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God's Plagiarist: *The Philosophical Fragments* of Johannes Climacus

Stephen Mulhall, *New College, Oxford*

1. Preliminary Assumptions: Biography, Script and Postscript

A. Script and Postscript

It is noteworthy that most of the scholarly and philosophical attention devoted to Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus has been directed at the Postscript to his *Philosophical Fragments* rather than the *Fragments* itself. True, the Postscript is some six times longer than its parent text, and it appears to focus in a more extensive and unremitting manner on recognisably philosophical concerns; but quantity is not a reliable guide either to quality or to significance, and appearance sometimes disguises reality. Perhaps these commentators would argue that Climacus inserts the truly significant philosophical material into his voluminous and rambling Postscript rather than the main text as a joke against their profession, and against Hegelian ideals of a systematic and self-contained presentation of the Truth. But that would imply that the *Fragments* itself contains little or no material of philosophical significance, that its form is somehow more acceptable to, or less subversive of, philosophical expectations than that of the Postscript, and that it is somehow incomplete or inadequate without its Postscript – that the central point of Climacus' authorship would have been missed in its absence. The first two assumptions are extremely implausible; and the third not only appears to miss the further joke implicit in the idea that a fragments or collection of fragments could somehow be made complete by appending one more piece (however large), but runs flatly contrary to a number of remarks made by Climacus in both the *Fragments* and its Postscript. The first key assumption of this reading is that those remarks should be taken seriously.

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i. Prefatory Remarks

The only evidence internal to the *Fragments* which suggests that it could even accommodate (let alone require) a postscript is Climacus' concluding comment that 'in the next section of this pamphlet, if I ever do write it, I intend to call the matter by its proper name, and clothe the issue in its historical costume' (PF, p. 109). Although this implies that the pamphlet is not yet complete, it also implies that any such sequel would be supererogatory, since Climacus sees no *need* to write it; and this is confirmed in his introductory remarks to the Postscript he eventually composes. There, he begins by stating that 'I have not felt bound by that promise, even though it was from the beginning my intent to fulfil it and the prerequisites were already on hand concurrently with the promise (CUP, p. 9); but this suggestion that the Postscript was always already a part of the *Fragments* project is immediately given a self-subverting interpretation: 'As far as my promise is concerned, its casual form was not in the least accidental, because the promise, essentially understood, was no promise, inasmuch as it had been fulfilled in the pamphlet itself' (CUP, p. 10). In other words, the prerequisites for the Postscript were on hand concurrently with the promise because they were part of the text in which the promise was so casually made; the Postscript is not an addendum to the *Fragments* – the provision of essential elements missing in that text – but a restatement or re-presentation of it.

Climacus is even more specific about this, as he goes on to describe the structure of the Postscript.

> The objective issue, then, would be about the truth of Christianity. The subjective issue is about the individual's relation to Christianity. Simply stated: How can I, Johannes Climacus, share in the happiness that Christianity promises? . . .
>
> In order to make my issue as clear as possible, I shall first present the objective issue and show how that is treated. The historical will thereby receive its due. Next, I shall present the subjective issue. That is really more than the promised sequel as a clothing in historical costume, since this costume is provided merely by mentioning the word 'Christianity'. The first part is the promised sequel; the second is a renewed attempt in the same vein as the pamphlet, a new approach to the issue of Fragments. (CUP, p. 17)

According to this account, although the forty pages of Part One of the Postscript fulfil his promise in *Fragments*, that promise could as well have been fulfilled by uttering the word 'Christianity'; and since

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in fact he did just that immediately after making the promise (by pointing out that 'it is not difficult to perceive what the historical costume of the next section will be. As is well known, Christianity is the only historical phenomenon that despite the historical – indeed, precisely by means of the historical – has wanted to be the single individual's point of departure for his eternal consciousness, has wanted to interest him otherwise than merely historically, has wanted to base his happiness on his relation to something historical' [PF, p. 109]), it is plain that the text of *Fragments* fulfils its own promise. As for the remaining five hundred and seventy pages that constitute Part Two of the Postscript: this goes beyond fulfilling the promise made in the *Fragments*, and is a new approach to the issue that the *Fragments* addresses, but it is also a renewed attempt in the same vein as that pamphlet. It follows that neither the topic nor the tone, neither the content nor the form, of the Postscript attempts anything that is not attempted in the *Fragments*.

In other words, according to Climacus' own account, even if the Postscript is not entirely superfluous to the *Fragments* project as a whole, it introduces nothing that should be unfamiliar to the readers of the main text; as he puts it, 'it is much more frivolous of him to complete the more difficult part, and then to promise a sequel, especially the sort of sequel that any attentive reader of the first part, provided he has the requisite education, can easily write on his own – if he should find it worth the trouble' (CUP, p. 10). We therefore have good reason to reject the hypothesis that the Postscript is the true heart of the project; as Climacus says, 'it is therefore quite in order that [the promise regarding the sequel] be fulfilled in a postscript, and the author can scarcely be accused of the feminine practice of saying the most important thing in a postscript, that is, if the whole matter is of any importance at all' (CUP, p. 11). Further, we may suspect that those who have acted upon that erroneous hypothesis place the wrong value upon their education, finding it worth the trouble to exercise their learning and erudition. For 'in essence, there is no sequel. [But] in another sense, the sequel could become endless in proportion to the learnedness and erudition of the one who clothed the issue in historical dress. Honour to be learning and knowledge . . . But the dialectical is nevertheless the vital power in the issue' (CUP, p. 11). In short, if Climacus' project can be said to have a centre of gravity, it lies in the dialectic of the *Fragments* itself.

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ii. Reviewing the Reviewer

Elsewhere in the Postscript, however, Climacus implies that, although it may be necessary to master the dialectic of the *Fragments* if we are to understand it and him, it is definitely not sufficient. For when commenting upon a German reviewer of the *Fragments*, he has this to say:

> His report is accurate and on the whole dialectically reliable, but now comes the hitch: although the report is accurate, anyone who reads only that will receive an utterly wrong impression of the book . . . The report is didactic, purely and simply didactic; consequently the reader will receive the impression that the pamphlet is also didactic. As I see it, this is the most mistaken impression one can have of it. The contrast of form, the teasing resistance of the imaginary construction to the content, the inventive audacity (which even invents Christianity), the only attempt made to go further (that is, further than the so-called speculative constructing), the indefatigable activity of irony, the parody of speculative thought in the entire plan, the satire in making efforts as if something [altogether extraordinary, that is new] were to come of them, whereas what always emerges is old-fashioned orthodoxy in all its rightful severity – of all this the reader finds no hint in the report. (CUP, pp. 274–5)

This litany of criticism tells us, not only that Climacus regards the form of his book as being at least as important as its dialectical content, but also that this form must be seen as contrasting with that content, and doing so by the incessant deployment of irony, parody and satire. How many readings of the *Fragments* might be subject to the same critical litany? And how might this reading avert it?

Climacus' review of his reviewer continues as follows:

> And yet the book is so far from being written for nonknowers, to give them something to know, that the person I engage in conversation in this book is always knowledgeable, which seems to indicate that the book is written for people in the know, whose trouble is that they know too much. Because everyone knows the Christian truth, it has become such a triviality that a primitive impression of it is acquired only with difficulty. When this is the case, the art of being able to communicate eventually becomes the art of being able to take away or to trick something away from someone. This seems strange and very ironic, and yet I believe I have succeeded in explaining exactly what I mean. (CUP, p. 275)

The person Climacus engages in conversation in the *Fragments* is the interlocutor who intervenes at the end of each chapter, the character Climacus describes as his 'dear reader' (PF, p. 89), and so presents as

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the text's internal representation of its intended audience. Climacus then suggests that his relation with this doubled reader is strange and ironic – 'ironic' because his text appears to be designed to communicate a certain kind of knowledge (the dialectic which is so ably captured by the German reviewer), and yet in reality aims to reduce or remove that knowledge; and 'strange', because it does so by estranging us from it, by defamiliarising it. For

> when a man is very knowledgeable but his knowledge is meaningless or virtually meaningless to him, does sensible communication consist in giving him more to know, even if he loudly proclaims that this is what he needs, or does it consist instead of taking something away from him? When a commentator takes a portion of the copious knowledge that the very knowledgeable man knows and communicates it in a form that makes it strange to him, the communicator is, as it were, taking away his knowledge, at least until the knower manages to assimilate the knowledge by overcoming the resistance of the form. (CUP, p. 275)

In other words, *Philosophical Fragments*, by employing a non-didactic form that resists its dialectical content, attempts thereby to resist being assimilated by its readers as an addition to their store of knowledge. Its satirical presentation of old-fashioned orthodoxy as something new and extraordinary is intended to ensure that a certain portion of its readers' existing store of knowledge – their knowledge of the Christian truth – might be properly assimilated rather than taken for granted, that it might become genuinely meaningful to them. In short, the author of this text pictures his readers as having a purely cognitive or epistemic relation to Christianity; they know what it is, but it means nothing to them – it is pure information, not something that informs their lives.

Of course, on the (not unreasonable) assumption that this approach is a constant feature of the Climacus authorship, certain important implications follow for the way in which the Postscript to the *Fragments* is usually read.[1] For our purposes, however, what mat-

1. James Conant's reading of the Postscript – uniquely amongst Kierkegaard commentators, as far as I am aware – operates on this assumption; indeed, it was his work which led me to speculate on the possibility of developing a parallel reading of the *Fragments*. Cf.: 'Must We Show What We Cannot Say?', in R. Fleming and M. Payne (eds), *The Sense of Stanley Cavell* (Bucknell University Press: Bucknell, 1989); 'Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard and Nonsense', in T. Cohen, P. Guyer, P. Putnam (eds), *Pursuits of Reason* (Texas Tech. University Press: Lubbock, TX, 1994); and 'Putting Two and Two Together', in T. Tessin and M. von der Ruhr (eds), *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (Macmillan: London, 1996).

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ters is the direct advice it provides concerning how to read the *Philosophical Fragments* proper. Any adequate reading must show how this text does not provide new information but rather takes it away, and how its incessant irony, parody and satire encourage the genuine assimilation of its dialectical content – how overcoming the resistance of its form might serve to make that content more meaningful for its readers.

B. Biography and Script

Although the *Fragments* and its Postscript make up Climacus' collected works, another text which bears his name – *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* – was earlier composed by the man identified as editor of his main work, Søren Kierkegaard. It provides a short biography of Climacus, and a longer (and unfinished) treatment of Climacus' attempts to take modern philosophy seriously. Kierkegaard never published this text, and since it does not constitute part of his pseudonymous authorship as a whole – let alone that part of it authored by Climacus himself – its pertinence to the task of understanding the *Fragments* and its Postscript can legitimately be doubted. Nevertheless, one important feature of Climacus' orientation to modern philosophy is likely to be underplayed if we ignore Kierkegaard's early biography of his pseudonym altogether. For the *Fragments* and its Postscript tend to focus almost exclusively on Hegelianism as representative of the practice of modern philosophy; and commentators have generally tended to follow this lead, assuming that Climacus thinks of Hegel as his emblematic philosophical opponent (except in the 'Interlude', with its focus on doubt, belief and scepticism). In *Johannes Climacus*, however, our young hero begins his philosophical studies with Descartes and the method of Cartesian doubt – and the unfinished text leaves him still grappling with the question of how properly to apply that method. Against this background, I take the lack of extensive overt reference to Descartes in the *Fragments* to be suspicious; and the second key assumption of this reading is that Climacus' text can best be understood as being in continuous but implicit dialogue with Cartesian philosophy.

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2. The First Acoustical Illusion: Inverting Descartes

A. The Thought-Project

The crucial point that Climacus' thought-project in chapter one of the *Fragments* is designed to establish emerges in the concluding exchange with his interlocutor, who accuses him of plagiarising the hypothesis he has been elaborating in opposition to the Socratic model of teaching and learning. Climacus claims that this charge is misdirected; it presupposes that he is parading as his own invention the ideas of another, and so implies that the interlocutor regards these non-Socratic ideas as the intellectual property of some particular human being or at least of the human race as such – that is, as ideas that are well within the scope of human invention. This is certainly not what believers in the non-Socratic hypothesis would say; for it is part of that hypothesis that human beings can only receive the truth which the hypothesis embodies through an encounter with the god. Put otherwise, they would regard the texts Climacus cheerfully admits to plagiarising (the Holy Bible and other texts of the Christian tradition) as divinely inspired – and it is not obvious that human beings can steal anything from God, let alone his words or his Word; indeed, since, Christianly speaking, the Word of God *is* God, this plagiarism would have to be what its etymology suggests – a form of kidnapping. Climacus, however, appears to think that the divine authorship of the hypothesis need not be taken on trust, but can be demonstrated from its content alone.

> Is it not curious that something like this exists, about which everyone who knows it knows that he has not invented it, and that this 'Go to the next house' does not halt and cannot be halted, even though one were to go to everybody? Yet this oddity enthrals me exceedingly, for it tests the correctness of the hypothesis and demonstrates it. It would indeed be unreasonable to require a person to find out all by himself that he does not exist. But this transition is precisely the transition of the rebirth from not existing to existing. Whether he understands it later certainly makes no difference, for simply because someone knows how to use gunpowder, knows how to analyze it into its components, does not mean that he invented it. (PF, p. 22)

This passage suggests that the non-human authorship of the non-Socratic hypothesis follows from the fact that one of its key elements is an idea of rebirth – of a transition from non-existence to existence.

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According to that hypothesis, human beings are not only in ignorance of the truth but lack the necessary condition for understanding it, until they receive both from the god. That state of untruth cannot have been the state in which we were created (since we would not then have been created human), so we must somehow have lost or been deprived of the truth; this cannot have been the result of divine action (since it would conflict with the god's original intention, and with his goodness), nor could it have been the result of an accident (since we would then have possessed an essential attribute of our natures only contingently), so it must have been our responsibility. In short, we must have forfeited, and be continually forfeiting, existence in the truth; our state is what Climacus suggests we call 'sin'. Having used our freedom to place ourselves in servitude to unfreedom, we cannot free ourselves; but when the god frees us, we are restored to the state for which our original creation intended us. Climacus comments:

> Inasmuch as he was in untruth, and now along with the condition receives the truth, a change takes place in him like the change from 'not to be' to 'to be'. But this transition from 'not to be' to 'to be' is indeed the transition of birth. But the person who already is cannot be born, and yet he is born. Let us call this transition rebirth, by which he enters the world a second time just as at birth . . . (PF, p. 19)

However, this final element of the non-Socratic model raises a fundamental difficulty.

> This matter of being born – is it thinkable? Well, why not? But who is supposed to think it – one who is born or one who is not born? The latter, of course, is unreasonable and cannot occur to anyone, for this notion cannot occur to one who is born. When one who is born thinks of himself as born, he is of course thinking of this transition from 'not to be' to 'to be'. The situation must be the same with rebirth. Or is the matter made more difficult by this – that the non-being preceding the rebirth has more being than the non-being that precedes birth? But who, then, is supposed to think this? It must, of course, be one who is reborn, for it would be unreasonable to think that one who is not reborn should do it, and would it not be ludicrous if this were to occur to one who is not reborn? (PF, p. 20)

The idea of being born can only occur to those who have already been born, for two main reasons. First, only existing beings are capable of thought as such. Second, and more specifically, someone can

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think of themselves as unborn only if they can think of themselves as non-existent; but Descartes' most famous contribution to modern philosophy, emblematised by the thought that 'cogito ergo sum', was to argue that it is impossible for any thinking being to doubt its own existence, to even think it possible that 'I do not exist' – a thought that he also took to reveal that thinking was essential to our nature as existent beings. Those who are born do not, of course, face this problem, since in order to think of themselves as born they need only think of themselves as having been non-existent in the past (to think 'I did not exist').

According to Climacus, the non-Socratic hypothesis raises exactly the same difficulty, because it embodies the idea of a radical change in one's being, from a wilful repudiation of one's intended orientation to the truth (and so of one's true humanity) to one in which that true nature is genuinely fulfilled – a change paralleling that from non-existence to existence. It follows that this idea of rebirth is thinkable only by those who have been reborn, and for the same two reasons. First, only reborn beings are capable of genuinely truth-oriented thinking; and second, someone can think of themselves as un(re)born only if they can think of themselves as non-existent – which is, on the Cartesian principles which guide modern Socratic philosophers, unthinkable. The reborn avoid this difficulty, because they are required only to think of themselves as having been non-existent – and 'I did not exist' is perfectly thinkable.

To those who would argue that the two cases of birth and rebirth are not parallel, since the state preceding rebirth which the non-Socratic hypothesis characterises as a mode of non-existence is what we standardly think of as full-blooded existence, Climacus' riposte is simple: who is in a position to think that thought, to make the requisite comparison between the non-existence preceding birth and that preceding rebirth? Only those who are capable of thinking of the state preceding rebirth as one of non-existence: but for those existing in that state, this would again mean thinking of themselves as non-existent – whereas those who have been reborn need only think of themselves as having been non-existent. And to those who would argue that, if they can understand the non-Socratic hypothesis as Climacus has outlined it, then it must have been possible for them – or indeed any human being – to have invented it, Climacus deploys his analogy with gunpowder. Someone capable of analysing the chemical structure of gunpowder does not thereby provide any

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grounds for believing either that she did or that she could have invented it; the two capacities are no more interchangeable or necessarily connected than those of the literary critic and the author. In the same way, Climacus implies, even if the Socratic follower really can follow his analysis of the logical structure of the non-Socratic hypothesis, it would give us no reason for thinking that she might have invented the elements of the structure herself. And in reality, one key element of that structure implies that any modern follower of Socrates who claimed that the non-Socratic hypothesis was a human invention would be committed to claiming that she can not only think, but could also have thought up, what she is committed to regarding as unthinkable.

B. The Poetic Venture

In the second chapter of the *Fragments*, Climacus sounds the same anti-Cartesian note, but in a more poetic key, and with reference to a different element of the non-Socratic hypothesis; here, he concerns himself with a mode of birth, a transition to a new existence, that is undergone by the god rather than by those the god encounters. Utilising an analogy with a king besotted with a lowly maiden, Climacus argues that – according to the non-Socratic hypothesis – the god is motivated to bring about an encounter with his human learners because he desires a fully reciprocal, loving and comprehending relationship with them. This means that the relation must be between equals, even though the two involved are as unequal as it is possible to be; the learner must understand her complete dependence on the god without this destroying her self-confidence, and so rendering their relationship an unbearable sorrow to them both. Raising the learner to the god's level would not solve the problem. If she was exalted, the lover would have changed the beloved and implied that his love required that change; if he elicited her adoration by appearing in his full glory, he would imply that his glory was what made him lovable, and so make her lowliness a cause for despair. The only solution is, therefore, for the god to descend to the learner's level: not merely to take on a human guise – since that would be the mere appearance of equality – but to become fully human. In short, there must be an Incarnation.

Once again, the key lesson of this poetic venture emerges in

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Climacus' concluding dialogue with his interlocutor. The charge of plagiarism is again raised, and again denied by denying that the venture can be thought of as having human origins.

> But then my soul is also gripped with new amazement – indeed, it is filled with adoration, for it certainly would have been odd if it had been a human poem. Presumably it could occur to a human being to poetize himself in the likeness of the god or the god in the likeness of himself, but not to poetize that the god poetized himself in the likeness of a human being, for if the god gave no indication, how could it occur to a man that the blessed god could need him? This would indeed be the worst of thoughts, or, rather, so bad a thought that it could not arise in him, even though, when the god has confided it to him, he adoringly says: This thought did not arise in my heart – and finds it to be the most wondrously beautiful thought. (PF, p. 36)

For Climacus, then, what betrays the divine authorship of the idea of the Incarnation is its implication that the blessed god needs human beings – that he becomes fully human because he needs to disclose his love for them without either deceiving or destroying them, and needs to elicit their freely given and self-confident love. But why is this idea of a creator dependent on his creatures beyond human invention?

Here, we might recall that in the course of his meditations, after establishing the certainty of his own existence and thereby establishing the principle that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true, Descartes next claims to have a clearly and distinctly perceived idea of God as a perfect being. By contrast, he perceives himself as an imperfect, conditioned and dependent being, and takes this to demonstrate that he cannot conceive of his own existence as self-grounding, but must rather conclude that it is sustained by the actions of a perfect, infinite and unconditioned being – by God. In other words, he assumes that his idea of God as free of imperfections or limitations is as indubitable a truth as that of his own existence whilst thinking; and he utilises the contrast between divine perfection and human imperfection to prove God's existence by proving our dependence upon him as our creator.

On Climacus' account, the non-Socratic conception of the god precisely inverts this Cartesian line of reasoning. Its distinctive doctrine of the Incarnation makes sense only on the supposition that the god is essentially dependent: not only does he take on the dependencies inherent in the finite human nature he exemplifies, he also

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needed to make himself incarnate, because the fulfilment of his love depends on establishing a mutually loving and mutually comprehending relationship with human beings. For a Cartesian, this thought is not thinkable: the idea of a dependent or needy divine being is a contradiction in terms, and we could have no reason to think of any idea that incorporates it as an idea of God at all. If, however, the very idea of a dependent god could not – according to Cartesian principles – be thought by the unaided human intellect, it could hardly be thought up or invented by it; the existence of that idea is thus explicable only as the product of divine authorship. We are, it seems, dependent on the god for our idea of him as dependent on us.

C. The Metaphysical Caprice

Against this background, it is hardly surprising to find Climacus ask the following question at the heart of his third chapter: 'Is it not here as it is with the Cartesian dolls? As soon as I let go of the doll, it stands on its head' (PF, p. 42). The Hongs claim that this is a double error on Climacus' part: misremembering a kind of eccentrically weighted tumbler doll that rolls to its feet when released, Climacus misnames it for a 'Cartesian devil' (a hollow glass figure that moves in a partially filled container of water when the pliable top of the container is pressed). It seems much more likely that Climacus is deliberately using an inverted version of the tumbling doll to allude to his argumentative strategy of inverting the founding moves and principles of the Cartesian meditations.

We should not, however, interpret that strategy as an attempted proof of the non-Socratic hypothesis – as if Climacus not only aims to defamiliarise our knowledge of Christianity by presenting it as a mere imaginative exercise, but also to provide anti-Cartesian demonstrations of God's existence from the existence of our idea of him (since the non-Socratic idea of God presupposes the humanly-inconceivable and so necessarily divinely-inspired ideas of His dependence and our non-existence). For first, the damage he has done to the Socratic hypothesis depends only on the existence of the non-Socratic hypothesis *qua hypothesis* – its reality as an idea; we need not assume that it corresponds to anything real for it to prove a stumbling-block to its opponents. Second, the non-Socratic hypoth-

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esis entails that followers of Socrates must lack the condition for understanding the truth; so the fact that they confront a paradox shows only that the non-Socratic hypothesis has avoided an internal inconsistency – it does not demonstrate its truth. And third, Climacus himself emphasises in his third chapter that no proofs of God's existence are possible. His underlying point seems reminiscent of the Kantian claim that 'existence is not a true predicate'. Logical or deductive links hold only between concepts, as part of the unfolding or inter-relating of ideas or essences; such connections can be elaborated from an existential presupposition (by, for example, showing that any object with one property must have another property), but they cannot by themselves deliver an existential conclusion, since that amounts to determining whether a given idea has application to the world (whether a certain empirical possibility is actual) and the contrary of any matter of fact is always logically possible. In short, logic cannot adjudicate existential claims; the abyss between the realm of essence and that of factual being is not bridgeable in thought.

Nevertheless, his two preceding exchanges with his (plainly Socratically-minded) interlocutor show that she has a hubristic misconception of her relationship with the non-Socratic hypothesis. For this modern representative of Socrates is prone to imagine that the non-Socratic hypothesis might have been invented by a human being, and so to presuppose that it falls within the realm of human conceivability – that it can be grasped by and in thought (and then, of course, rejected). But the reality appears to be that its key elements are not thinkable on Cartesian principles, and so that the hypothesis as a whole is beyond the powers of human invention or construction, and indeed beyond the realm of the humanly thinkable. All paradoxes present themselves as a challenge to the understanding; but this paradox really is absolutely beyond its scope.

In a terribly compressed metaphysical analysis in this third chapter, Climacus tries to demonstrate the hubris attendant upon any claim by the understanding to be able to construct an adequate idea of that which is beyond it. If this idea of the unknown or the unknowable truly is to be something that thought cannot think, then it must not only be different from thought but absolutely different; there must be no trace within it of anything by reference to which thought might be able to grasp it, and so no mark by which the unknown is distinguished from other known or knowable things – since the

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unknown would then at least be knowable as the opposite or negation of that knowable thing, and so the supposed beyond of thought would be thinkable by way of negation.

> Defined as the absolutely different, [the unknown] appears to be at the point of being disclosed, but not so, because the understanding cannot even think the absolutely different; it cannot absolutely negate itself, but uses itself for that purpose and consequently thinks the difference in itself, which it thinks by itself. It cannot absolutely transcend itself and therefore thinks as above itself only the sublimity it thinks by itself. (PF, p. 45)

If the absoluteness of the difference requires that all distinguishing marks be erased from it, that must include whatever mark distinguishes it from the understanding; the understanding must therefore negate itself absolutely, negate even its grasp of the difference as absolutely different from itself, since that too amounts to a relation between it and the difference (by way of self-negation), and so a negation of it as absolutely different. But this is impossible: if the understanding negated even this relation to the idea of the absolutely different, it would not stand in any relation to it at all – in other words, it would be absolutely ungraspable. Instead, surreptitiously but necessarily, the understanding continues to think the idea of absolute difference by using itself – that is, by thinking of the unknown as absolutely different from itself, and so as the negation of itself in some respect or other. Climacus characterises this as a dispersion of the unknown: the dissemination of a number of ideas of the unknown which differ according to which aspect of the understanding has been negated to produce it – the unknown as the ridiculous, as the prodigious, and so on. But then, our choosing to develop one of these ideas as opposed to any other is entirely arbitrary – each is as little and as much an idea of the absolutely different as any other; and of course, all are ultimately constructions of the understanding, which knows deep down that it has produced its idea of the unknown god itself in a capricious manner, and so knows that it is not truly an idea of the absolutely different at all.

The consequence is that every idea of the unknown which the understanding is in a position to grasp is one in which the supposedly absolute difference between the unknown and the understanding has in fact absolutely collapsed.

> If the difference cannot be grasped securely because there is no distinguishing mark, then, as with all such dialectical opposites, so

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> it is with the difference and the likeness – they are identical. Adhering to the understanding, the difference has so confused the understanding that it does not know itself and quite consistently confuses itself with the difference. (PF, p. 45)

This is why paganism has produced such a variety of gods resembling human beings in so many different ways. And it is also why the understanding tends to generate entirely misleading conceptions of the non-Socratic hypothesis of divine incarnation. For it will interpret that hypothesis as requiring that a human being who behaves in just the way all other human beings behave is and can be known to be the god.

> How do I know that? Well, I cannot know it, for in that case I would have to know the god and the difference, and I do not know the difference, inasmuch as the understanding had made it like unto that from which it differs. Thus the god has become the most terrible deceiver through the understanding's deception of itself. The understanding has the god as close as possible and yet just as far away. (PF, pp. 45–6)

Any idea of god constructed by the understanding is made in the understanding's own, all-too-human image, and is (therefore?) also an image of a terrible deceiver, an evil demon – since an incarnate god who was indistinguishable from any other human being would have made it impossible for anyone even to imagine that he was the god, and so prevent them from encountering him as the god. The closest that the understanding can come to an idea of the absolutely different inevitably fails to respect the absoluteness of that difference, and so places itself as far away as possible from the god. The absolute paradox of divine incarnation constitutes the downfall of the understanding.

But for Climacus, collision with such a paradox is exactly what the understanding most fundamentally desires; the ultimate paradox of thought is its desire to discover something that thought cannot think, to will its own downfall. This diagnosis is again Kantian in its inspiration; it reiterates the famous opening declaration of the first *Critique*, that it is the fate of human reason to set itself questions that it is capable neither of answering nor of dismissing. The first half of that *Critique* (the 'Transcendental Analytic') presupposes that the understanding attains true maturity only when it determines for itself the limits of its legitimate employment – maps the limits of the comprehensible from within, as it were; and the second half (the

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'Transcendental Dialectic') amounts to a study of the various deformations of reason which can result from the paradoxical impulse to violate those limits – a taxonomy of the perversions to which thought is unavoidably heir. Taken as a whole, then, the Kantian bequest to modern philosophy is the idea that reason is both inherently obliged to explore its own limits, and inherently inclined to violate them. So when Climacus says that anything which presents itself to thought as a limit simultaneously torments and incites the understanding, that thought needs to discover a boundary beyond which it cannot go but can never stop wanting to go beyond any such boundary, he is adapting that Kantian vision in order to account for the understanding's fascination with the paradox of the incarnate god. For that paradox really is beyond the scope of the understanding, and so fixes its limits from the outside, as it were; but precisely because of that the understanding will never cease wanting to grasp it, and never cease claiming to have succeeded – even though it knows that at bottom it can never succeed, that the absolute paradox represents its own nemesis. In effect, the paradox of the incarnate god and the understanding's paradoxical desire for its own downfall are made for one another; only the absolute paradox can elicit and satisfy the passion of the understanding to its fullest possible extent.

In the Postscript to the *Fragments*, Climacus brings this picture of the absolute paradox and the perverse understanding as a marriage made in heaven to centre stage; but in the appendix to his third chapter, he restricts himself to presenting its sado-masochism as a drama of contested copyright. He defines all passion as a kind of suffering, and the passion of the understanding's unhappy love for the paradox of the unknown god (what Climacus calls 'offense', as opposed to what he will later call the happy love of 'faith') as one in which the understanding – subject to an acoustical illusion – continually protests its own authorship of the paradox, is wounded by its own inevitable failure to validate that claim and to accept that everything it knows of the paradox originates from the paradox itself rather than its own creative resources, and yet continually returns to the cause of its endless suffering – to that which wounds it by its very existence. In this context, the understanding's struggle to avoid acknowledging its own perversity appears as itself perverse – as one more sado-masochistic twist in that spiral of self-injury; and it confirms Climacus' suspicion that the modern followers of Socrates –

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committed to the essential transparency and truthfulness of human nature – ought to consider (as did their master) the possibility that human beings are in fact as bizarre and mysterious in their nature as winged horses, Gorgons and other monsters.

3. The Second Acoustical Illusion: Subverting the Inversion

A. Is Absolute Difference Unthinkable?

Climacus himself, however, takes his metaphysical caprice one step further than its identification of a certain capricious perversity in the understanding. For, as he insists to his interlocutor, it directs us towards a paradox that appears to confront more than just the modern followers of Socrates:

> [I]f a human being is to come truly to know something about the unknown (the god), he must first come to know that it is different from, absolutely different from him. The understanding cannot come to know this by itself (since, as we have seen, this is a contradiction); if it is going to come to know this, it must come to know this from the god, and if it does come to know this it cannot understand this and consequently cannot come to know this, for how could it understand the absolutely different? . . . If the god is absolutely different from a human being, then the human being is absolutely different from the god – but how is the understanding to grasp this? At this point we seem to stand at a paradox. (PF, p. 46)

Followers of the Socratic hypothesis have just been charged with erroneously thinking that they might be able to think the unthinkable – to construct a contentful idea of that which is beyond the understanding. But even if we assume divine authorship and delivery of an appropriately constructed idea of the absolutely different, it would still *ex hypothesi* be ungraspable by the human understanding. So it would not be graspable even by those who want to use it as part of their elaboration of the non-Socratic hypothesis, or as part of their defence of it against what they see as the intellectual hubris of their Socratically-minded opponents.

Of course, according to the non-Socratic hypothesis, the reborn would be able to grasp it; for an encounter with the god is supposed to give us both the truth and the condition for understanding it – to transform our corrupted understanding so that it can grasp the truth.

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The same idea emerged in response to parallel difficulties in the first two chapters; the ability to think of ourselves as non-existent and of the god as dependent was there attributed to our redemptive rebirth at the hands of the god. But if only transformed human beings can grasp the non-Socratic hypothesis, anyone offering to explain and defend that hypothesis would not only be presumptuously putting themselves forward as divinely redeemed, but should also appreciate that their offer was futile – since the only people for whom an explanation and defence of the hypothesis might be useful would be entirely unable to grasp it.

Might we perhaps distinguish between thinking the unthinkable and thinking that the unthinkable is the unthinkable? At one point Climacus remarks in passing that 'we do not say that [the learner] is supposed to understand the paradox, but is only to understand that this is the paradox' (PF, p. 59); perhaps, then, we should say that only the transformed human understanding can think the unthinkable paradox, but the untransformed human understanding can at least grasp that the paradox is unthinkable – and so can usefully be led to appreciate this. Surprisingly enough, Descartes uses a distinction of this kind when defending his own conception of God's absolute freedom to abrogate even the laws of logic, and thus to create a logically impossible world.[2] He distinguishes between knowing that God is the author of everything (including logic) and conceiving or grasping it; just as we finite creatures cannot embrace a mountain but can only touch it, so with our finite, imperfect understanding we cannot embrace God's omnipotence in thought but can only touch it. This looks like a possible solution to the problem of being able to think the unthinkable; the untransformed understanding can frame a thought about that which lies beyond the unthinkable because it can conceive of something inconceivable without conceiving that inconceivable something; the latter task can be performed only by the transformed understanding. Could we not, then, touch the absolutely different in our thought without actually embracing it; and so is there not room for explanation and even defence of the non-Socratic hypothesis by and for the unreborn?

We must surely, however, ask the same question of this claim that Climacus has just insisted on asking the followers of Socrates: is the

2. James Conant has examined this matter in some detail, in 'The Search for Logically Alien Thought', *Philosophical Topics* (Vol. 20, No. 1: Fall 1991), to which the following paragraphs are indebted.

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idea of absolute difference invoked here really absolute? Climacus' metaphysical caprice made it clear that the most minimal relation between the understanding and the idea of absolute difference would undermine the absoluteness of that idea of difference; but understanding that something is the absolutely different, even if it is not equivalent to understanding the absolutely different, nevertheless presupposes some kind of relation between the notion of absolute difference and the untransformed understanding. To put it in Cartesian terms: if the untransformed understanding could not even touch the idea of the absolutely unthinkable in its thought, the non-Socratic hypothesis would be neither explicable nor defensible; but if it so much as touches that idea, even if it restricts itself to thinking that the unthinkable is the unthinkable, then that idea is not an idea of the absolutely unthinkable.

B. Transgressing the Frontier of Thought

The paradox to which Climacus's commentary on his metaphysical caprice appears to direct us is that the anti-Socratic line of argument developed thus far in the *Fragments* is hoist by its own petard. It criticises the Socratic hypothesis for presuming to think the unthinkable, generating an interpretation of the god as the absolutely different in order to underline this presumption; but that criticism must help itself to the same, supposedly unthinkable notion, and so displays the presumption it castigates. In other words: if the idea of absolute difference is humanly unthinkable, how can the idea that absolute difference is humanly unthinkable – the idea just employed to explain the non-Socratic model and criticise its opponents – be humanly thinkable? According to its own analysis, the anti-Socratic position must either be itself unthinkable or it must be surreptitiously helping itself to an idea of something other than the absolutely unthinkable – and thus collapsing the distinction between human beings and the absolutely different.

Climacus thinks of this collapse as a confusion of difference and likeness; and he diagnoses its cause as follows:

> [I]n defining the unknown as the different, the understanding ultimately goes astray and confuses the difference with likeness. (PF, p. 46)

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In other words, the problem lies with our definition of the unknown as the absolutely different. In fact, Climacus begins his discussion of the paradox in chapter three by reference to a frontier of thought, and his metaphysical caprice properly gets underway only when he shifts from the idea of a frontier to the idea of difference: the unknown, he says, 'is the frontier that is continually arrived at, and therefore when the category of motion is replaced by the category of rest it is the different, the absolutely different' (PF, p. 44). Moreover, he later remarks that the fatal dispersion of the idea of the absolutely different comes about only 'if the unknown (the god) is not solely the frontier' (PF, p. 45). Taken together, these points suggest that the understanding goes astray the moment it shifts from picturing the unknown as a frontier to picturing it as the different.

But how momentous could such a figurative shift be? Well, the idea of the frontier allows Climacus to develop the following thought:

> The paradoxical passion of the understanding . . . has correctly perceived the unknown as frontier. But a frontier is expressly the passion's torment, even though it is also its incentive. And yet, it can go no further, whether it risks a sortie through via negationis (the way of negotiation) or via eminentiae (the way of idealization). (PF, p. 44)

When, by contrast, we think of the unknown god as the absolutely different, it presents itself as something lying beyond the frontier of thought; so when we attempt to think that difference, we find ourselves assuming that we can somehow get beyond that frontier – that we can know the unknown (*qua* absolutely different). The followers of Socrates attempt this via a combination of negation (defining the unknown by self-negation) and idealization (idealizing their powers of understanding); those opposed to them deploy a similar combination (constructing an idealized understanding by negating our familiar one). And both fail, because their attempts illicitly and ironically render what is supposedly unknown and unknowable as in fact knowable.

If the frontier of the thinkable truly is the frontier of the thinkable, then it can never be crossed by thought, but – as Climacus says – can only be arrived at and engaged with; for anything beyond such a frontier would be unthinkable. But the idea of the absolutely different is an attempt to mark that frontier from the outside, to pick out some specific thing that thought cannot think. It therefore pre-

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supposes that there are two types of thought – the thinkable thoughts and the unthinkable ones; whereas an unthinkable thought is not a peculiar kind of thought – it is no thought at all. More generally, it presupposes that we can delineate the limits of thought by thinking both sides of the limit; but if we could think both sides of this boundary, it could not be the boundary of the unthinkable, but at best a boundary within the boundary of the thinkable – a division within the realm of thought. As Climacus puts it, '[the understanding] thinks as above itself only the sublimity that it thinks by itself' (PF, p. 45).

The Cartesian strategy of supplementing the non-Socratic distinction between transformed and untransformed modes of human understanding with a further distinction between ideas touchable by thought and ideas embraceable by thought merely deepens the problem. If a transformed understanding might grasp ideas that are beyond the capacities of an untransformed understanding, then the limits of the untransformed understanding are not the absolute limits of the thinkable – but rather constraints that can conceivably be transcended; the unthinkable is only contingently unthinkable, as it were. And if the untransformed understanding can touch the ideas that only a transformed understanding can embrace, then the contingently necessary limits of the thinkable are not even contingently necessary – the boundary can be crossed even by untransformed thought, and so must mark a division within the realm of the thinkable. The limits of the thinkable are thus transgressable by the unreborn as well as the born; they are doubly displaced or devalued, doubly non-absolute.

Could the anti-Socratic critique be rescued by reformulating it in terms of a frontier rather than of absolute difference? As we have seen, Climacus does appear to think that its problems begin when the picture of a frontier is left behind. Sensitised by his own warnings, however, we may be less sanguine than he is; after all, no matter how much he stresses that the frontier of thought can only be arrived at, that it cannot be crossed, the image itself can accommodate the thought that (as with the territorial borders with which we are familiar) there is a realm beyond the frontier to which we are being denied access. Regardless of this, however, the anti-Socratic critique only works by accusing the followers of Socrates of violating the limits of the understanding when they claim to be able to grasp the non-Socratic idea of the god; but if we reinterpret that idea of

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the god as the frontier of thought, then either that frontier can be engaged by the understanding (in which case there is no violation of the limits of thought in thinking it) or it cannot be so engaged (in which case, neither can we engage with the claim that it [what?] cannot be so engaged).

Accordingly, insofar as the anti-Socratic critique developed earlier utilises the idea of the god as that which thought cannot think, it commits the very error of which it accuses its opponents (that of violating the limits of the thinkable), and it hides its violation in exactly the same way – by illicitly deabsolutising those limits, picturing them as a boundary drawn within a wider realm and so as thinkable from both sides. This means that it participates in the understanding's perversion of its proper role; the anti-Socratic claim to have more respect for the proper limits of the understanding itself transgresses them – its fervent warning against the hubris of the mind merely a further expression of that hubris. What greater proof could there be of the understanding's tendency for self-deception and self-ironization – of its all-but-unappeasable desire for its own downfall – than its impassioned construction of an idea of the god which demands that it nail itself to a cross of perpetual torment?

C. Negating the Understanding

This self-subversion of the anti-Socratic critique strongly suggests that its conception of the god as a paradox, or more precisely its interpretation of the god's paradoxicality as something that thought cannot think, is driven by the perverseness of the understanding rather than the nature of the god. And in fact, once we notice the further reflexive implications of Climacus' metaphysical caprice, their consequences can be seen to engulf virtually every aspect of his earlier development of the non-Socratic hypothesis. First of all, according to his analysis, any attempt to grasp the unthinkable by negating some aspect or other of the understanding will go awry, collapsing the very distinction it aims to comprehend. But in the previous two chapters, those opposed to the Socratic model attempted to demonstrate its incoherence by presenting key elements of the non-Socratic hypothesis as negations of Socratic conceptions of the limits of the understanding. This at first appeared to be a particularly powerful way of criticising the understanding; but now it

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appears as simply one more instance of the understanding attempting to think the unthinkable by negating some aspect of its own self-conception, and thus as exemplifying exactly the same inability to think the unthinkable of which the modern followers of Socrates were accused.

Once, however, suspicions are raised about constructions by negation, then the whole of Climacus' elaboration of the non-Socratic hypothesis is placed in the dock. For he repeatedly insists that that hypothesis is constructed by negating every element of the Socratic hypothesis. Only thus, we were told, could its distinctiveness be maintained – its claim to have gone beyond Socrates. But according to the metaphysical caprice, constructions of the understanding which operate by self-negation precisely fail to reach beyond the understanding, but rather maintain an internal relation to that which it negates; so no such construction could be anything other than Socratic in its essence. And this insight is further underlined if we examine the starting point of Climacus' presentation – the problem with which it gets off the ground.

The issue is: Can the truth be learned? Climacus himself immediately identifies this as 'a Socratic question' (PF, p. 9); and he structures his elaboration of the Socratic and non-Socratic hypotheses as alternative solutions to that paradox. But this starting point is preceded by the 'propositio' (proposition or hypothesis) which formally initiates the thought-project, and which forms the heading of chapter one:

> The question is asked by one who in his ignorance does not even know what provided the occasion for his questioning in this way. (PF, p. 9)

The question referred to can only be that which immediately follows this 'propositio' – the Socratic question of how the truth can be learned. Since Climacus asks this question of himself and us, the 'propositio' in effect describes him as someone ignorant of what leads him to ask the question, and ignorant of his ignorance; it suggests that Climacus never questions the importance and correctness of his procedure, but in fact lacks the fully-transparent self-knowledge whose reality the very asking of the Socratic question presupposes.

Suppose he were to ask himself what occasioned his investigation, what might he say? What does this starting point tell us about his

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motivation? First, that it is a response to a paradox – that learning the truth is not possible, since those who know the truth have no need to acquire it, and those who do not know what it is cannot look for it. As we are reminded in chapter three, this is exactly the starting point we would expect for a meditation by a follower of Socrates; 'the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a very mediocre fellow' (PF, p. 37). After all, Climacus often says that he is not himself a Christian, not one of the reborn or one who propounds the non-Socratic hypothesis as the truth; he is a humorist and a philosopher who is interested in trying to make sense of the possibility for eternal happiness that Christianity claims to offer.

It should not therefore surprise us that his perspective on his material is Socratic through and through; but we may not properly have appreciated the implications of that fact hitherto. For it entails that, despite its overtly anti-Socratic thrust, his presentation of the non-Socratic hypothesis will manifest every weakness and incoherence of which his anti-Socratic critique accuses its opponents. Indeed, according to the appendix to chapter three, any Socratically-inflected presentation of the god is an expression of the understanding's unhappy love for the paradox – an expression of offence rather than faith. So we should expect this presentation to manifest the distinguishing marks of offence:

> Offense is the erroneous accounting, the conclusion of untruth, with which the paradox thrusts away. The one offended does not speak according to his own nature, but according to the nature of the paradox, just as someone caricaturing another person does not originate anything himself, but only copies the other in the wrong way. (PF, pp. 50–1)

If Climacus' thought-project produces a caricature of the god, then his Socratic interlocutor's constantly-reiterated charge of plagiarism is (entirely predictably) precisely the reverse of the truth; the problem is not that Climacus presents the words of a (divine) other as his own, but that he presents his own words as those of a divine other. This is the opposite or negation of plagiarism – a species of ventriloquism, an acoustical illusion (of the kind to which the title of the appendix carefully draws our attention): we have taken Climacus' voice, echoing back from the frontier of thought, as that of the unknown god, and allowed him to remake the god in his own Socratic image. But exactly how does the Socratic inflection of

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Climacus' thought-project produce an erroneous copy or caricature of the non-Socratic god?

As we have just seen, such an orientation entails that the non-Socratic hypothesis is presented primarily as a second possible solution to a Socratic paradox – divine incarnation emerges as one solution to a Socratic question about the transmission and acquisition of knowledge. As we saw earlier, it also entails that the non-Socratic hypothesis emerges by negation from the Socratic hypothesis, and so embodies an interpretation of the divine incarnation as beyond the limits of human understanding, as the absolute negation of thought and reason. In every respect, therefore, this interpretation of the god has cast him in terms of his relation to the understanding. He appears as one element in a hypothesis, an intellectual structure designed to solve an intellectual problem; and whether we are offended by him or not, it is our understanding – our capacity for thought – that is engaged by him, our understanding that suffers and is wounded by his existence. If, then, we really are to live up to Climacus' warning that we should not interpret the unknown god in Socratic terms, we must surely reject as a caricature of the truth the idea that our relation to him is best interpreted in terms of the understanding – as if the only kind of challenge that the incarnate god poses to the followers of Socrates is an intellectual one, a challenge to thought. We must, in short, recognize that the understanding's self-constructed crucifixion is a blasphemous, intellectualized parody of the real challenge that the god's crucifixion sets us.

4. The Third Acoustical Illusion: The Meaningfulness of the God

A. (Theo)logical Paradoxes

Climacus claimed in the Postscript that his aim in the *Fragments* was to re-present our knowledge of Christianity in such a way that it is no longer meaningless to us. This claim explicitly denies that the non-Socratic hypothesis is literally unknowable or unthinkable; it says rather that it has come to mean nothing to us – that we cannot see how or why we might come to think of ourselves and our lives in the particular terms it proposes. In short, the real problem for Climacus is to get us to see the existential or spiritual point of Christianity – to appreciate once again the true nature of the

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existential challenge it poses. The Socratic interpretation of the incarnate god as the key element in a non-Socratic solution to a Socratic problem of knowledge merely continues the original problem, by disguising the existential challenge of Christianity as an intellectual challenge. Even the supposedly anti-Socratic insistence that the god is beyond our intellectual capacities implies that this intellectual insight is an essential prolegomenon to any proper relation to Christianity – something that must be cleared up before a proper relation with the god can be established. However, even explaining that the god is absolutely inexplicable, is, after all, a kind of explanation; and this kind of assumption is identified by Climacus as one of the characteristic signs of offence:

> When the understanding wants to have pity upon the paradox and assist it to an explanation, the paradox does not put up with that but considers it appropriate for the understanding to do that, for is that not what philosophers are for – to make supernatural things ordinary and trivial? (PF, p. 53)

But this suggests not only that the blasphemous parody of the god with which the offended understanding presents us in *Fragments* trivialises the divine, but also that the paradox will not put up with that trivialisation – that it will nevertheless find a way of getting its true nature across despite the parody. After all, if – as we saw earlier – the offended understanding produces a caricature of the god, we should remember that a caricature is not an entirely inaccurate portrait of someone; a good caricature exaggerates the true features of its subject, and may even give a clearer picture of it than a more faithful representation can convey.

Putting these points together, we must ask ourselves how the philosopher Climacus' intellectualised caricature of the god might nevertheless indirectly convey the true existential challenge embodied in Christian vision and terminology – might contain at least an echo of the voice of the god as it is reflected by the offended understanding. The necessary shift of aspect is not hard to identify in general terms. Climacus' thought-projection has presented the non-Socratic vision as a rigorously-elaborated conceptual chain or network, a kind of logical skeleton; at various points he notes in passing that particular nodes of this network might be labelled with tags from Christian theology, but that these are at best marginal *aides-mémoires*. If we are to reclaim the true significance of Christianity, we need to invert the terms of this ironical presentation; we need to

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recognize that it is those seemingly dispensable tags that embody the real substance of the Christian vision – that the heart of the matter lies with the concepts that even Climacus' caricature does not entirely eliminate from his subject.

This is certainly what Climacus' concluding remarks in chapter three suggest. There, immediately after hinting that the metaphysical caprice implies that the anti-Socratic critique is self-subverting, he goes on to explain how the god's difference from human beings might be perfectly adequately understood.

> [I]f the god is to be absolutely different from a human being, this can have its basis not in that which man owes to the god (for to that extent they are akin) but in that which he owes to himself or in that which he himself has committed. What, then, is the difference? Indeed, what else but sin, since the difference, the absolute difference, must have been caused by the individual himself. (PF, p. 47)

Here, the absolute difference is not read as a cognitive distance but a moral or spiritual one; human beings are sinful and the god is not – it is not their understanding but their soul that is inadequate as it stands, and their encounter with the god gives them a consciousness of their own self-willed falling away from goodness. In other words, the transition of rebirth, which the thought-project in chapter one presents as embodying the anti-Cartesian intellectual challenge of thinking of oneself as non-existent, is here presented as the existential challenge of thinking of oneself as spiritually non-existent, as living a life that is oriented away from the good. The key issue is not negating the cogito, but overcoming our resistance to thinking of ourselves as radically sinful creatures.

Climacus elaborates upon this alternative interpretation by switching attention from sinner to saviour:

> Only the god could teach [consciousness of sin] – if he wanted to be teacher. But this he did indeed want to be, as we have composed the story, and in order to be that, he wanted to be on the basis of equality with the single individual, so that he could completely understand him. (PF, p. 47)

Here, Climacus reminds us of the aspect of the non-Socratic hypothesis that was elaborated in chapter two; what was originally presented as an anti-Cartesian point about divine dependence or imperfection now appears as a point about god's love for mankind. The difficulty is not the intellectual one of recognizing divinity in

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imperfection, but the practical one of recognizing oneself – a sinner – as nevertheless lovable by god, as having something of the divine within oneself that an incarnate god might redeem.

Combining these two elements, Climacus immediately derives a spiritual version of the absolute paradox or absolute difference which was the topic of his third chapter.

> Thus the paradox becomes even more terrible, or the same paradox has the duplexity by which it manifests itself as the absolute – negatively, by bringing into prominence the absolute difference of sin, and positively by wanting to annul this absolute difference in the absolute equality. (PF, p. 47)

B. On Being a Follower

The appendix to chapter three continues this reinterpretive task by embodying a highly compressed sketch of part of what it might mean to perceive oneself as a sinner redeemed by one's relation to the god. Its account of the understanding's happy love has three central themes. It tells us that the understanding suffers through its relation to the god – that it must, indeed, undergo a self-inflicted crucifixion if it is to maintain that relationship. Second, it emphasises the acoustical illusion that is central to that relationship – the understanding's unwitting but ineliminable indebtedness to the paradox for its words about the paradox. And finally, it refers to the understanding's need to step aside – to resign its self-given position of importance in relation to the paradox; 'the understanding surrenders itself and the paradox gives itself' (PF, p. 54). Those familiar with the Postscript will recognize each of these elements; for Climacus there anatomises Christianity (religiousness B) as incorporating and transcending an absolute orientation to the Absolute good (religiousness A), and he anatomises this orientation in terms of three aspects or moments: resignation, suffering and guilt (a term which also signifies indebtedness). The overt interpretation placed on those elements in the appendix may trivialise their demands; but part of the theological skeleton of the Christian vision is visible in the caricature.

Two things are not yet visible, however: first, the rest of that skeleton – the ways in which a consciousness of oneself as sinful transcends as well as incorporating a sense of oneself as guilty; and second, a clearer indication that these theological terms require exis-

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tential application. After all, if the true challenge posed by the god is existential rather than intellectual, more must be involved in meeting it than simply shifting our terminology from cognitive paradoxes to theological ones; Climacus' caricature must show that the Christian vision of sinful but redeemable humanity is meant to find application to human life – to secrete an existential imperative. But the second half of the *Fragments* can be seen to do just that – in its usual self-subverting way.

The Postscript's brief analytical account of how sin-consciousness transcends guilt-consciousness focuses almost exclusively on the Christian concept of the divine incarnation – on the idea that since, in religiousness B, the absolute good to which religiousness A asks us to orient ourselves enters time, it must be understood as asking us to orient ourselves to the absolute good in time, to the incarnate deity. Sure enough, the fourth and fifth chapters of the *Fragments* appear to do just that: they confront the redoubled absurdity involved in relating oneself *qua* temporal being to the eternal made temporal. Equally predictably, however, they interpret this difficulty as an intellectual one – that of comprehending the nature of any relation to such a deity – and they take this comprehension to be an essential preparation for properly relating oneself to the god.

The Interlude, in particular, presents itself as a virtuoso metaphysical analysis of the concepts of existence, necessity and history designed to demonstrate that the absurdity of the idea of an incarnate deity is such as to collapse any religiously significant difference between different generations of Christian believers; faith in Jesus as the incarnate god is neither strengthened nor weakened by temporal propinquity, since not even a lifetime's close observation of him would go any way to establishing his divinity. In short, a believer's interest in the historical event of the incarnation is not essentially historical, and so is essentially unaffected by considerations pertinent to historical beliefs.

We might say: according to the 'Interlude' between 'The Contemporary Follower' and 'The Follower at Second Hand', there is no religiously significant interlude between the contemporary follower and the follower at second hand. But then how religiously significant can the 'Interlude' be? Climacus describes himself as having 'thought to fill the intervening time by pondering the question set forth' (PF, p. 72); he tells us that, although 'how long the intervening period should be is up to you', he has assumed as large a

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passage of time as possible (1843 years); and he remarks that 'the most recent philosophy . . . seems to suffer from a strange inattention, confusing the performance with the caption' (PF, p. 73). But the message of the metaphysical analysis is that historical distance is no barrier between the individual and the god, that there is no religiously significant time-gap to fill between Climacus himself and the god; whatever challenge the god poses for us, he poses it as immediately now as he did during his lifetime. And yet Climacus does not engage with that challenge, but rather allows time to pass (and as large a passage of time as possible) by musing about metaphysical questions – as if the first challenge posed by the god is an intellectual one. In short, instead of relating to the god, he relates to the idea of relating to the god; he focuses on the caption rather than the performance.

But his own metaphysical performance explicitly stresses that no coming into existence, and so no action, performance or event, is ever necessary. In particular, 'belief is not a knowledge but an act of freedom, an expression of will' (PF, p. 83); so the performance of faithfully believing in the incarnate deity is doubly expressive of the individual's free will, since it involves willing to believe in the coming into existence of a historical event, and willing to believe in the divinity of that which comes into existence. In short, it is an event that is also an action, just as the incarnation is both an event and an action; it means undergoing an existential transformation, a change from one mode of existence into another – a change which must therefore itself be both an event (induced by the god) and a freely-willed action. Nothing will ensure that this transition comes about – not even the god's presence, but particularly not the presence of some piece of knowledge, even if it purports to be knowledge about the transition; only by willing it can the individual be reborn.

And of course, what the would-be believer must will is a continued relation to the god: as the titles or captions of these chapters emphasise, she must will to become a follower of the god. To believe in the god is to follow the god; and to follow him is not to follow him around but to live as he did, to imitate him – he did, after all, say 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life'. Focusing on the incarnate god as someone to follow means focusing on his way of living – the life that was sufficiently different from everyday human life to ensure that the incarnate deity did not entirely obscure his divinity, and yet not beyond the power of ordinary human beings to

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imitate. Climacus describes him as 'so absorbed in the service of the spirit that it never occurs to him to provide for food and drink' (PF, p. 57), and as being essentially a teacher; but that means that he *is* his teaching – that his life, and most particularly his death, are what he calls those who would follow him to imitate. In short, the crucifixion he requires of us is not a crucifixion of the intellect but of the heart; the challenge he poses is to live in the way that he was willing to die – to keep body and soul together according to a conception that the self will experience as tearing them asunder.

5. Conclusion: The Perverse Performance of the *Fragments*

If this really is the message that the *Philosophical Fragments* aims to convey, why does Climacus choose such a perversely indirect way of doing it? Why construct a text that develops a progressively more baroque parody of Christianity to the point where its implications subvert its own foundations and bring down the whole edifice, leaving only marginal adumbrations of the true Christian vision for those with eyes to see them?

Climacus' general answer appears in the concluding exchanges with his interlocutor in the appendix to chapter three. He is accused once again of plagiarism – of having woven his descriptions of the understanding's unhappy love for the paradox from the words of other authors (ranging from Tertullian to Shakespeare); but he seems, as usual, untroubled by the charge.

> [H]ave not all these men talked about a relation of the paradox to offense, and will you please notice that they were not the offended ones but the very ones who held firmly to the paradox and yet spoke as if they were the offended ones, and offense cannot come up with a more striking expression than that. Is it not peculiar that the paradox thus seems to be taking bread from the mouth of the offense . . . as odd as an opponent who absent-mindedly does not attack the author but defends him? . . . Yet offense has one advantage: it points up the difference more clearly . . . (PF, p. 54)

By citing these authors' words, Climacus implies that this description of them applies to him; he therefore identifies himself as holding firmly to the paradox despite speaking as if he were offended by it, and he implies that this does the paradox the service of pointing up the difference – the paradox – more clearly. But how does his

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performance do this, and why must it be done in this indirect way? His text elsewhere suggests two main reasons.

The first involves his readers' philosophical predilections. We know that Climacus thinks of the understanding as an obstacle to establishing a proper relation to the paradox (the god), and as inherently prone to violate its own proper limits. Accordingly, he is bound to expect that even the best attempts to understand these ideas are likely to be unconsciously but radically distorted – especially by philosophers, those well-known followers of Socrates. They in particular will be prone to think that his insight about the superfluity of the understanding is itself a matter for the understanding – and to regard direct warnings to this effect in the same, radically inappropriate way. Consequently, Climacus instead develops his idea in a way which is gradually but increasingly distorted by the perversity of the understanding, but in such a manner that the attentive reader gradually becomes conscious of the distortion – in just the way that we became conscious of it in this reading. By enacting the error to which he thinks that his readers are prone, but in a way that allows them to become conscious of it as an error, he is in effect trying to inoculate them against it – to make them see how easily they can fall into it, and how important it is that they avoid this trap. In short, he offers his own text as a mirror in which his readers might see an aspect of their own perversity, and thereby avoid its baleful consequences.

His second justification for indirection involves another aspect of his sense of the centrality of an unmediated god-relationship. If the god really is to be beyond Socrates, then – as we have seen – he must be both teacher and teaching; if his message can be separated from his person, then our true focus as learners would have to be the teaching rather than the teacher, who would then be a Socratic midwife – a mere occasion for our learning that which we could have learnt some other way. If, however, our relation to the teacher is essential to his teaching, if he is the Truth, then we must owe everything to him and we must know that we are so indebted. How, then, can someone who believes that the teacher is the teaching pass on that teaching?

> If . . . that ardent learner, who did not, however, go so far as to become a follower, spoke ever so frequently and emphatically about how much he owed that teacher, so that his eulogy had almost no end and its gilding was almost priceless – if he became

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> angry with us as we tried to explain to him that the teacher had been merely the occasion – neither his eulogy nor his anger would benefit our reflections . . . By talking extravagantly and trumpeting from the housetops as he does, a person hoodwinks himself and others that he actually does have thoughts – since he owes them to another. (PF, p. 61)

If the message this learner preaches really is that any learner owes the teacher everything, that only a relation to the teacher is a relation to the teaching, then he cannot attempt to convey that teaching directly to other would-be learners himself; that would suggest that his teacher was only an occasion for him, and that he himself will do as well as his teacher as an occasion for others to learn. If he has properly absorbed what his teacher has to teach, he can help others to learn that lesson only by helping them to learn from his teacher; he must not even present himself as an occasion for them to learn, but rather find a way of removing himself entirely from the scene – a way of bringing other learners to the teacher without allowing them to assign any kind of authority to him, not even the authority of one who prepares the way to the teacher (for the teacher *is* the way).

Paradoxically enough, one solution to this problem is for Climacus to trumpet his message from the housetops with exaggerated intensity – to present his claim that he owes the god everything as a carefully-elaborated metaphysical hypothesis of his own devising; for he then makes it almost impossible to ignore the contradiction between the form and the content of his communication, which in turn makes it almost impossible for his readers to avoid seeing that a full appreciation of its content requires the avoidance of that kind of contradiction. This means, of course, that they should not attempt to communicate it to others in similarly inappropriate ways; such communication is something they do (an existential act), and the message of the god is most fundamentally that they live a certain form of life, so Climacus' caricature is simply emphasising that there should never be any contradiction between what they profess to believe, and how they live. In short, Climacus aims to produce a caricature that invites his readers' repudiation precisely because trying to repel his readers from any reliance upon him as an example or an authority is required by what he takes himself to have learnt; it is what is required of a writer who is also attempting to be a follower. It is not, however, possible for any writer, however gifted, to guarantee that

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the deepest purposes of his text will be properly appreciated by his readers – as the prevailing orthodoxy in the secondary literature on the *Philosophical Fragments* tends to confirm.

New College
Oxford OX1 3BN

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