

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-70910-1 - Søren Kierkegaard: Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the  
Philosophical Crumbs

Edited by Alastair Hannay

Excerpt

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*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*  
*to*  
*the Philosophical Crumbs*

A Mimic, Pathetic, Dialectic Compilation  
An Existential Contribution

By

Johannes Climacus

*Responsible for Publication:*  
*S. Kierkegaard*

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ἀλλὰ δὴ γ', ὦ Σώκρατες, τί οἶει ταῦτα εἶναι συνάπαντα; κνήσματα τοί ἐστι  
καὶ περιτμήματα τῶν λόγων, ὅπερ ἄρτι ἔλεγον, κατὰ βραχὺ διηρημένα:

But really, Socrates, what do you suppose all this amounts  
to? As I said a little while ago, it is mere scrapings and  
shavings of discourse, cut up into little bits ...

*Hippias Major*, § 304a

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## Preface

Fate may seldom have so favoured a literary undertaking in accordance with its author's wishes as my *Philosophical Crumbs*.<sup>1</sup> In doubt and unforthcoming as I am in all matters of personal opinion and self-appraisal, there is one truth I may confidently assert concerning the fate of that little piece: it has caused no sensation, none whatever. Undisturbed, and in accordance with his own motto ('Better well hanged than ill wed'),<sup>2</sup> the hanged, yes, well-hanged author has been left hanging. No one has asked him, not even playfully and in jest, exactly for whom he was hanging. But that was the wish: better well hanged, yes, better that than by an unfortunate marriage brought into systematic affinity with all the world. Relying on the manner of the piece's composition, my hope was that it would turn out like this. But in light of the agitated ferment of the times, in light of the constant warnings of prophets, visionaries and speculators, I feared I might see my wish confounded through some mistake. It is always awkward, even for the most insignificant traveller, to arrive at a town just when, in a state of the highest but most diverse expectation – some with cannons drawn up and fuses lit, with fireworks and illuminated placards in readiness, some with the town hall

<sup>1</sup> *Philosophiske Smuler eller en Smule Philosophi*, SKS 4 (traditionally translated as *Philosophical Fragments*), published on 13 June 1844 under the pseudonym 'Johannes Climacus', with Kierkegaard, as here, accepting responsibility for publication. The work is often referred to in the text as 'the *Crumbs*'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Bedre godt hængt end slet gift.' Danish rendering of the German translation of the clown's 'Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage' in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Motto of *Philosophiske Smuler*.

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ceremoniously decorated, reception committee booted, speakers prepared, some with urgent systematic pen dripping and notebook opened – everyone is awaiting the arrival incognito of the promised one. A mistake can always happen. Literary mistakes of this kind belong to the order of the day.

So, thank heaven it did not happen. With no fuss, no shedding of blood or ink, the piece has remained unnoticed, un-reviewed, unmentioned anywhere. No tinkling of literary bells in its connection has added to the ferment; no scholarly outcry has misled the expectant throng; no warning shout from the outpost has brought the citizenry of the reading world to its feet. Just as there was no hocus-pocus about the project itself, so too has fate exempted it from all false alarms. The author is thus also in the happy position of not, *qua* author, owing anyone anything, I mean critics, reviewers, intermediaries, consultants etc., who in the literary world are just like tailors in the civic world, who ‘make the man’: they style the author, position the reader correctly, through their assistance and art a book amounts to something. But the same is true of these benefactors as Baggesen<sup>3</sup> says about the tailors: ‘They kill them again with bills for the creation.’ One comes to owe them everything, without even being able to pay off the debt by writing a new book, for that new book’s significance, if it has any, is again due once more to these benefactors’ art and assistance.

Encouraged by that favour of fortune I now mean to press ahead. With nothing in my way, or any pressing regard to the demands of the times,<sup>4</sup> following solely my inner impulse, I continue as it were to knead the thoughts until to my notion the dough is a good one. Aristotle says somewhere<sup>5</sup> that people now prescribe the absurd rule for narration that it should be rapid, and continues: ‘It is fitting to remember here the answer given to a man kneading dough who asked if he should make it hard or soft: “What, can’t you make it good?”’ The one thing I fear is a sensation, especially the appreciative kind. Although the age is broad-minded, liberal, and speculative; although the sacred claims of personal liberty have their cherished and applauded spokesmen, it nevertheless seems to me that the matter is not grasped dialectically enough. For otherwise one would not repay the strenuous exertions of the elect with noisy jubilation, hip-hip hurrahs at midnight, torchlight processions and other distracting encroachments on personal liberty. In lawful things

<sup>3</sup> Jens Baggesen (1764–1826), Danish writer.

<sup>4</sup> For the source of this expression see the translator’s introduction. <sup>5</sup> *Rhetoric*, 1416b29–32.

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everyone should be allowed, it seems only fair, to do as he likes. The encroachment occurs only when what one person does puts another under an obligation. Thus any expression of disapproval is permissible since it imposes no obligation on the life of another. If the mob brings a *pereat*<sup>6</sup> on a man, it does not interfere with his freedom; he is not urged to take any action, nothing is demanded of him, he can remain sitting undisturbed in his living room, smoke his cigar, occupy himself with his thoughts, joke with his sweetheart, relax in his morning-gown, sleep without a care – yes, he can even be out, since personal presence is in no way required.

Not so, however, with a torchlight procession. If the object of celebration is not at home he must return at once. If he has just lit a fragrant cigar he must instantly put it down. If he has gone to bed he must straight away get up, hardly has time to pull on his trousers and must go out under the open sky bareheaded to make a speech. What is true for the prominent with regard to those collective expressions of opinion holds also in more modest circumstances for us humble folk. A literary attack, for instance, constitutes no encroachment on the author's personal freedom, for why should anyone not be allowed to express his opinion, and the object of the attack is still free to go on with his work, fill his pipe, let the attack go unread, etc. An expression of approval is on the other hand far more questionable. A criticism that ushers you out of the literary realm is no encroachment, but a criticism assigning a place within it is worrisome. A passer-by who laughs at you puts you under no obligation at all; he becomes, on the contrary, your debtor for having given him something to laugh at. The parties remain free to pursue their own ways, unhampered by an intrusive or binding mutuality. A passer-by who stares at you defiantly, as much as to intimate that you are not worth taking his hat off to, puts you under no obligation at all; on the contrary, he relieves you of having to do something, from the inconvenience of tipping your hat. An admirer, on the other hand, cannot be so easily got rid of. His tender courtesies soon become so many liabilities laid on the unfortunate object of admiration, whose life, before he realizes it, labours under heavy taxes and duties, even were he the most independent of men. If one author borrows an idea from another without naming his source, and makes something absurd out of the borrowed idea, he makes no encroachment

<sup>6</sup> Latin: let him die, death to ...

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on the other's personal rights. If he mentions him by name, however, perhaps even with admiration as the one to whom he owes, yes, that wrong-headed notion, he creates a most embarrassing situation. Grasped dialectically the negative is therefore no encroachment, only the positive. How strange! Just as that freedom-loving nation, the North Americans, have invented the cruellest punishment, silence,<sup>7</sup> so too has a liberal and broadminded age invented the most illiberal forms of pestering: torch-light processions in the evening, popular demonstrations three times a day, hip-hip hurrahs for the great, and similar lesser annoyances for humble folk. The principle of sociality is precisely illiberal.

The present offering is again a piece, *proprio Marte, proprio stipendio, propriis auspiciis*.<sup>8</sup> The author is proprietor in so far as he is the private owner of the crumb he does own; but otherwise he is as far from having bonded tenants as from being one himself. His hope is that fortune will smile on this little project once again and, above all, avert the tragicomedy of some or other prophet in deep earnest, or a rogue as a joke, going off and making the age believe that it is something, and then running off, leaving the author stuck with it like 'the pawned farmer's lad'.<sup>9</sup>

J. C.

<sup>7</sup> Part of a nineteenth-century penal system developed in Auburn, NY, in which inmates worked by day and were kept in solitary confinement at night with silence enforced at all times.

<sup>8</sup> Latin: of my own accord, at my own expense, at my own risk. The expression occurs in rearranged form in the first line of the Preface to *Philosophical Crumbs*.

<sup>9</sup> Reference to a comedy by the Dano-Norwegian dramatist and playwright Ludvig Holberg (1684–1745), its title usually translated as *The Pawned Farmer's Helper* (1726).

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