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Introduction

Rick Anthony Furtak

Søren Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ascribed to a pseudonymous author named "Johannes Climacus," is the source of the notorious claim that "truth is subjectivity." That alone has provoked a variety of divergent interpretations of the work as a whole, from the time of its publication in February 1846 until the present day. Yet the *Postscript* has been both celebrated and condemned under many other descriptions: as the chief inspiration for twentieth-century existential thought, as a subversive parody of philosophical argument, as a prelude to later phenomenology, as a critique of mass society, as a forerunner of postmodern relativism, and as a testimonial for Christianity conceived in either theologically conservative or radically progressive terms. For a book that sold only about fifty copies during the first few years after its publication, it has caused quite a stir in the long run.

The *Postscript* was regarded by Kierkegaard as a culminating work – although he later came to view it as more of a turning point in his authorship – and, as a result, it resembles a sort of "container into which all of the important ideas he has ever had must be crammed."[1] Philosophers have appropriated and opposed various claims endorsed in the *Postscript*, which seems more like a philosophical treatise in form and content than perhaps any other work in Kierkegaard's corpus. Yet the reader of the *Postscript* will also encounter a dizzying range of material that is seldom found in canonical works of philosophy: personal anecdotes by a fictional narrator who interrupts himself with frequent exclamations; rhetorical devices such as the part in which Johannes Climacus "reviews" Kierkegaard's earlier works as an outsider with curiously similar interests; a hilarious multi-page footnote containing twenty examples of comic incongruity; and stories of escaped lunatics, large green birds, highway robbers in disguise, and self-forgetful people who wake up to find themselves dead.

[1] Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, 278.

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The term "unscientific" (or *uvidenskabelig* in Danish) indicates that the book is *not* a work of academic or scholastic philosophy. This promptly sets it apart from the kind of *Wissenschaft* pursued by a number of German idealists and their Danish acolytes. Johan Ludvig Heiberg and Hans Lassen Martensen are prominent among the latter, although the *Postscript*'s critique of philosophy that aims for an inappropriate type of scientific rigor is applicable to much of the modern philosophical tradition from Descartes through Hegel, and hardly irrelevant to philosophy in the present day. Although no blogs or websites kept track of philosophical fashion in Kierkegaard's time, his age did have its trends and its prevailing ways of doing philosophy. As Kierkegaard saw it, this included the tendency to favor an impersonal, detached approach to philosophical questions, one that he regarded as wholly out of place for issues that pertain to human existence. His relation to most of the leading philosophers of recent times is polemical, although the *Postscript* does pay tribute to Kant (CUP 462–463) and takes a point of departure from Lessing (CUP 53–60). Even such heterodox thinkers as Jacobi and Hamann are portrayed by Kierkegaard's pseudonym as having fallen short of kindling the intellectual fire that he is trying to light. As for what philosophy *would* look like if it were to be reoriented as Johannes Climacus advises, the prototypical point of comparison is Socrates, for reasons that will be explored by several contributors to this volume.

Not least among the bewildering features of the *Postscript* is its very last section, in which Kierkegaard, speaking in his own voice, takes responsibility for the texts he has published under other names (including this one). He explicitly requests that any quotations from these writings should *not* be assigned to Kierkegaard himself, but to the respective pseudonyms. One point of contention among readers of the *Postscript* has been whether, and how, to obey this request. Almost all of the contributors to the present volume follow Kierkegaard's dictate and accept that Johannes Climacus is the author of the *Postscript*, as earlier generations of readers generally did not – yet the question of what follows from this remains unsettled. Climacus could represent a side of Kierkegaard himself, in which case his views might overlap with Kierkegaard's own, even if there is more to Kierkegaard than what Climacus has to offer; or, by contrast, Climacus could be a straw man invented to defend a flawed position or to pursue an impossible project.

In any event, if Climacus is not *exactly* to be identified with Kierkegaard himself, then what are we to make of his commentary on Kierkegaard's other writings, or his description of religious faith? Many have taken the

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Postscript's account of "Religiousness A and B" as an authoritative lens through which Kierkegaard's own religious writings ought to be interpreted, while others have argued more recently that this simply cannot be done.[2] This kind of issue, it would seem, can only be settled by looking at the text itself and comparing it to Kierkegaard's other writings. In the few places where Kierkegaard does make potentially helpful remarks about how *he* understands the task of the *Postscript*, his words are cryptic enough to require further interpretation. For instance, in an 1849 journal entry, he laments that the *Postscript* has led to much "confusion" since it is assumed to be the source of a "new doctrine," whereas what the text actually contains is "personality."[3] If we find ourselves wondering how the personality could be embodied in a philosophical text, or how it could be associated with the apprehension of the truth, our best resource for deciphering these enigmas is likely to be the *Postscript* itself.

Regardless of how we construe the authorial status of Johannes Climacus, one thing is clear: he gives voice to many worries about the tendency of abstract thought to lose sight of the reality from which it has abstracted. Too frequently, he claims, philosophers adopt a view from nowhere when reflecting upon conceptual questions, even when their questions have ethical or practical relevance. It is "truly difficult" to penetrate one's existence with a thoughtful awareness while remaining present in life (CUP 258), and we are commonly all too eager to avoid this kind of difficulty. Yet philosophy then becomes a travesty of itself, rather than living up to its name as the love of wisdom. Even worse, in spite of all of the data and information that surrounds us, we can be utterly lacking in our conception of what it means to be human. It is all right to explore theoretical fields that bear no relation to existence, but that does not exempt us from having to make sense of our lives, and the *Postscript* reminds us of the urgent and continuous need to do this. And it warns us to steer away from the realm of abstract, speculative thought that is populated by unrealities.

Kierkegaard's own reaction against those who would aspire toward complete systematic knowledge was predicated on a number of disagreements with them; it included such ideas as that all of our beliefs involve some

[2] Among the contributors to the present volume, Edward Mooney has argued that we ought to downplay the importance of Religiousness A and B: see Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard*. Taking a more extreme view, Michael Olesen has argued that Religiousness as portrayed by Climacus is inconsistent with the religiousness presented in Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses: see Olesen, "The Climacean Alphabet."

[3] SKS 22: 310, NB13:61. Cited in *The Point of View*, KW 22: 216. See also Hannay, *Kierkegaard and Philosophy*, 7–8, 23.

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possibility of error, and that the most intricate and complex subject matters do not always lend themselves to highly stringent methods of study. Today, he might say that in order for our intellectual culture to focus more adequately on human concerns, it would need to jettison the presumption that the scientific answer is always the most accurate one, no matter what question is being asked.[4] If we are concerned about truth in the library or the laboratory, while testifying in a court of law or when professing beliefs during a liturgical service, then we should also care about the kind of truth that actually orients our life on a daily basis. This kind of humanistic truth is essentially subjective and uncertain, according to Johannes Climacus, in a sense that no brief remarks could hope to explain. For now, however, here is one instance that might illustrate what Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author has in mind.

Let us assume that there is a real difference between someone who lives with God in the world, on the one hand, and someone whose life is godforsaken, on the other. If there is – and Kierkegaard himself certainly believes so – then we might think this difference would have to do with some correlation, or lack thereof, between each person and an objectively existing divinity. What the *Postscript* asks us to consider is the possibility that there is a real difference here, but not of the sort that we had guessed: the world of the religious believer is not the same as that of the one for whom nothing is sacred, but not in a way that can easily be accounted for in our standard vocabulary. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, affirming our role as world-disclosing beings is not a matter of "constructing" reality without any constraints, but it does require us to rethink just how deeply life as we know it is inflected by our own subjectivity. As for the notion of doubting in order to find a solid foundation for true beliefs, which was very popular in Kierkegaard's academic climate, he says that this is no more sensible than lying down in order to stand up straight.

Because of its emphasis on the subjectivity of the individual human being, as opposed to transparently "objective" truth or that which is established by the human community, the *Postscript* lends itself to misreadings that have prevented it from being more fully appreciated. So we hear it said that "the self for Kierkegaard is an objectless inwardness," which turns away from others and withdraws into its own private isolation.[5] Yet in the *Postscript*, what we find is not at all an appeal for introspection but an invitation to attend to our whole cognitive and affective outlook on life, as it

[4] On how philosophers after Kierkegaard must turn toward a more "unscientific inquiry" that would also be a more human one, see Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 7–8.

[5] Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, 27.

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informs our engagement in the world. The kind of knowing highlighted by Johannes Climacus is based upon character and linked with moral agency: if he is talking about ethics, it is not in any narrow sense of the word; if he is talking about knowledge, it is an aspect or a type of knowledge that usually falls outside the domain of epistemological analysis.[6] The *Postscript* outlines a form of passionate and personal reasoning, and it tells us that we must be appropriately disposed in order even to feel the force of existential questions, much less to attain truthfulness with respect to our most important concerns.

The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, then, confronts us as a quasi-philosophical work that insists on a personal and idiosyncratic style: at the same time that it immerses us knee-deep in the bizarre and incomparable world of Kierkegaard's writings, it leaves us unsure about whether we are meeting Kierkegaard himself or whether he is hiding behind the text, paring his fingernails in masterful Joycean style. Indeed, if we can be sure of anything with respect to this infinitely rich and difficult book, it is that no one angle or interpretive slant will reveal the whole truth about it. Accordingly, readers of this collection are introduced to a plurality of approaches to the *Postscript* – and what better way could there be to get into a multifaceted work, which will always exceed any description of it that can be given? The chapters that follow deal in diverse ways with such hotly debated topics as the tension between the Socratic-philosophical and the Christian-religious; the identity and personality of Johannes Climacus, his literary career and *how* he is affected by an overheard conversation (along with *what* he learns from it); his conceptions of paradoxical faith and of passionate understanding; his relation to his contemporaries, and to some of his more distant predecessors; and, last but not least, his pertinence to our present-day concerns. As any attentive reader of Kierkegaard's *Postscript* will see, its immense potential to transform our way of thinking has hardly yet been realized.

[6] Cf. Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard*, 184n.

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CHAPTER 1

The "Socratic secret"

The postscript to the *Philosophical Crumbs*

M. Jamie Ferreira

About two years after the publication of *Philosophical Crumbs*, also known as the *Fragments*, a second book authored by Johannes Climacus appeared. The title of the new book reflected both its great length and his delight in being provocative – *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs. A Mimic–Pathetic–Dialectic Compilation. An Existential Contribution.* What does it mean that the *Postscript*, published in 1846, is explicitly presented (in its title) as a "postscript" (*Efterskrift*) to the *Philosophical Crumbs* of 1844? What is a postscript and what does it do? As a hypothesis to be tested, consider that when I add a postscript to a letter I have just written, it means that I think I left out something important – something I remember after I have finished signing (or even sending) the letter that I think still needs to be conveyed. The postscript is an after-thought, in a sense, but it still serves to append something that I think cannot be left unsaid. It may serve to emphasize something that was implicit in the letter, like "PS, I love you." Or it may provide some critical information that was not implicit in the letter – e.g., "PS, did you know that the party has been changed to Tuesday?" This latter PS imparts crucial information that I did not mention in my letter. The PS might also serve to qualify in a crucial way something that I did say in the letter – e.g., "PS, don't take what I said above as a criticism of your brother." Adding a postscript means that I have decided that I do not want to leave the letter as it was.

I will argue in what follows that, however successful *Philosophical Crumbs* may have been on its own terms, Kierkegaard later judged that it could not be allowed to stand as it was. The recognition that it needed to be importantly qualified may well have been precipitated by the thinking and writing that followed the publication of *Crumbs*,[1] as well as by Kierkegaard's

[1] One of the major themes in CUP is anticipated in *The Concept of Anxiety*, where, at the end of Chapter III, Haufniensis writes: "the greatness of a man depends simply and solely on the energy of the God-relation in him, even though the God-relation finds an altogether wrong expression as fate" (KW 8: 109–110). This seems to differ strikingly from the historically specific understanding of

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decision to bring his authorship to a close. In particular, I suggest that the book, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, contains both a quasi-sequel to *Crumbs* (which elaborated some claims effectively made in *Crumbs*) and a postscript to *Crumbs* that provided a new and crucial supplement to *Crumbs*. That "postscript" within the book *Postscript* is found in Part Two, which constitutes the bulk of the work. Although some aspects of *Crumbs* become more finely grained in the part of the *Postscript* that is a "sequel,"[2] the point of the "postscript" part of the *Postscript* was to provide something new. This supplement involved not only a more appreciative take on Socratic subjectivity, where Socrates is carefully distinguished from other philosophers, but, more radically, the presentation of Socratic subjectivity as a *necessary* preliminary to genuine Christianity. I suggest that whereas in *Crumbs* Socratic subjectivity was presented as an alternative to the non-Socratic (Christian) position, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* reveals them in a positive relation. That is, the "postscript" within *Postscript* corrects the "either–or" presentation of *Crumbs* by introducing the importance of a specific sort of "both–and" (which nonetheless differs from "mediation").

POSTSCRIPT VERSUS SEQUEL

Climacus provides important guidance for reading the *Postscript* when, in his introduction, he (in effect) distinguishes between the postscript and a "sequel." He refers back to his suggestion in *Crumbs* of a possible "sequel," a sequel that would clothe the formal non-Socratic position in its "historical costume" (KW 7: 109), but he tells us now in *Postscript* that the promise was already "fulfilled" in *Crumbs* itself (which, he says, "anyone who has read through the first part attentively" could have inferred from the earlier work), so "essentially, there is no sequel" (CUP 12–13). Alternatively, he says both that such a sequel could be fulfilled by mentioning the single word "Christianity" (CUP 18), and that Part One, on the objective problem of Christianity's truth, is "the promised sequel" (CUP 18). That is, the sequel, if there is one, is found only in the short section that constitutes Part One. All of these claims point in the same direction – namely, to the priority Climacus places on Part Two, which constitutes the bulk of the lengthy

faith in *Crumbs*. Moreover, CUP incorporates several themes from the *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*; in particular, the theme of appropriation and subjectivity found in the Preface to those discourses and throughout the three of them culminates in the claim that "the person is fully as mad who states a correct opinion if it has absolutely no significance for him" (KW 10: 99–100).

[2] For example, notions of immanence and the absurd.

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Postscript. Whether or not Part One really deserves to be called a "sequel," it is clear that the "postscript" proper, found in Part Two, is not any kind of "sequel" but rather a "renewed attempt" to discuss, or "a new approach" to, the "problem" presented in the *Crumbs* (CUP 18).[3]

Climacus sees himself as responding to the failure of others to engage "the problem" that was "posed" in *Crumbs* – namely, "*Can there be a historical point of departure for an eternal consciousness; how can such a thing be of more than historical interest; can one base an eternal consciousness on historical knowledge?*" (CUP 16). This issue, he insists, has been not advanced, but rather suppressed (CUP 13), by either scholarly erudition or rhetorical eloquence or systematic philosophy's sleight-of-hand in offering the conclusion it cannot produce (CUP 14–16). But when, at the end of Part Two, Climacus reverts back explicitly to the distinctiveness of Christianity in relation to its historical center, he notes that "this is what the *Crumbs* essentially dealt with; I can therefore make constant reference to that work and express myself here more briefly" (CUP 470). A little later he adds, "As mentioned, it was with this dialectic in particular that the *Crumbs* dealt" (CUP 477), so he can now briefly "summarize it even more succinctly" (CUP 477). In other words, that issue had been essentially addressed in *Crumbs*. Although the *Postscript* adds more detail to the notions of "sin," the "absurd," and the "offense" already introduced in *Philosophical Crumbs*, the discussion of the specific difficulty raised by the historical dimension of Christianity takes up only relatively few pages of this 531-page book (namely, Part One, "The objective problem," and the section on "The dialectical aspect" in Part Two). The "sequel" is not a critical supplement to *Crumbs*.

POSTSCRIPT AS SUPPLEMENT

Thus, the point of the *Postscript* is not the sequel. The point is the postscript. What is it that cannot be left unsaid then, or left said as it had been said in *Crumbs*? In what way is Part Two, "The subjective problem" (minus the section on "The dialectical aspect") a candidate for a genuinely "new approach"? The first five chapters of Part Two explore the generic nature of subjectivity – what it means to exist humanly. Of these five, the first two chapters (Section One) are an indirect approach to subjectivity via a discussion of four theses possibly attributable to G. E. Lessing, and they

[3] As we shall see later, there is no contradiction between the phrases "renewed attempt" and "new approach"; it is a "renewed attempt on the same lines" (the comic, humor, parody, satire), while the "new approach" refers to the crucial difference between the two works.

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frame things in terms of a dialectic of communication and a dialectic of existence. The next three chapters (in Section Two) are a response to the question, "How subjectivity must be for the problem to appear to it" (CUP 107). Their titles are remarkably similar: Chapter 1, "Becoming subjective"; Chapter 2, "The subjective truth, inwardness; truth is subjectivity"; Chapter 3, "Actual, ethical subjectivity; the subjective thinker."

In other words, whereas the issue discussed in the "sequel" concerns the distinctive problematic of a historical religion, the issue in the "postscript" is the way in which Christianity has been misunderstood because people have "forgotten what it is to **exist** and what **inwardness** means" (CUP 203, emphasis in original). As Climacus puts it: "I now resolved to go back as far as possible, so as not to arrive too soon at the religious mode of existence, to say nothing of the specifically Christian mode . . . If one had forgotten what it means to exist religiously, no doubt one had also forgotten what it is to exist humanly; and so this must be brought out" (CUP 209). Climacus' concern with what it is to be an existing individual is dictated by his recognition that it is impossible to understand what it is to be a Christian if one does not know what it is to be an existing individual. Still, it is the concern with *generic subjectivity* that constitutes the bulk of Part Two's nearly five hundred pages.[4]

This imbalance between Parts One and Two, and the claim that the section on Christianity can be brief because it had already been dealt with in *Crumbs*, support the suggestion that Part Two is intended to do justice to what was covered only briefly in *Crumbs*. The bulk of *Crumbs* explored the non-Socratic account of faith, whereas the Socratic version was presented in very short compass – a few pages sketched out the formal position on the immanence of truth and a very minimalist picture of inwardness was presented. It is not surprising that the postscript would have emphases that are directly inverse to the emphases in *Crumbs.* The postscript takes a step back to examine more fully the Socratic account before it takes two steps forward to look again at the distinctively Christian account. Or more precisely, Climacus takes two steps back – and lingers. Climacus undertakes a total revisioning of the Socratic position which, now seen in contrast to both Platonic and Hegelian speculative philosophy, is shown in its richness and depth. This remarkable appreciation of the possibilities of Socratic inwardness is perhaps also attributable to the fact that, in his intended last word, Kierkegaard needed to give generous credit to an achievement

[4] It is not simply a question of quantity of pages, since the Introduction points to the priority of Part Two by its comments on the limitedness of the "sequel."

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(human subjectivity) that he now conceded was "so strenuous for a human being as always to be task enough" (CUP 466).

THE HEART OF PART TWO – GENERIC SUBJECTIVITY

Section Two ("The subjective problem, or how subjectivity must be for the problem to appear to it") takes up and develops Climacus' earlier references to Socrates as a prism to explore "the subjective problem," for his "only comfort is Socrates" (CUP 135).[5] The first three chapters return continually but indirectly to the four theses found in Section One (on Lessing), expanding on the dialectic of communication and the dialectic of existence, and considering in detail the condition in which one must be if one is even to recognize the import of the issue of *Crumbs.* Each of the three chapters circles back to what precedes it, and there is a great deal of overlap, but it is possible to see different foci: as a rough approximation, I suggest that Chapter 1 focuses on subjectivity as the ethical; Chapter 2 focuses on subjectivity as truth; Chapter 3 focuses on subjectivity as the concrete paradox of existence.

Chapter 1 is a prolonged tribute to the "eternal validity of the ethical" (CUP 119). It begins by claiming that an understanding of subjectivity is found only in the activity of becoming subjective. What is important about subjectivity is not what we can say about it, but how we engage in it – subjectivity is a "task" (CUP 108). Recalling his earlier connection between striving "infinitely" and our condition of "becoming" (CUP 77), and his norm, "Let us be human beings" (CUP 97), Climacus concedes that while there is a sense in which we are each a human being, each "a so-called subject of sorts," we all still need to learn how to be "what one is through having become that" (CUP 109), as well as "what it is to live" (CUP 122). This task of becoming subjective, becoming a subject, an existing human being, either "is" or "should be" "the highest task" that we have (CUP 111, 132–133, 137), and it is a task for a lifetime (CUP 136, 150): "For a human being it [that is, "being a single individual"] is the only true and its highest meaning" (CUP 124–125). Moreover, this task is identical with becoming ethical: "The ethical is and remains the highest task set for every human being" (CUP 126).

The ethical "as the absolute is infinitely valid in itself" (CUP 118); "the ethical is absolutely and in all eternity the highest" (CUP 124). Climacus notes that our "eternal consciousness is only in the ethical" (CUP 124) and

[5] Socrates is introduced early on (CUP 70, 74, 75, 78).

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