reason in order to justify limiting reason. If Climacus' assumption that deity exists is rejected by the reader, then the deity's design that human reason find its fulfillment in itself is also inexplicable. The limitation of reason and the priority of faith as a relational trust then become equally improbable.

Summary

Climacus's texts demonstrate how faith and reason might be integrated in the Christian context when reason is given strict boundaries, but not wholly denied. Climacus' polemic against reason and unaided knowledge of God is harsh to some, but he is no irrationalist. Whatever one thinks of his Protestant framework of viewing the human subject as finite and encumbered with significant noetic limitations imposed by sin, he does seem consistent in limiting reason within this framework and there is no irrefutable logic, evidence, or argument suggesting that reason cannot have some such limitations. Reason's interest, an expression of this finitude, orients the individual in a moral and relational sense towards an epistemically transcendent object, and dictates that reason is not an end in itself, but must be fulfilled in this something higher. Some form of reason-derived knowledge functions as a kind of "catapult" for faith, and beyond that, Climacus hints that in being taken captive, reason is not obliterated but lives on to operate in a qualitatively different, exalted way. It is in subjectivity, the complex, daily appropriation of the eternal and objective into the subjective existence, where true self-knowledge (the highest religious knowledge) is gained, and where faith gains understanding. Critics may question the validity or consistency of this account of interested reason by claiming a "leap of faith" is irrational and arbitrary, since, after all

the Absolute Paradox is an offense to logic. But this is a popular misconception of Climacus that is, I contend, dissolved in a careful and comprehensive analysis of Climacus' texts. Climacus' thought leaves open the potential for a 'faith-seeking-understanding' interpretation of the relationship of faith and reason, though not in the traditional sense where secular, objective knowledge is considered useful for faith development. In interpreting the Climacus texts in this way, there are three important factors—finitude, radical sin, and the interestedness of reason—which emerge as vital to refuting the accusation that Climacus is an irrationalist. One who rejects these as reasonable or at least fails to apply them judiciously to the texts will have good reason(s) to view Climacus (and Kierkegaard) as an irrationalist.

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