Introduction

During an idle moment in my office at the university, now well over ten years ago, I selected from my bookcase a thin blue hardcover volume that I had never before opened. The book was *Philosophical Fragments* by Johannes Climacus, translated into English by David F. Swenson, and published in 1944 for the American-Scandinavian Foundation by Princeton University Press. Of Climacus, I knew only that he was one of a handful of authorial personae under whose names Søren Kierkegaard published such pseudonymous works as *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Stages on Life's Way*. Of Kierkegaard, I knew only what little I could remember from a brief encounter in an undergraduate survey course. But Climacus obviously had something to say to me. He talked about the absolute importance of the truth in human life, and he wasted no words in doing so. His insights into the essential nature of Socratic teaching and learning were especially striking. His understanding of Socrates, I thought, was rivaled only by Plato and Xenophon, two authors who had long stood at the center of my philosophical interests. Yet as far as I could tell, the real subject of his book was not Socrates, and not even philosophy. It was religious faith.

There was brilliance in Climacus's writing, and there was ardor. Above all there was mystery. His book was a literary gem as well as a philosophical *tour de force*. It was then and there that I conceived a passion for Kierkegaard's thought, and it was out of this passion that the present study was born.

The book you hold in your hands is about the relationship between philosophy and faith in the thought of Johannes Climacus, and primarily

in *Philosophical Fragments*. It does not presuppose that you are a specialist in Kierkegaard or Plato, or even that you have more than a general knowledge of the vocabulary of philosophy. Vast learning, as C. Stephen Evans has noted, is not needed in order to understand Kierkegaard's works.[1] More important is a capacity for wonder. For this book springs from wonder, primarily at the fact that Kierkegaard, a nineteenth-century Danish author who devoted his literary career to promoting the Christian faith, felt himself to be the soulmate of a pagan Athenian who lived and died for philosophy. "I for my part tranquilly adhere to Socrates," Kierkegaard wrote in a reflection on his life and work that was published by his brother a few years after his death. "It is true, he was not a Christian; that I know, and yet I am thoroughly convinced that he has become one."[2]

Kierkegaard, a Christian Socrates – what could this mean? Aren't philosophy and faith opposites? Doesn't philosophy rest on the assumption that reason is by itself sufficient for the achievement of wisdom, while faith, acknowledging the depredations of sin and the weakness of human understanding, humbly embraces divine revelation? If so, how could Socrates – by all appearances a partisan of reason and independent thought – become a Christian? And even if the notion of a Christian Socrates makes sense, would such a person have anything to say to non-Christians?

One cannot attempt to answer these questions directly without presupposing that one already knows what philosophy and faith are. This presupposition is repeatedly challenged in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works. *Fear and Trembling*, a meditation on the exemplary faith manifested by Abraham when he prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, asks whether *anyone* can understand Abraham's devotion to God (14). And *Philosophical Fragments* suggests that even Socrates did not fully understand the love of wisdom for which he lived and died.

On the most basic level, Climacus's book is a philosophical archaeology of the concepts of "philosophy" and "faith." In *Fragments*, Climacus tries to cut through centuries of "chatter" in order to uncover the original

[1] Evans 1983, 2. "It would be tragic," Evans adds," if he [Kierkegaard] became the special property of a band of scholars." The present study falls under the heading of what Evans calls the "literary-philosophical" approach to Kierkegaard, which aims at "an encounter with the text which will be philosophical in what might be termed a Socratic sense" (Evans 1992, 3). It is perhaps worth noting that Poole 1998, which contrasts "blunt readings" of Kierkegaard with those that follow "the deconstructive turn," leaves no room for literary-philosophical readings. Cf. Evans 2004, 63–7.

[2] *Point of View*, 41.

phenomena of philosophy and faith in what he regards as their purest and truest forms – the one exemplified in the speeches and deeds of Socrates, the other both solicited by, and manifested in, the incarnation of God in the person of Christ.[3] Climacus's motivation is easy to discern. In his view, the most important questions we can ask ourselves as human beings – questions about who we are, what we can know, and how we should live – become clear only when we first grasp what is at stake in the alternative of philosophy and faith.

Fragments begins by presenting the guiding presuppositions of philosophy and faith in such a way as to emphasize their mutual exclusivity. According to Climacus, philosophy is founded on the Socratic assumption that knowledge is recollection, or that "the ignorant person merely needs to be reminded in order, by himself, to call to mind what he knows" (9) – a principle that evidently leaves no room for faith. Because Climacus identifies Socrates with this principle, scholarly consensus holds that he is, in the somewhat extreme formulation of Merold Westphal, the "villain" of *Fragments*.[4] But this identification is only the first move in a book full of unexpected twists and turns. Climacus introduces philosophy and faith as competing hypotheses about learning the truth. Yet he also makes it clear that neither philosophy nor faith is reducible to a hypothesis, because neither can be understood without reference to the individual who embraces it as a path to the truth. One therefore cannot answer the question "What is philosophy?" without first asking the ontologically prior question "Who is the philosopher?" To fail to recognize this priority is to obscure the passion that is essential to Socratic philosophizing and the existential transformation that is central to faith. Because Climacus is well aware of this problem, neither philosophy nor faith is what it first appears to be in *Fragments*. This becomes obvious as the inquiry unfolds. While philosophy is supposed to rest on the assumption that knowledge is already latent in our souls, Climacus will make much of Socrates' frank admission that he does not even know himself (Plato, *Phaedrus* 229e–30a).

[3] One would not be mistaken to detect here an anticipation of the attempts of Heidegger, who never fully acknowledges his debt to Kierkegaard, to dig beneath the sediment of philosophical tradition and to penetrate the veil of idle talk in order to uncover original phenomena.

[4] Westphal 1996, 121. Westphal adds that *Fragments* identifies Socrates with "the speculative collapsing of the difference between the divine and the human," whereas *Postscript* presents him as the "hero" who challenges Hegelian, speculative philosophy. This, too, expresses the scholarly consensus; cf. most recently Rubenstein 2001. A closer reading, however, suggests that Socrates is already an antispeculative hero in *Fragments*. Cf. Allison 1967/2002, 3.13.

And while Climacus introduces faith as a "happy passion," it turns out to involve terror and struggle.

Although the opposition between philosophy and faith is never entirely overcome in *Fragments*, it nonetheless begins to break down almost as soon as it is formulated. This is in large part because Climacus chooses to convey what is meant by philosophy not merely by examining its fundamental presuppositions, but also by attending to the figure of Socrates as he is depicted in the dialogues of Plato. This procedure gives rise to a certain interpretative tension, because Socrates' philosophical practice is in important respects at odds with the hypothesis of philosophy with which the book begins. Climacus makes it clear, however, that philosophy is a way of life, from which it follows that it cannot be evaluated in abstraction from the speeches and deeds of the philosopher.[5]

In sum, *Fragments* develops dialectically, which is to say that the careful reader is obliged continually to rethink earlier assumptions and expectations in the light of later developments. Climacus initially leads us to anticipate that he will attack philosophy in the name of faith, but he goes on to show that genuine or Socratic philosophy and faith are siblings whose family resemblance rests on certain fundamental analogies. In this important respect, *Fragments* echoes the intellectual tradition initiated by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*, in which faith is seen not as the negation but as the perfection of reason.

Yet Climacus is otherwise no Thomist.While Thomas's thought reflects the philosophical sobriety of Aristotle, Climacus gives voice to the divine erotic madness of Plato. He identifies passion as the central element of both philosophy and faith, and he sees both as distinct expressions of what we might as a preliminary approximation call love. According to Climacus, faith is a passion analogous to the erotic or romantic love between a man and a woman. This is an insight advanced also by Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*; as we shall see, *Fragments* develops the analogy between faith and love in a way that complements Silentio's thought. At the same time, Climacus embraces Socrates' claim, as set forth in the Platonic dialogues, that philosophy is rooted in eros. But

[5] Socrates is thus more than "an ideal type or metaphor" in *Fragments* (Perkins 1994, 1). Nor is he "transformed into a promulgator of a philosophy, that by a stereotypical exaggeration is presented as encapsulating the entire tradition of Greek humanities," a role in which he supposedly "provides the negative counterpart to the Christian embodiment of God" (Petersen 2004, 46–7). It is more precise to say that "'the Socratic' way of thinking" or philosophical *hypothesis* "includes the whole of the (Platonic) idealist tradition, up to Hegel and his successors" (Rudd 2000/2002, 2.257).

what exactly is eros, a phenomenon that manifests itself in ways ranging from sexual longing to the love of wisdom? Although Socrates wrestles at length with this question, Climacus claims that he is never fully able to answer it. Eros is difficult to grasp because it is fundamentally ambiguous. It is simultaneously human and divine, "objective" as well as "subjective": it comes from without just as much as it springs from within, and pulls the soul upward no less than it drives it forward.

According to Climacus, Socrates follows his passion for wisdom to the point where he is forced to acknowledge the intractable mystery of the divinity to which eros opens him up – a divine other without which he is less than whole. The experience of eros thus leads Socrates implicitly to admit the failure of his philosophical quest for wisdom and self-knowledge. For this very reason, however, Climacus sees Socrates as the proper judge of his own attempt in *Fragments* to "go beyond" philosophy by developing the hypothesis of faith (111). What is more, it is precisely Socrates' knowledge of eros – knowledge just as ambiguous as his celebrated knowledge of ignorance – that qualifies him to judge Climacus's accomplishment. If philosophical eros opens up a path to faith, faith also reflects the structure of eros. For in striving to hold together elements that seem to be poles apart – the self and that which transcends it, the finite and the infinite, one's life in time and eternity – the work of faith is essentially erotic in the Socratic sense of the term.

Although Socrates' philosophical eros stands at the center of Climacus's consideration of the relationship between philosophy and faith, scholars have paid little attention to its role in *Fragments*.[6] This is all the more surprising because Socrates' erotic nature is reflected in Climacus's own passions and convictions.[7] In particular, the exemplary openness Climacus displays in *Fragments* to the claims of both philosophy and faith is itself rooted in a Socratic love of thinking and longing for wisdom. The literary critic Bakhtin remarks that, in his novels, Dostoyevsky strove to express "fidelity to the authoritative image of a human being."[8] This phrase nicely describes what is at stake in *Fragments* as well, which is itself a kind of philosophical novel in that its author – who writes, among

[6] Even Daise 1999, which reads *Fragments* and *Postscript* as Socratic exercises in indirect communication, does not examine the significance of the figure of Socrates *within* these texts.

[7] Cf. Muench 2003: "in his two books . . . [Climacus] giv[es] what I contend is one of the most compelling performances we have of a Socratic philosopher at work since Plato put Socrates himself on stage" (140).

[8] Quoted by Richard Pevear in his Forward to Dostoyevsky 1994, xix.

other things, about himself – is Kierkegaard's literary creation. Climacus offers us a profound reflection on two such authoritative images, those of Socrates and Christ, while presenting in his own paradoxical person a unique attempt to live one's life in fidelity to *both* of them. By Climacus's own admission, he ultimately falls short of his goal.[9] But this does not diminish our ability to learn from his example. To think with Climacus about what it means to be human is an undertaking that must appeal to all those – regardless of their particular philosophical or faith commitments – in whom the human condition arouses wonder.

No less important, *Fragments* is noteworthy as a corrective to the critical interpretation of Socratic philosophizing initiated by Friedrich Nietzsche and developed by twentieth-century European philosophers. In the *Birth of Tragedy*, which appeared almost thirty years after the publication of *Fragments*, Nietzsche presents Socrates as the originator of a great and consequential error – "the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it."[10] It is this misplaced optimism, the ultimate fruits of which can be seen in the seemingly unlimited ambition of natural science and technology, that in Nietzsche's view cuts us off from rejuvenating and healing contact with the life-giving yet fundamentally unintelligible core of reality he called "the Dionysian." Nietzsche's critical appraisal of Socrates and Plato (or more precisely, of Socratism and Platonism), as well as his attention to pre-Socratic poetry and philosophy, are echoed and extended in the work of Martin Heidegger.[11] These themes lie at the root of the thought of the Frankfurt School philosophers Horkheimer and Adorno, who argue that the Socratic quest for knowledge (which they trace back to Homer's Odysseus) is inseparable from the "totalitarian" attempt to dominate the

[9] If he "does not make out that he is a Christian," Climacus writes in *Postscript*, this is only because "he is, to be sure, completely preoccupied with how difficult it must be to become one" (617). But perhaps such claims should not be taken at face value. See Lippitt 2000 with ch. 10 below, 205–08.

[10] Nietzsche 1967, 95, emphasis in original.

[11] See in this connection David Farrell Krell's Introduction to Heidegger 1975, 10: "In his *Introduction to Metaphysics* . . . focusing on the question of the meaning of *to on* [being], Heidegger describes his own task as one of 'bringing Nietzsche's accomplishment to a full unfolding.' That means following Nietzsche's turn toward early Greek thinking in such a way as to bring the possibilities concealed in *eon* [the form of *on* in the dialects of the pre-Socratic philosophers Heracleitus and Parmenides] to a radical questioning."

objects of knowledge, including ourselves as well as nature.[12] And they are most recently reflected in the deconstructionist interpretation of Plato exemplified in the work of Jacques Derrida, who presents Socrates as a purveyor of intellectual snake-oil – one who vainly promises to make intelligible that which is intrinsically resistant to the charms of philosophical reason.[13]

Because Climacus is also engaged in an exploration of the limits of Socratic philosophizing, one might have expected him to criticize Socrates along the lines laid out by Nietzsche and followed by his philosophical heirs. Far from condemning Socrates in *Fragments* as an arrogant partisan of reason, however, Climacus discerns in his speeches and deeds the capacity of philosophy to know its own limits, and therewith to acknowledge the impenetrable mysteriousness of ourselves as well as the world we inhabit. And far from associating Socrates with totalizing ambition, Climacus presents himself, in what turns out to be an essentially Socratic gesture, as a thinker who offers merely a fragment or scrap of philosophy at a time when the loudest voice in the fields of philosophy and theology was that of Hegelians claiming to be able to embrace all of thought and being in a single system.

In *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, I have attempted to make the nature of Climacus's project and its implications clear enough to be understood by educated amateurs while also saying something important to scholars of philosophy and religion. Students of the Platonic dialogues may hope to understand Socrates better after reading this book, because Climacus's reflection on what he calls the "paradoxical passion" of philosophical eros sheds new light on the erotic core of Socratic philosophizing. Students of Kierkegaard may hope to gain an appreciation of the seminal importance of Socrates to his thought. And anyone who seeks greater clarity about either philosophy or faith will learn much from Climacus's remarkable understanding of their relationship.

The plan of the present study is straightforward. The first chapter introduces Climacus by examining the way in which Kierkegaard himself intended to introduce him in his unfinished intellectual biography of the author, *Johannes Climacus*. Subsequent chapters take the reader step by step through *Philosophical Fragments*, with attention to its literary and

[12] Horkheimer and Adorno 1991. The original title of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* was *Philosophische Fragmente*.
[13] Derrida 1981.

rhetorical dimensions (including poetic analogy, humor, and irony) as well as its philosophical ideas and arguments. There is a pause early on to explore Socrates' relationship to the inscrutable divinity he calls "the god" and the nature of his philosophical eros as these are presented in some of Plato's major dialogues. The book concludes with a chapter on Climacus's presentation of Socrates in his sequel to *Fragments*, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, and with a brief epilogue.

There were many different literary representations of Socrates in antiquity, primarily including those of Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon, and readers may wonder which Socrates they will encounter in this book. It is important to note in this connection that Climacus views Socrates through the lens of the Platonic dialogues. He does not ask whether the character of Socrates in the dialogues is an accurate representation of the historical Socrates, nor is this a question with which we need be concerned here.[14] Unless otherwise indicated, any mention of "Socrates" in the following pages should accordingly be understood to refer to the protagonist of the Platonic dialogues.[15]

The reader should also bear in mind the peculiar interpretive challenges posed by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings. These writings leave the clear impression that one must work to earn whatever wisdom they might contain. Reading the pseudonymous works is in this respect like reading a Platonic dialogue or talking to Socrates. Not coincidentally, both Plato and Socrates tend to keep others guessing when it comes to their own opinions. Kierkegaard accomplishes the same thing by writing pseudonymously, and he has a good pedagogical reason for doing so: the

[14] In contrast, Kierkegaard makes much of this question. He begins his dissertation by stating that "it is necessary to make sure that I have a reliable and authentic view of Socrates' historical-actual, phenomenological existence with respect to the question of its possible relation to the transformed view that was his fate through enthusiastic or envious contemporaries" (*Concept of Irony*, 9).

[15] The question remains whether it is possible to distinguish between the philosophy of Plato and that of the character of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues. As we shall see, Climacus criticizes Plato's understanding of Socrates in *Fragments* and makes the distinction between them explicit in *Postscript* (n. on 206–7). Yet insofar as Climacus bothers to offer a textual basis for his picture of Socrates, he moves freely between dialogues that Kierkegaard, following Schleiermacher, regards as belonging to both the "early" stage of Plato's "development" (e.g., the *Apology*) and the "later" stage of "authentic Platonism" (e.g., the *Theaetetus*; cf. *Concept of Irony*, 123 with *Fragments*, 10–11). Following Climacus, I have ignored the putative authorial chronology of the dialogues in attempting to flesh out the nature of Socratic philosophizing. Howland 1991 offers a scholarly justification of this practice; cf. Cooper 1997, xii–xv.

mere fact that he himself holds a certain opinion should be of no interest to his readers, whose primary task is think for themselves.[16]

At the very end of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, there appears "A First and Last Explanation" signed by "S. Kierkegaard." In this explanation, Kierkegaard admits that he is the author of the pseudonymous works. Yet he observes that his relationship to the likes of Johannes Climacus "is even more remote than that of a poet, who *poetizes* characters and yet in preference is *himself* the *author*." This is because he has "poetically produced the *authors*, whose *prefaces* in turn are their productions, as their *names* are also." Thus in the pseudonymous books, he declares, "there is not a single word by me."[17] In accordance with this declaration, and out of respect for Kierkegaard's "wish" and "prayer" that "if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books . . . he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author's name, not mine,"[18] I have treated Climacus, and not Kierkegaard, as the author of *Fragments* and *Postscript*. This has not prevented me from attributing to Kierkegaard those writings to which he has not attached a pseudonym.[19]

A final word on pronominal usage. As neither Plato nor Kierkegaard employed gender-neutral pronouns, it would be potentially misleading and, to my ear, disruptive for me to switch between "he" and "she." With some misgivings, I have therefore chosen to employ the traditional pronoun "he" even in contexts where "he or she" is to be understood, as for example in speaking without qualification of the philosophical learner or the faithful follower.

[16] Alastair Hannay notes that "pseudonymity 'scrambles' the author-reader link in a way that allows the writings to enjoy a genuinely independent existence, letting them become considerations in the mind of the reader, to do there whatever they have it *in themselves* to do" (Hannay 2001, 175–6, emphasis in original). Niels Thulstrup observes that *Fragments* resembles both "a Platonic dialogue" and "a classical drama in five acts" with "two main actors, Socrates and Christ" (Kierkegaard 1962, lxvii–lxviii). Cf. the discussion of "Socratic midwifery" in the pseudonymous authorship at Taylor 1975, 51–62.

[17] *Postscript*, 625–6, emphases in original. Compare Plato's assertion that "there is no writing of Plato, nor will there be, but the things now said to be his are of a Socrates grown beautiful and young" (*Second Letter*, 314c).

[18] *Postscript*, 627.

[19] See ch. 1 and Epilogue. Nor have I refrained from occasionally noting connections between Climacus's thought and that of Johannes de Silentio – something Climacus himself does in *Postscript* (see, e.g., 261–2, 264–8).

1

Johannes Climacus, Socratic Philosopher

The relationship between philosophy and religious faith is the central theme of two of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous volumes. *Philosophical Fragments, or A Fragment of Philosophy*, by Johannes Climacus, edited by S. Kierkegaard, was published in 1844. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments: A Mimical-Pathetical-Dialectical Compilation, An Existential Contribution*, also by Johannes Climacus, edited by S. Kierkegaard, appeared two years later, in 1846. These are the only works by Climacus in the Kierkegaardean corpus.[1]

Kierkegaard first mentions the name of Climacus in connection with the speculative philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), whose followers, including theologians as well as philosophers, played a leading role in the Danish intellectual scene of the day.[2] In a journal entry dated January 20, 1839, he writes: "Hegel is a Johannes Climacus who does not storm the heavens as do the giants – by setting mountain upon mountain – but climbs up to them by means of his syllogisms."[3] Hegel ascends to the "heaven" of absolute knowledge stepwise, on the basis of a series of philosophical arguments. This occurs in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which

[1] The Hongs claim that *Johannes Climacus*, which Kierkegaard did not finish, is also by Climacus (*Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, xv–xvi). The book has no stated author, however, and so "inhabits, as it were, a limbo of anonymity" (Dunning 1994, 209).

[2] On the Hegelians J. L. Heiberg and H. L. Martensen and their influence in Denmark, see Stewart 2003, 50–69. Stewart argues against the assumption that the Danish academy was dominated by Hegelians. He notes there were a number of "anti-Hegelians" in Denmark, that only Heiberg was a "full-fledged" Hegelian, and that the Danish Hegelians "never formed an organized or coherent school" (69).

[3] JP 1575, 2.209–210 (II A 335).