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Philosophical Crumbs

Edited by Alastair Hannay

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Concluding Unscientific Postscript

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SØREN KIERKEGAARD

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to
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EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

ALASTAIR HANNAY

Emeritus, University of Oslo



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Introduction

What does the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* conclude?

Those with an acute ear for language will pause at the title *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Don't postscripts conclude anyway? Besides, strictly speaking, a postscript is not really a conclusion at all, but an addition, perhaps an afterthought, or a supplement, even an appended note commenting on what the reader has read previously.

Some clarification is needed to assure the reader that here as elsewhere Kierkegaard has chosen his language with care. Perhaps this 'postscript' was meant to be concluding in more ways than one, or even just in one way but not the one that first comes to mind. Also, and as one might guess from the work's very length, it is no mere afterthought, not just something the author forgot to include in the slim book to which this forms a gigantic sequel.

In his introduction to the *Postscript* Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author (of both books, naturally), describes it as the continuation of a project begun in that earlier work but left incomplete. The earlier work's Danish title is *Philosophiske Smuler*, which is traditionally translated 'Philosophical Fragments' but is rendered here more accurately as 'Philosophical Crumbs'. In the conclusion of that book Johannes Climacus had made mention of what a continuation might contain, though (in a style of studied nonchalance to be found in both books) not committing himself to producing any such thing ('if I ever write such a section'). He says there that the sequel to the abstractly conceived *Crumbs* would 'give

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the matter its real name and clothe the problem in its historical costume'.¹ This, not so surprisingly to the reader of the *Crumbs*, turns out to be Christianity. But while the *Crumbs* had concerned itself with what one would have to *think* if, as it hypothesizes, the conditions for locating essential truth were not a human birthright, here, more directly, the task discussed is how to participate in that truth, or to clothe the task in its historical costume, a matter of what it means to become a Christian.

In writing the *Postscript* Kierkegaard was not merely bringing the earlier work's unfinished task to bear on this more practical task; he was also bringing a far larger project to its close. This was something that Kierkegaard had begun in Berlin, in 1841, with the drafting of material forming part of *Either/Or*, the first in a series of pseudonymous works the most recent of which, *Stages on Life's Way*, had appeared just eight months before publication of the *Postscript* early in 1846. The latter was to be 'concluding', therefore, in the sense of bringing four and a half years of a creative and exhausting pseudonymous authorship to its conclusion. It must be borne in mind that Kierkegaard had also published a series of discourses simultaneously in his own name, the most recent being *Three Discourses for Imagined Occasions*. This was published in April 1845. After revisiting Berlin briefly in May, Kierkegaard set to work on this 'sequel', delivering the manuscript to the printer in mid-December. The *Postscript* appeared two months later, on 17 February 1846.

But Kierkegaard did not stop there. In this connection two factors are to be noted. One was the beckoning of the Kierkegaard family's nemesis. In May 1846 Kierkegaard would be thirty-three years old, the age, he told a friend, at which he was firmly convinced that he was going to die.² It was at this age that two of his sisters had died, and Kierkegaard and his elder brother, Peter Christian, were now the sole survivors of a family of seven children, with both parents dead. One might be little surprised, then, to gain an impression from the text, especially towards the end, not least from the many footnotes that bear the mark of being inserted in reworkings of the manuscript, of an attempt to cram into one envelope as

¹ References to Kierkegaard's published writings in this introduction and in the translation are to the latest Danish edition, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (abbrev. *SKS*) (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag), 1997-. Here *SKS* 4, p. 305.

² See Bruce H. Kirmmse (ed.), *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 240 and 336.

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many as possible of the ideas that had come to him in those four and a half years.

That metaphor might be extended, or adjusted slightly. Not only does the *Postscript* conclude those rich years by presenting the drift of the authorship between two covers, it also in a sense wraps them up. An appendix to one of the chapters has Climacus rehearse the products of the other pseudonyms, as well as his own, as well as commenting on the signed works. We perhaps begin to feel that Climacus occupies a position superior to that of his colleagues – at least one that affords him a certain detachment enabling him to provide a kind of itinerary into which the paths of the other pseudonyms are drawn in a single direction.

The other factor in Kierkegaard's continued activity is that it was during the last phases of preparing the *Postscript* for publication that the notorious *Corsair* affair broke out,³ in which that satiric journal's lampooning of Kierkegaard's person drove him into uncustomary seclusion. In his journal from that time and later, Kierkegaard admits to having contemplated retirement as a country pastor. He even took some tentative steps in that direction. He had, after all, the necessary qualifications; in February the previous year, perhaps with this 'conclusion' in mind, he had held the trial sermon required for ordination. However, his plans for self-rustication were in the event short lived. Finding himself still alive at thirty-four, and unwilling to be seen to have been forced into retirement against his will, Kierkegaard returned to his desk to produce several more discourses, several important pamphlets, and the two final pseudonymous works, *The Sickness unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*.

These facts, however, do not in themselves disqualify the *Postscript*'s title to be concluding. Although there may be some point to regarding the two later pseudonymous works (by Anti-Climacus) as forming a postscript to the earlier pseudonymous series (as a whole), there is no obvious way in which these can be seen to provide the latter with a more embracing wrapping, from an even more detached position. On the contrary, Anti-Climacus appears less detached. While Climacus speaks to us from outside and tells us what is needed if we should enter, Anti-Climacus is already halfway through the door and speaking to us, as it were, over his shoulder.

³ Perhaps reflected on pp. 350–1.

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[More information](#)*Introduction***The *Postscript* as a new approach to the problem of the *Crumbs***

Philosophical Crumbs had taken up the question of how an eternal happiness could be based on something that was simply historical. The question was one that had been put by the German dramatist and critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who had formulated it in terms borrowed from Leibniz. That Lessing is the source of the formulation is first mentioned in the *Postscript*. Not noted as a systematic thinker, and keeping his many cards close to his chest, Lessing had escaped classification by the encyclopaedists (Kierkegaard's use of the symbol '§' to denote "entry" or "paragraph" is retained in this translation), so that Climacus is able to present him as the exemplar he needs of the kind of subjective thinker whose requirements become the topic of the rest of the *Postscript*. With Lessing as reference, and providing the concept of subjective thinker with an appropriately elusive historical costume, the *Postscript* opens the way to a new way of thinking. It is an existential way that plucks traditional philosophical problems from their intellectual reserve and places them in daily life. In that context questions asked in a philosophical spirit come from a core experience of what it is, plainly and simply, to be a human being – but not only that: of what it is to be the particular human being that one is.

Philosophical Crumbs had in fact already mentioned Christianity briefly as 'the only historical phenomenon' to fit its hypothesis and its thought-experiment. Climacus now says in the introduction, a little disconcertingly, that in order to give the problem its historical costume all you need to do is utter the word 'Christianity'. Since he has already done that, one wonders why this postscript has to be so lengthy. The answer is something like this: if you are to approach truth on the assumption that it lies in Christianity, then certain conditions are to be met. These conditions work upon each other and form a tension that in the end only a hard and personal and purely individual decision can resolve. In other words they form a 'dialectic', and among his other capacities it is in his role as a seasoned dialectician that Climacus pilots the reader towards an understanding of what is required.

This suggests clearly enough that what we are presented with is not just an expansion of what had been presented so concisely in the *Crumbs* as its problem. Nor, it seems, is the *Postscript* in any literal sense a sequel.

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Indeed Climacus says that any promise he had made of a sequel to the *Crumbs* is already fulfilled in the comparatively short Part One of the *Postscript*. That deals with those who assume that the correct approach to Christianity is to establish objectively some genuinely Christian state of affairs. Several such approaches are reviewed and dismissed, all of them familiar to Kierkegaard's Danish readers. One such approach is based on the assumption that the truth of Christianity is to be found in the living word of repeated Christian worship; another is that of those who rely on the ability of Hegelian philosophy to assimilate Christianity into a process of rational thought, faith thereby giving way to understanding (at least for those able to follow the reasoning).

It is with a radically different way of grasping Christian truth that the bulk of the *Postscript* is concerned. It could well be the case that what this required, together with its implications and the space needed to lay them bare, was not clear to Kierkegaard on completing the *Crumbs*. Although he says, here in the introduction, that his Part Two is 'a renewed attempt on the same lines' (as the *Crumbs*), he also says that it is a 'new approach to the problem'.

Outline of the 'argument' (Part Two)

The nature of the new approach to the problem of the *Crumbs* has already been hinted at. Roughly speaking, it is a matter of seeing what is needed to appreciate the problem itself. However, to the reader glancing at the list of contents for the first time the path to enlightenment on this matter will seem a tangled one. The serried layers of parts, chapters, sections, sub-sections and minor headings suggest a labyrinth in which it will be all too easy to lose one's way, or *the* way if only there is one. However, the visual density here is due in part to a convention (still prevalent in Scandinavia) that dispenses with indexes and gives as much information as possible at the start. The structure of Part Two of the *Postscript* (and that is where we must look for the new approach) is in fact fairly simple. It has two main sections, the first setting up the question of how to relate to Christianity once the task of doing so is conceived as a subjective one, and the second, vastly longer, devoted to an account of what must be true of 'subjectivity' for the task to be properly presented and addressed.

Part Two has five chapters. The first of these guides the reader in the direction of what it means, in ethical terms, to 'become subjective', and it

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ends with some examples of questions raised in that direction. In the second chapter we find the famous assertion that truth is subjectivity, but with the clarification that this conception of truth is one that can be apprehended only by someone who has become subjective and can thus see what matters most from that point of view. It is to this chapter that Climacus adds the appendix, mentioned earlier, in which he incorporates the previous pseudonymous authorship seamlessly (after some critical editing) into his own current project. The third chapter comes closest to stating some sort of fundamental ontology. It does so, among other things, by making the inversions of the traditional Aristotelian terms ‘possibility’ and ‘actuality’ required once subjectivity is the preferred point of view. The chapter ends by giving a (comparatively) brief résumé of the form and style of a thinker who performs such inversions.

By far the longest, longer even than the *Philosophical Crumbs*, to which it is only a small part of a postscript, the fourth chapter is itself divided into two main sections. Again, one of these sets up a question before going to work on it, in this case in pursuit of what is required of subjectivity if it is to address the issue of an eternal happiness. In the first of the two main sections Climacus returns to the question of the *Crumbs*, explaining its point of departure and positioning it in relation to the Hegelian ‘mediation’ whereby Christianity is dissipated in thought and ‘becoming’ vanishes from view. There then follows, in the second main section, what may be identified as the essence of the new approach. It consists of illustrated accounts of the two vital dimensions which reciprocally motivate the seeking of an eternal happiness (pathos) and keep the search on track (dialectic). The subsection on pathos describes three progressively emphatic expressions of a person’s relationship to the absolute. The subsection on dialectic is briefer but has an appendix that rehearses the three-stage (aesthetic/ethical/religious A and B) account of spiritual progression (developed in previous works by other pseudonyms) in the light of what has been said in the subsection on pathos.

There follows a relatively brief concluding fifth chapter, which marks a distinction between what, with regard to Christianity, matters for the simpler-minded person *vis-à-vis* what matters for the intellectual. Included here is some evidently autobiographical material on Kierkegaard’s part relating to the damage that imposing a strict form of Christianity can cause a child. There follows an appendix to the book in which Climacus signs off and (it may seem surprisingly) takes his work with him. After

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which, in pages left unnumbered in the original, Kierkegaard comes forward himself and assumes responsibility for all the pseudonyms, though stressing that he is not responsible for what they have written.

Humour in the *Postscript*

Except perhaps for this final talk of taking it all back, it all sounds sufficiently serious. Yet not only does our author not always wear his earnest on his sleeve, he makes a point of calling himself a humorist. What can that mean? A great deal of discussion has been generated on this score. Some commentators have exploited this self-description in order to draw the sting from some of the less palatable characterizations that Climacus applies to Christianity, especially his use of terms like ‘the absurd’ and ‘the paradox’, and not least the much disputed definition of truth as subjectivity. Louis Mackey famously suggested that in defining ‘truth as subjectivity’ Climacus was ‘writing a satire on definition’, adding that, if it is read as a philosophical treatise, the *Postscript* ‘is nonsense’.⁴ The ‘nonsense’ theme has been strengthened by being further adumbrated in the light of Wittgenstein’s description of the sentences of his own *Tractatus* ‘as nonsensical’ (*als unsinnig*). As Wittgenstein points out (while still in the *Tractatus*), these sentences fail to conform to the conditions of meaningfulness that the work itself states by means of these very sentences.⁵ Likewise, the 500 pages or so of Part Two of the *Postscript* may be seen in some way to infringe a rule of practical truth that their sentences tell us is what the truth that matters really is. Wittgenstein’s ‘ladder’ metaphor is also introduced as corroboration: a person who has seen the nonsense but gained insight thereby into what cannot be said ‘must throw away the ladder after he has climbed it’.⁶

There is some force to the suggestion. It is not out of the question that Wittgenstein, himself an admiring reader of the *Postscript*, actually borrowed the ladder metaphor from Climacus. The latter’s name, not entirely

⁴ Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 192; cf. Henry E. Allison, ‘Christianity and Nonsense’, *The Review of Metaphysics*, 20/3 (1967), reprinted in Daniel W. Conway (ed.), *Kierkegaard: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers* (London and New York, Routledge, 2003).

⁵ See, e.g., James Conant, ‘Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense’, in Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer and Hilary Putnam (eds.), *Pursuits of Reason* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Technical University Press, 1993).

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 6.54.

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incidentally, is that of a certain seventh-century abbot who lived for many years as a hermit in a monastery in the neighbourhood of Mount Sinai. Known initially for his learning as Johannes Scholasticus, he taught the vanity of human wisdom and received the name Johannes Climacus from his work *Κλίμαξ τοῦ παράδεισου* (or in Latin *Scala paradisi*: the ladder to heaven, or heavenly ladder). The analogy gains further credibility from the fact already noted that towards the end of his almost 500 pages (of Part Two) Climacus revokes everything. Perhaps he is throwing away the ladder.

There is a tendency here to place Climacus in an ancillary role in relation to the main import of Kierkegaard's authorship seen as a whole. This might be interpreted in several ways. One such is to see Climacus, and indeed the whole pseudonymous authorship that he 'wraps up', as simply to be read and then forgotten, except as a warning about where not to go before getting down to the practical job of becoming a Christian. An alternative interpretation regards Climacus as supplementary reading to the 'edifying' and 'Christian' discourses published in parallel with the pseudonymous works and under Kierkegaard's own name. This in turn can be seen in either of two ways: either Climacus must be read as a preliminary to reading the discourses, in order to put us on course; or else he has to be read but then kept constantly in mind in order *keep* us on course through being constantly reminded of the dangers of slipping back into self-serving ways of grasping Christian truth.

Where commentators take us on this point is not always clear. Thus, as Mackey sees it, the 'sense' behind the nonsense is its being designed to 'force the reader back on his own resources and into the awful presence of the living God'. The *Postscript*, though a 'funny book', has the 'frighteningly sober purpose ... of [leading] its reader down a broad and prodigal path of merriment to the brink of the bottomless pit of freedom and to surprise him with the absolute responsibility he bears for his own life'.⁷ This, for Mackey, is part of the project of 'reconverting' philosophy into 'its ancient form'.⁸

It is not hard to imagine even a reader disinclined to accept a 'nonsense' reading finding something obviously right in this description of where the *Postscript* tries to lead its reader. Whether or not Climacus is at the same time trying to guide philosophy back into its ancient form, or perhaps even ushering it and us onward into a new one, the *Postscript* does give an

⁷ Mackey, *Kierkegaard*, p. 192. ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

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impression of trying – yes, with among other things humour and satire – to wrench people out of their customary ways of thinking while at the same time confronting them with what they must face if they are to treat their assumed topic, essential truth and specifically the nature of Christian faith, in the way this topic demands once *it* is understood.

As for Mackey's suggestion that in defining 'truth as subjectivity' Climacus was 'writing a satire on definition', if by that he means that the definitions themselves lend themselves to ridicule, then Kierkegaard himself would strongly disagree. He himself thought Climacus had done a fairly good job in this department. On the publication, three years later than the *Postscript*, of Hans Lassen Martensen's *Dogmatics*, Kierkegaard wrote: 'Gentle God and Father! The most popular of my works is more rigorous in its conceptual definitions, and my pseudonym J. Climacus is seven times more rigorous in his.'⁹

The *Postscript* is far from consistently humorous. Indeed much of the detail shows no sign of humour at all. Long passages drive the same point home again and again. Nor do the points driven home arise haphazardly; they are, to all appearances, and if the reader does not just dip into this large tome, related quite systematically in a developing argument. Many a footnote totally lacks the sheen of light-heartedness (and ridicule or mockery) that sporadically pervades the text otherwise. They are as though reservoirs of urgent and cool thought in the midst of a work that in its playful tone and tendency to lapse into anecdote is often otherwise anything but scholarly. One example shows also the polemical thrust of these remarks added to the text. It talks of 'dialectic' as the 'infinite reflection, in which alone the subject's concern for his eternal happiness can realize itself', and says that it has 'just one distinguishing mark':

that the dialectical accompanies it everywhere. Be it a word, a proposition, a book, a man, a society or whatever, as soon as it is supposed to form a limit in a way in which the limit is not itself dialectical, it is superstition and narrow-mindedness. There is always in a human being some such concern, at once complacent and concerned, a wish to lay hold of something so really fixed that can exclude the dialectical; but this is cowardice and treason towards the divine ... As soon as I take away the dialectical I become superstitious and cheat God of each moment's strenuous reacquisition of

⁹ Kierkegaard's *Journals and Notebooks* (henceforth *KJN*) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007–), *KJN* 6, NB 12:16.

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what was once acquired. On the other hand, it is far more comfortable to be objective and superstitious, and bragging about it, and proclaiming thoughtlessness.¹⁰

Dialectic, along with pathos, is essential to Climacus's 'argument', the latter providing a living interest in the topic under discussion, the former holding the individual back from immature and premature satisfactions of the spirit. It would be incongruous to consider a passage such as the one above as humorous in a sense similar to that in which some commentators take the whole work to be amusing, even an entertainment. That, for instance, would mean that the reader is supposed to see something laughable in the very idea of an infinite reflection; which in turn would mean that dialectics, by which Kierkegaard means the thought process generated through conceiving one's life project ever more clearly in the light of an eternal goal, also becomes part of the comedy. Why, then, we may ask, is Climacus so insistent on this dialectic as to repeat the claim over and over again, or why should we not take his quite straightforward claim (in a footnote just prior to the one quoted) that 'there is no excluding dialectics' to be intended with absolute seriousness? No entertainer deserving the name would countenance such tedious insistence and repetition.

Humour in Climacus's 'system'

So what is the humour that we must presume pervades the work as a whole and justifies its author in calling himself a humorist? That is, over and above the fact that it does indeed include moments of ordinary comedy and satire, and also that irony seems to be a tool that comes so naturally to its author that he finds it hard to put down.

The *Postscript* itself contains the outlines of a 'theory' of humour (and irony), but part of the answer may be found in remarks made by Kierkegaard himself on irony and humour well before he began his pseudonymous production. In the latter we may be looking at remarks forming the germ of Kierkegaard's dissertation on irony of 1841. In observations jotted down a whole decade earlier than the *Postscript* we read of someone able 'to practice the absolutely isolated humour that subsists in the person alone'.¹¹ Irony differs from humour in calling for collective support. While irony can make fun of the world, humour makes fun, privately,

¹⁰ See p. 31. ¹¹ *KJN* I, DD 36, p. 225.

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of what will save it. Ten years on, the distinction between irony and humour is elaborated in the *Postscript*, and with the introduction of ‘the comic’ it is applied to the stages of existence. The comic is itself dignified by inclusion in the philosophical category of ‘contradiction’, something that also brings it within the scope of ‘dialectical’ reflection. The comedy that appears is to be seen in a contradiction made apparent from the point of view from which you live your life. Climacus, not being religious himself in the sense that he is investigating it (as shown by the very fact that he is *investigating* it), nevertheless grasps what is needed, and indeed what it means to be (properly) religious. He is able, therefore, to see the comedy of those who adopt an ethical life-view but have not risen to the level of religion. If he were the religious person himself, and seeing that there is no position above that of the religious from which the latter can appear comic, he would *not* be a humorist. Or, if in that case he did resort to humour, it would only be as an ‘incognito’, a cover with which he protects the ‘hidden inwardness’ of his religiousness. As it is, he ‘remains in immanence’, professionally so, one might say, and is therefore not prevented by any incapacitating elevation from laughing at religiousness proper when he finds its claims to be intellectually absurd and thus also amusing.

Climacus’s own task, therefore, is to ‘make legitimate use of the comic against presumptuous forms of the religious’,¹² that is to say, those that fall short of the religiousness of what he calls ‘hidden inwardness’. That includes all the targets of Part One, among them the ‘speculating’ philosophers. But then again, humour of this kind is legitimate only if the would-be humorist can safely assume that the object of the humour is someone who is potentially religious, and thus someone who ‘surely knows the way out if only he is willing’. To laugh at a person when one believes that he or she has no idea of the way out is like laughing at lunacy, and that is not legitimate.

You might say, in other words, that Climacus’s humour is an expression of his position near the top of the ladder. His virtue, for the reader, is that he sees the way to the top, while his value depends on his not having got there; for then he would have disappeared from view and would be practising that ‘absolutely isolated humour that subsists in the person alone’. Given that the humorist (as opposed to the religious person using humour as a cover) is still with us, the reader’s own ability to join him in his sense of the comedy of those who live below him thus also depends on

¹² See p. 437.

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our assuming, with him, that the latter know the ‘way out if only they were willing’. As for whether those who manage to retract their religiousness into a hidden inwardness can, by the same token, throw away the ladder, or whether they still need it to remain elevated and hidden, Climacus’s own words, taken at their face value, seem to suggest the latter. He must take the ladder up with him as at least a reminder that, still being human, he may at any time need it again to regain altitude.

Climacus’s curriculum vitae

Some historical details relating to the genesis of the *Postscript* can be of help in the choice of one’s reading. Surely not irrelevant, for example, is the fact that it was only at the last minute, indeed as late as when preparing the fair copy, that Kierkegaard had decided to resort to a pseudonym, presenting himself only as publisher (*Udgiver*) of *Philosophical Crumbs*. That he nevertheless did so is open to several interpretations. It might mean that he found himself expressing attitudes or voicing opinions that he would not openly admit to having, or opinions that he did not actually hold. But the late decision also undermines any impression one may have of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymity as a pre-planned and strategic manipulating of marionette figures behind whose studied posturing the manipulator himself remains a secret. Kierkegaard’s own explanation can be found in a later remark to the effect that his own position was higher than Climacus’s but lower than that of Anti-Climacus.¹³

In resorting to the Climacus pseudonym, Kierkegaard was resuming an earlier connection with it. While *Either/Or* was still in press he had begun on a philosophical project that remained uncompleted. It bore the title ‘Johannes Climacus eller *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*’ (Johannes Climacus or Everything Is to be Doubted). Subtitled ‘A Tale’ (*Fortælling*), it was the story of the young student Johannes Climacus, who aspired to an eternal consciousness and chose the way to it prescribed by philosophy or ‘speculation’. The outcome, so far as it went, was to undermine the ambitions of speculative philosophy itself, or, as some today might prefer, to deconstruct the very notion. Kierkegaard’s own closeness to Climacus is suggested by his describing this aborted effort as his own first ‘attempt at a little speculative exposition’,¹⁴ just as its drift indicates how this might give way to a polemic

¹³ *KJN* 6, NB 11:209. ¹⁴ *KJN* 2, JJ, p. 288.

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directed *against* speculation. An observant reader of the *Postscript* will note a brief passage that brings the tale discreetly back to mind.¹⁵

In what sense is the *Postscript* ‘unscientific’?

Another interesting detail is the history of the *Postscript*’s title. Up until his preparation of the fair copy, the working title that Kierkegaard had used was *Concluding Simple-Minded* (eenfoldig) *Postscript*.¹⁶ What prompted the last-minute change to *Unscientific* (uvidenskabelig) *Postscript* is unclear, but reading the text supplies some clues. The simple-minded person is a figure that Climacus returns to several times, contrasting the simple soul with the wise man. He talks also of the simple-minded wise man, whose wise answers are to questions that occur to him *in his existence*. We are reminded of the Sermon on the Mount’s ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit [οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’¹⁷ Whether or not this is the reference, Climacus makes it clear that it should be no more difficult for the simple-minded to receive Christianity’s offer of eternal happiness than for the clever and wise. Far from it indeed. The difficulty is surely greater with the wise, for they have to disabuse themselves of so much worthless knowledge, to say nothing of their assumption that the truth that will save them is to be found down the path of scholarship and learning. In changing the title to *Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard may have been worried that the earlier title hinted that the book was written *for* the simple-minded by someone on their level, rather than by someone really quite learned but writing, on their behalf, to those who assumed that their learning gave them a head start rather than being, as it is, a serious obstacle.

Another thing that the last-minute change in the title strongly suggests is that in labelling his postscript ‘unscientific’ Kierkegaard is not specifically targeting Hegel, as has been widely assumed. Climacus never talks of Hegelian ‘science’, only of the ‘system’. (We would hardly have expected him to call his work ‘unsystematic’, for in spite of its inner disproportions, it all hangs quite nicely together.) As for ‘science’, we note that Climacus has no hesitation in describing Immanuel Kant as ‘at the peak of science’,¹⁸ the very same Kant in whose critical philosophy Hegel saw there lacked exactly

¹⁵ See p. 260. ¹⁶ See facsimile on *SKS K7*, p. 35. ¹⁷ Matthew 5:3.

¹⁸ Even described as ‘the top of human science (paa *Videnskabens Høide*)’, p. 462.

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what his own philosophy as *Wissenschaft* (science) was projected to provide. The domain of ‘science’ that is under question here is human science, and the first occurrence of the notion in the *Postscript*¹⁹ refers quite generally to any objective approach to truth essential to human being. As noted, it is this approach, illustrated by a selection of samples drawn from their local protagonists in Copenhagen, that Part One of the *Postscript* dismisses before going on to develop its ‘argument’ in favour of a subjective approach. The Hegelian case, what Climacus calls the ‘speculative view’ is just one example of the ‘scientific’ approach addressed in Part One, though one that in its local manifestation at the time in Copenhagen preoccupies him most and in that manifestation becomes a prime target in Part Two.

The term ‘unscientific’, through narrowing the focus of Climacus’s polemic not least by implying that, once Hegel is discredited, its critical task has been accomplished, can therefore be seriously misleading. Today it can be misleading in yet another way. ‘Science’, with its sharp focus on method and procedure, now defines a more restricted type of investigation than it did in Kierkegaard’s time, something that naturally tends to weaken the force of denying that what one says is ‘scientific’. Equally, a term like ‘unscholarly’, an acceptable and perhaps less misleading rendering of the Danish, today fails fully to capture the sense in which, in Kierkegaard’s time, scholarship as a whole, under the surviving influence of theology, was seen to focus on matters considered relevant to the human ‘spirit’, including of course nature itself. Scholarship was for that reason properly called ‘science’.

That raises the heretical thought that, in a sense of the word rooted in its time, and in view of the *Postscript*’s fairly evident aim to point the reader in the direction of a faith that can in some sense be called ‘knowledge’ of the truth, the book has in fact even some claim, in an attenuated and incipiently ironical sense of the term, to be called ‘scientific’.

It is as well to bear all this in mind when considering the way, or ways, in which the *Postscript* proclaims itself as an ‘unscientific’ and/or ‘unscholarly’ work. Even from our own point of view, its claims to be unscholarly are evident enough. It deliberately flouts the conventions of scholarship in both style (humour) and content (inclusion of anecdote), to say nothing of revocation (though now we do have Wittgenstein as an example).

The disregard of convention might of course be put down to humour. But we must again bear in mind where the humour comes from.

¹⁹ See p. 20.

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Its source is not in the anecdotal asides and all else that contributes to the idiosyncrasy and sheer length. These things that deliberately disqualify the *Postscript* as a contribution to an ongoing scholarly discussion on its topic are a byproduct of the author's acquired sense of the comedy of the behaviour of those persons in whom contradiction is apparent. These byproducts are merely a way of showing that scholarliness is not the way to the goal at which these discussions claim to be aimed. The comedy that Climacus sees in those who do approach its topic by way of ongoing and 'approximating' discussion is something that, given the essential privacy of humour, he might have kept to himself. But Climacus hopes to share his sense of the comedy of people who aim at something that the means they have chosen never lets them reach. If you do not see it as he does, then the sheer humour becomes mere entertainment.

However, there is another side to the unscholarliness (humour, anecdote, etc.). It can be seen as a loosening up of the traditional category and genre distinctions that is not only allowed but is even mandatory once the matters under discussion are seen not to be the preserve of 'science' and 'scholarship' but to be approached positively by all literary and discursive and even rhetorical means.

Some commentators have claimed that the *Postscript* (and presumably they are referring to Part Two) is a deliberate parody of the Hegelian approach. It may be more revealing, as just noted, to follow Climacus himself and ascribe any comedy that is seen in that approach to its futility when seen from the perspective of someone able to place it in the category of contradiction. The fact that Climacus employs Hegelian concepts in his criticism of the Hegelian approach need not prevent him from using them himself. When he employs them we are not forced to attach a certain wryness of tone, a sort of verbal nudge and wink, to his utterance, something that signals to his audience that here there is something that will no doubt entertain them too. Climacus is a humorist, not a comedian, and he can enter into the business of dialectic quite seriously on behalf of his own vision of the comedies of 'approximation' and 'mediation'.

Hegel as background and target

The Hegelian philosophy nevertheless forms a main target of Climacus's polemic. What has just been said means that it is less than obvious that in attacking it Kierkegaard has Climacus discard the entire Hegelian

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apparatus. Again some historical background can be useful. As a student, according to his philosophy teacher Professor Sibbern, Kierkegaard like many others of his colleagues underwent a Hegelian phase. Sibbern himself had developed an interest in Hegel, though from the start he was also critical. The firmer grip of Hegel on Kierkegaard did not last, but even when it loosened, Kierkegaard continued to show considerable respect for Hegel's thinking. Thus he seems to have both appreciated and absorbed Hegel's writing on aesthetics in particular. What we find at the receiving end of Climacus's humour are mainly notions from Hegel's *Wissenschaft der Logik* (Science of Logic). Its concepts of being, nothing, and coming into being, as well as essence and existence, finitude and infinity, ground, and repulsion, are all to be found in Climacus, as also that of the concept itself, or 'idea' (not here capitalized as often in translations of Hegel). Conversely, we find in Hegel such iconically Kierkegaardian notions as 'inwardness' and the 'leap'. It is hardly surprising, particularly in light of its account of the genesis of philosophy as thought about the world, that this particular work of Hegel was required reading then as later. This places Kierkegaard in the company of thinkers like Karl Marx, Lenin, Lukács and not least Jean-Paul Sartre.

Just as they did, Kierkegaard too gave the Hegelian terminology a new twist, and none more radically than he. In the light of the *Postscript's* inverted focus away from objectivity, some might claim that a terminology thus torn from its traditional philosophical roots in 'objectivity' becomes empty jargon. But there is little indication that Kierkegaard himself believed this to be so, or that if he did, he has Climacus also assume it. To all appearances these Hegelian terms are deployed by Climacus in their new clothing quite straightforwardly, as a means of conveying in the philosophical language of the time that the way in which philosophers were using it was a dereliction of their professed duties to the human spirit.

The Hegelian notion criticized most repeatedly in the *Postscript* is 'mediation'. Hegel's term is *Vermittlung* and it occurs mainly in the discussion of philosophy's *modus operandi*, in particular in connection with how it gets started.²⁰ It implies that the truth of one notion can be sought only through the 'mediation' of another. In the Hegelian dialectic one term first stands and then is opposed by its negation. The 'contradiction' thus unearthed speaks untruth but can be resolved through the

²⁰ As in *Wissenschaft der Logik, Werke*, VI (Frankfurt a. M., 1979), pp. 125–9. See also *Hegel's Logic*, tr. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), pp. 105ff.

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mediation of a third term, the two original terms thus being reconciled, and in a sense preserved yet transcended in a grasp that is more true because more embracing. At that time in Denmark, however, ‘mediation’ was topical at what might be termed the other end of philosophy, in the question of the ability of Hegelian thought to assimilate Christianity. It is this aim that Climacus is out to discredit. In attempting this he was resuming a project that Kierkegaard had placed on the table long before in a programme-declaring journal entry beginning ‘Philosophy and Christianity can never be united’.²¹ There he writes that he ‘can conceive a philosophy after Christianity, or after a person has become a Christian’, but in that case it would be ‘a Christian philosophy’. The drift of the argument now being put into the hands of Johannes Climacus is that no such possibility can be conceived if the method of the philosophy is mediation. Other aspects of Hegelian philosophy are also targeted, for instance the idea that philosophy can begin with Nothing, or with Immediacy, that is, without any presuppositions, and also the idea that the ‘movement’ towards an opposition-free understanding which mediation is supposed to allow can be part of a philosophy based in logic.

Resources, supporters and opponents

Thinkers are said typically to build on the work of their predecessors. If Climacus may be said to follow that tradition, then there can be little doubt that Hegel is the most obvious thinker upon whose shoulders he raises himself, though Aristotle can be mentioned as a common source. But there is no doubt that Climacus also raises himself on the shoulders of Socrates. That complicates the picture, since the Socratic aspect, according to Kierkegaard’s inversion of Hegel’s project, is one in which the thinker sinks lower into ignorance, with inwardness increasing proportionally. Still, the two seem to be somehow combined in Climacus, the Socratic side correcting any impression that the Hegelian style here is doing what Hegelians take themselves to be doing with it, arriving at the truth, and not, as Climacus proposes, just as far as the point where truth must then be grasped in ignorance and faith.

The references to recent thinkers besides Hegel are few and carefully chosen. Climacus has good words for two anti-Enlightenment thinkers,

²¹ *K7N* 1, *AA* 13.

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Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88) and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819). Both of these assisted German philosophy in an anti-Enlightenment direction, Hamann in his typically ironic and allusive manner, the latter more incisively. Climacus's appreciation of Socrates is something he shared with Hamann. These German and religiously minded thinkers are both mentioned in the *Postscript*, but only as lost causes due to the ease with which the Hegelian system has been able to reduce them to passing phases in the development of thought. However, as mentioned earlier, in Lessing (1729–81) Kierkegaard found a figure more resistant to what he calls the 'overturning plough' of Hegelian philosophy, in fact an 'authority' of sorts for the elusive notion of a subjective thinker. Lessing (via Leibniz) provides the formulation of 'the problem of the *Crumbs*', to which the *Postscript* then proceeds to make its new approach.

Several of Kierkegaard's coevals in Copenhagen are directly or indirectly present in the text, among them two supporters and mentors. Poul Martin Møller (1794–1838) was a poet as well as a philosopher, well known in his time for his *Strotanker* (Aphorisms). In the late 1820s he had been responsible for introducing Hegel's thought to the comparatively new Royal Frederick University in Christiania (Oslo). From 1831 until his relatively early death Møller was professor at the University of Copenhagen and a close friend of Kierkegaard, to whom Møller's death came as a severe blow. He lost not only a close friend but also a living witness to the possibility of the kind of poetic approach to philosophy to which his own talents were most suited. A long footnote in Part One seeks to rectify the reputation as a pro-Hegelian that Møller had acquired since his death. Another mentor was Frederick Charles Sibbern (1785–1872), a serious-minded thinker and professor of philosophy at the university in the seven years or so of Kierkegaard's studies there, and until his retirement fifteen years after Kierkegaard's death. Sibbern had travelled in Germany, meeting Fichte, Schleiermacher and Schelling, but on returning to Copenhagen he had pursued an independent line, engaging in debates on aspects of Hegel's philosophy as this was being promoted and developed by the local Hegelians. Sibbern was instrumental in having Kierkegaard's dissertation accepted by a sceptical committee. Incidentally, the dissertation's title, 'Om Begrebet Ironi' (On the Concept of Irony), was identical with that of one of Møller's aphorisms.

The most prominent among the local Hegelians satirized by Climacus is Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791–1860). Heiberg combined the careers of

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academic, playwright, theatre director and editor. Together with his wife Johanne Louise Heiberg (Pätges), Denmark's most celebrated actress, he hosted a salon to which the young and aspiring Søren Kierkegaard had sought and finally gained access. Kierkegaard's subsequent relations with Heiberg were strained, at least on Kierkegaard's part, and he later lost no opportunity to get back at what he considered Heiberg's superior attitude in what he saw as ill-conceived reviews of his works. That he sent Heiberg a personal copy of the *Postscript* on its publication speaks, however, of continued respect. A theme to which Kierkegaard constantly returns (in the *Postscript* too) is Heiberg's report of having received a vision of the truth of Hegel's philosophy when returning from attendance at Hegel's lectures in Berlin on aesthetics in the 1820s. Following his visit to Berlin, Heiberg subsequently wrote several excellently lucid introductory works on Hegel. Above all, he managed to publish a systematic account of Hegel's aesthetics even before the (posthumous) publication of Hegel's own lectures on the subject. A recurring expression in Kierkegaard's writings, including the *Postscript*, is 'the demands of the times'. This stems from Heiberg, consistently from a perspective in which the times determine their own demands, thus making them blind, in Climacus's view, to what they actually require or need. Climacus also alludes several times to Heiberg's keen interest in astronomy.

Two other names are the butt of Climacus's ironic tongue, the first in the form of unalloyed ridicule, the other with a touch of bitterness. Whenever Climacus makes fun of the 'awakened' or 'reborn', it is impossible not to suppose him to be referring to followers of Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872). These included Kierkegaard's own elder brother. Pastor Grundtvig was a theologian, politician, historian, philologist and hymnwriter who also became one of Scandinavia's greatest influences within education. With a strong poetic imagination based in the German Romantic writers, Grundtvig sought to revitalize Denmark's religion, replacing ritual observance based on texts duly deciphered by intellectuals with what he called the 'living word'. This could be established in a 'society of faith with a creed', something Grundtvig referred to as his 'matchless discovery'.²² The phrase is one that Climacus makes much of in Part One of the *Postscript*, in the section 'On the Church'.

²² See Bruce H. Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 212.

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The other name here is that of Hans Lassen Martensen (1808–84). Once Kierkegaard's tutor, he topped off a brilliant academic and clerical career by succeeding to the primacy of the Danish Church just a year before the death of his former (and only five years younger) student. Martensen is not directly mentioned in the text either, but it was he who, on returning from a three-year study tour of Germany, reawakened interest in Hegel at a time when, Hegel himself having died in 1832, any original interest helped by Heiberg's advocacy was clearly on the wane. Kierkegaard had attended Martensen's inspiring lectures in the winter of 1838–9. He must have realized that they would change the face of local Hegelianism, and they no doubt inspired Kierkegaard too. Together with a sense of rivalry that never seems to have left him in his relations with Martensen, they gave him the thought that something must be put in Martensen's way. The *Postscript* gives every appearance of being just such a something. Martensen's ongoing project, after all, culminating in his *Christian Ethics* of the 1870s²³ (as a sequel and supplement to his *Christian Dogmatics*, on which Kierkegaard comments adversely in his journals), was the uniting of philosophy and Christianity.

Finally, there was the primate at that time of the Danish Church, Jakob Peter Mynster (1775–1854), a man of formidable intellect who took part freely in academic debate. In his younger days he had been picked out by Kierkegaard's father to be the family's pastor; it was he who officiated at Kierkegaard's confirmation. Much later Mynster had engaged in a discussion on *Either/Or*. He criticized a colleague who, also in writing on that work, had defended the view that religion could profit from some injection of the aesthetic as a way of motivating a personal appropriation of Christianity. As was natural for a cleric in his position, Mynster followed Kierkegaard's writings as their religious aspect became increasingly explicit. It seems that in general he shared Kierkegaard's anti-Hegelian sympathies. As time went on, however, and as Mynster began to see how a polemic on behalf of the 'single individual' would eventually endanger the very existence of the established church in his charge, relations between the primate and the polemicist became strained. Mynster had already been subjected to some scathing remarks at the very

²³ Hans Martensen, *Christian Ethics* (1871), tr. (from the Danish) C. Spence (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1873), and *Christian Ethics: Special Part: First Division: Individual Ethics* (1878), tr. (from the author's German) William Affleck (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1881).

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end of the *Postscript*. Climacus implies that he has failed to find in ‘his reverence’ what he most urgently seeks, namely a teacher of ‘the ambiguous art of thinking about existing and existing’. It was nevertheless from Mynster that, very soon after, Kierkegaard sought advice when contemplating retirement to a country living now that the Climacus operation was accomplished. When, in his final year almost a decade later, Kierkegaard launched his notorious no-holds-barred attack on the church, he waited a full year following Mynster’s death before publishing an article that was shockingly critical of this widely revered man.

The *Postscript*’s continuation

Kierkegaard sold 119 copies of the *Postscript*. He also gave away several. The work’s subsequent history became largely that of Kierkegaard’s authorship in general. On the whole it was *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* that caught the public’s imagination. Few people bothered to read the whole of Climacus’s huge and, at first glance, ramshackle ‘compilation’. When they did, parts of it, especially passages from the chapter on truth as subjectivity and the brief account given of ‘indirect communication’, were subsequently introduced into compendia as required reading for students taking courses in existentialism and its sources. Thus began a tradition of citing Kierkegaard out of context, typically also with indifference to any problems suggested by pseudonymity.

Ignoring the interpretational challenges of the pseudonymity has been the rule rather than the exception. Several significant thinkers have based their criticism of Kierkegaard on the evident ‘contradictions’ that come to light if one attempts to form their productions into one coherent life-view. This is true of Adorno,²⁴ and also of Levinas, whose view of ‘the leap of faith’ (an expression nowhere to be found in Kierkegaard’s work) as an act of violence is based on the figure of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*.²⁵ But as Kierkegaard himself acknowledges, and as Climacus already indicates in his discussion of it in the *Postscript*, that work is a very misleading guide to what the latter means by the religious. Heidegger’s appreciative but thinly acknowledged appropriation of a wide range of Kierkegaardian

²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, tr. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

²⁵ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

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concepts²⁶ places them outside the ‘private’ sphere of personal religious commitment, which is exactly where the *Postscript* begins, while Sartre’s category of the ‘singular universal’²⁷ converts the single individual into a philosophically acceptable category under which everyone potentially falls, rather than into a goal that we are urged one by one to become.

Among those whose attentions have been caught especially by the *Postscript*, Ludwig Wittgenstein has already been mentioned. Another, also of Austrian origin, is Paul Feyerabend, who acknowledges that work as a main inspiration behind his anarchistic *Against Method*.²⁸ Each of these philosophers applies what appealed to him in the *Postscript* to his own field of interest, respectively the logical analysis of language, and scientific procedure. In recent years philosophers of diverse background, in areas ranging from ethics through philosophy of language to cognitive science, have engaged themselves in Kierkegaard. This must be due partly to the availability of translations allowing a wider realization of the richness and challenge in his work; but accompanying the dissemination of his thought is a growing appreciation of Kierkegaard’s remarkable ability to combine philosophical insight with the skills of a writer. On reading Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein said he felt humbled by his profundity,²⁹ and more recently, thinking primarily of his powers of exposition, Jerry Fodor has described Kierkegaard as ‘a master and way out of the league that the rest of us play in’.³⁰ The interesting point, though, is that both Wittgenstein and Fodor take Kierkegaard to be ‘playing’ in *their* league.

All of which confirms that those who find inspiration and challenge in this particular work, whether reacting to it favourably or unfavourably, do so from diverse interests and points of view. Perhaps, in concluding his concluding postscript with a wish that the work be left as it is, Kierkegaard had a premonition that this, if it was read at all, would be the last thing to happen to it.

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

²⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, tr. J. Matthews, ‘Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal’ (1972), in *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (New York: New Left Books, 1974).

²⁸ Paul K. Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (London: New Left Books, 1975).

²⁹ In private correspondence; see *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 28/1–3 (1976) (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co.).

³⁰ *The London Review of Books*, 23 April 2006.

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Concerning Climacus's 'defence' of Christianity, he says in one place that it is 'a hair's breadth' away from being an attack on it,³¹ not just on Christendom, which for Climacus is not Christian and which he also attacks, but on the Christianity for which Climacus himself is commissioned to be a protagonist. Readers taking sides here are standing on a fine edge, an either/or that is reflected in the secondary literature. One could even say that the range of interpretational attitudes invited by the work's style and pseudonymity vanishes into indeterminacy. What, for instance, is to stop a reader of a sceptical bent from seeing in the *Postscript* simply a direct attack on the real author's rivals and critics? Since the satire and wish to make fun of his contemporaries seem real enough, it is hard to believe that Kierkegaard is merely scripting someone else's jokes. So might not the 'theory' of humour outlined in the *Postscript* simply be a ruse to give an appearance of legitimacy to the satire? The legitimation would be of just the kind its chosen targets would be most easily taken in by.

Of course one doubts that anyone in a reasonably balanced state of mind could seriously countenance such a reading. But its possibility is there, among many others, and here we might guess at one more of many conceivable reasons why Climacus should want to revoke the work. His work is done as far as he is concerned. One might compare this satirically with the way in which he says the same about the Hegelian system. It too claims to have completed its task, or very nearly so, so that 'going further', as some Danish Hegelians claimed to do, was no way of honouring the system. Similarly with the Climacian 'dialectic' both discussed and deployed in the *Postscript*. Once you are through reading the *Postscript* and you happen to be a simple-minded person who is also wise, it should have done its job. If you are not as simple-minded as a wise person must be in order to get its message, then it is just possible that its humour and its dialectic may have helped you to become so. For those who are wise but treat it as further wisdom it will have been a waste of time. It is as though they had become, in their new wisdom, wiser even than the wise. Today's readers will no doubt include many who have no sympathy with its project anyway. They too may see the work as a source of greater wisdom, helping them to justify their lack of sympathy.

All the above are liable to do what Kierkegaard says that he would rather they did not, namely meddle dialectically with Climacus's *opus*.

³¹ K7N 6, NB 13:92a.

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On the other hand, those who do have sympathy for the project, and also have understood the role of the dialectic, will more readily see that in this direction there is nowhere further to go. The book can be shelved, though that does not mean it should be forgotten. Another title that Kierkegaard played with before settling, first, on *Concluding Simple-Minded Postscript* and then *Concluding Unscientific* [or *Unscholarly*] *Postscript*, was *Comprehensive and yet Superfluous* Postscriptum.³² In the published text the assertion of the book's redundancy comes in an appendix at the end. Of course, commercially speaking, if he had described it in this way on the title page, people might have been discouraged from reading it at all, especially in view of its length (though perhaps today that might have succeeded wonderfully as a sales gimmick). But the intention was indeed that it should be read. In that appendix Climacus says that revoking a book having once written it is not same as not having written it. Better that there should be one reader than none.

Indeed, even if there were several readers, the idea seems to have been that each should read it as though he or she were that one reader. There comes a point where irony is capable of conveying deep truth to those on the right wavelength. So Kierkegaard may have been serious when he has Climacus say, with seeming irony, that he would be happy to find just one reader who saw the point. The truth here would be that he wants every single reader to be that one. However, readers selecting the *Postscript* as one in a series of Historical Texts may be forgiven for doing so collectively out of a certain curiosity, or just to pass an exam.

³² See the facsimile on *SKS* K7, p. 54.