

**Thinking the Unknown:  
Kierkegaard's Climacus and the Absolute Paradox of  
Understanding**

*A.D.C. Cake*

By a certain light, one can see the overarching purpose of Kierkegaard's authorship as an attempt to give expression to the paramount difficulty of Christian faith. A full account of his critical assessment of attempts to rationalize or ease the tensions of the God-relationship would span the considerable breadth and depth of his corpus. My modest intention in this paper is to address the question of the traditional proofs to Johannes Climacus, the most philosophical of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, who claims that he is in no way a Christian, even though we have good reason to suspect him in this regard. Though Climacus has a great deal to say on the topic—in both his *Philosophical Fragments* and its *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—I have chosen to focus on the former as it gives a pointed critique of demonstrations for existence in general with an eye toward Spinoza's perfection argument in particular. But I believe Climacus's critiques of demonstrations for God's existence are less interesting than his complex exposition of the absolute paradox of thought in relation to the struggle for religious faith and salvation, which fundamentally precludes such rationalizations. So I will present the critiques as a kind of ingress to the much more difficult problem of the understanding's having to will its own downfall in order to make way for the happy passion of faith.

I should say by way of a clarifying preface that the god as the unknown is always presupposed by Climacus insofar as he asserts that the unknown is "present fundamentally everywhere in thought, [and] also in the single individual."<sup>1</sup> I will clarify this in relation to other texts within the Kierkegaardian oeuvre. Even more pointedly, I would like to note that in the supplemental appendix, the Hongs include an excised portion of an important footnote in which Climacus says that indeed "there has never been an atheist, even though there certainly have been many who have been unwilling to let what they know

---

<sup>1</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 37.

(that the god exists) get control of their minds.”<sup>2</sup> In light of this intransigence, we can certainly understand the offhandedness with which Climacus dismisses the proofs, insofar as they are interpreted as intending to establish the existence of God as a necessary truth. The more probing and diplomatic assessments of the proofs as they have been presented by other thinkers should not be expected from Climacus; his interest and insight focuses elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

I will begin by giving a brief sketch of the *Philosophical Fragments* as a project, wherein Climacus puts forth an unsystematic “thought experiment,” which asks if there is an alternative to the Platonic-Socratic theory of learning as recollection, the ancient idea that human beings have the condition and possibility of an eternal consciousness by virtue of a kind of pre-existence. On the title page, Climacus raises the questions that are critical to the text: “Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness? . . . Can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?”<sup>4</sup> As I believe C. Stephen Evans has rightly interpreted, the sense of “eternal happiness” and “eternal consciousness” in Climacus’s discussion is best understood in contact with the Greek sense of *eudaimonia* as an enduring happiness and the Christian understanding of salvation. The issue for Climacus, in his “little pamphlet,” is whether a historical moment can be the necessary condition for attaining the truth in the eminent sense. The truth in this instance is not the attainment of this or that truth in the course of an investigation, but rather the Truth that fulfills human existence. Climacus not only assumes that eternal happiness comes by way of some kind of insight, but also that the whole of humanity is searching for this eminent and fulfilling truth, and these are among the most basic presuppositions of his at least apparently philosophical project.<sup>5</sup>

Interpreting the Platonic-Socratic paradigm, Climacus believes that the Delphic command to know thyself is paramount for achieving the highest human relation to the truth, since “every human being is himself the midpoint, and the whole world focuses only on him because his self-knowledge is God-knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> Within the Socratic view, the condition for truthfulness in the eminent sense is always present within human being; a conscientious and philosophical self-cultivation is required to actualize it. In contradistinction, Climacus’s philosophical project is to develop the hypothesis that human beings are not innately self-sufficient in their pursuit of eternal consciousness; perhaps a historical moment can become the point of departure for the ultimate fulfillment of human life. Although it quickly becomes apparent that Climacus’s “experimental hypothesis” is Christianity, a brief synopsis of the first two chapters is nonetheless in order.

The first and second chapters of the *Fragments* are, respectively,

---

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 191-2.

<sup>3</sup> I have drawn upon C. Stephen Evans’s lucid treatment of the *Fragments* in his book *Passionate Reason* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 11.

philosophical and poetic elaborations of how matters must stand if there is some historical point of departure for a human being's eternal happiness. In the first chapter, Climacus relates that "if the situation is to be different" from the Socratic, and the human being cannot will herself into relation with the eternal, then the "moment" with all its qualification of time, must have decisive significance. If this is the case, then the historical moment must overtake the individual as one who profoundly lacks the truth. She cannot possess the truth, "not even in the form of ignorance." Consequently, in this hypothetical departure from the maieutic paradigm, the single individual must be defined as "untruth."<sup>7</sup>

Yet Climacus asserts that "inasmuch as the learner exists, he is indeed created, and, accordingly, God must have given him the condition for understanding the truth," otherwise the learner would not be human. Nonetheless, if the moment is to have "decisive significance" the learner must have lost the condition somehow and "consequently be deprived of it." Climacus asserts that the learner could not have been deprived of this condition by the god, or by accident, as these ways constitute contradictions. Rather, the learner must have deprived herself of the condition. The difficulty emerges in that "the untruth, then, is not merely outside the truth but is polemical against the truth."<sup>8</sup> If it is the case that the one who attains to the truth is in fact the untruth herself, and has even situated herself against the truth, then the teacher at the outset must be a sign to the learner that she is imprisoned in untruth and indeed is responsible for imprisoning herself: "The teacher, then, is the god himself, who, acting as the occasion, prompts the learner to be reminded that he is untruth and is that through his own fault. But this state—to be untruth and to be that through one's own fault—what can we call it? Let us call it sin."<sup>9</sup>

This notion of sin remains relatively obscure in the *Philosophical Fragments*. In relation to how it comes about that a human being is untruth without knowing it, we would have to turn to Virgilius Haufniensis's *The Concept of Anxiety*—a discussion that would prove far too complex to include here. Nevertheless, the implications of Climacus's presentation speak for themselves, at least philosophically, insofar as anyone who aspires to the truth and has positioned herself against it is at fault by virtue of her own *telos*. Yet this movement toward the recognition of a state of sin (being the untruth through one's own fault) is still only a Socratic movement, for as Climacus says, "the teacher is only an occasion, whoever he may be, even if he is a god, because I can discover my own untruth only by myself."<sup>10</sup> Insofar as this is the case, however, it is not possible for us to unbind ourselves and thereby attain the truth, for then we would only have to realize our lack of freedom and unfetter ourselves and the historical moment would have no significance beyond the Socratic occasion.

Thus there is a second movement that Climacus hypothesizes, wherein

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 14.

the teacher not only gives the condition for understanding the truth, but also the truth itself. “What, then, should we call such a teacher who gives him the condition again and along with it the truth? Let us call him a savior, for he does indeed save the learner from unfreedom, saves him from himself.”<sup>11</sup>

With this movement there is a qualitative change in the learner, the learner is in fact transformed into a new person. This is the moment of “conversion” in Climacus’s experiment, and the imagery of a person’s changing course is illuminating. The savior, in a historical moment, bestows the condition as a teacher and then also the truth, and with this bestowal the learner turns her back on the untruth to which she has thus far dedicated her life and heads away from it towards the truth. There is the sorrow of leaving one’s previous life behind, but Climacus describes it as a grief one has for wasted time and opportunity, which he promptly christens repentance. What is sorrow but repentance? he asks, “which does indeed look back, but nevertheless in such a way that precisely thereby it quickens its pace toward what lies ahead!”<sup>12</sup>

Here we have another decisive break from the Socratic and Climacus shows us the salient difference between our relationship with the teacher (as an occasion) and the divine savior who allows us to begin a new life:

Just as the person who by Socratic midwifery gave birth to himself and in so doing forgot everything else in the world and in a more profound sense owed no human being anything, so also the one who is born again owes no human being anything, but owes that divine teacher everything. And just as the other one, because of himself, forgot the whole world, so he in turn, because of this teacher, must forget himself.<sup>13</sup>

In the seemingly innocuous final words of this summation, we have a looming foreshadow of the absolute paradox and the problem it will present to the human subject. As we will see, there is nothing in the conversion of the individual that prepares her for the near impossibility of this indescribable task.

Elaborating this hypothesis, which by this point is baldly the religious doctrine of Christianity, Climacus makes a “poetical venture” in the second chapter and considers the idea that the god, in order to give the truth to human beings, must become human. Out of love, the god descends so as to affect a unity with history and is incarnated as the lowest of the low. In history, the eternal god emerges as a servant, “for this is the boundlessness of love, that in earnestness and truth and not in jest it wills to be the equal of the beloved.”<sup>14</sup> This historical unification makes it possible for the god as servant to remind the individual of her untruthfulness, and in this to give her the condition of the possibility for understanding the truth. Thus, if we are not to revert to the Socratic position and the self-sufficiency of recollection, the historical descent of the god into time, as

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 32.

motivated by his unbounded love, is the condition of the possibility of attaining the truth and thus the historical point of departure for the individual's eternal happiness.

With this background, I would like to turn to Climacus's critique of traditional arguments for the existence of God before tackling the issue of the paradox. In the middle of the difficult third chapter, Climacus takes a slight departure in order to give a series of general and specific arguments against demonstration, many focused loosely on an ontological approach and another on the attempt to argue from design. His underlying objection is similar in both cases, arguing first of all that in relation to demonstration in general, endeavoring to demonstrate that the god exists necessarily requires one to presuppose the conclusion that the god does exist, otherwise the demonstration would never get off the ground. If "the god does not exist, then of course it is impossible to demonstrate it," as Climacus says. He goes so far as to claim that "it hardly occurs to the understanding to want to demonstrate [that the god exists]," so obvious is it—by his lights—that either the god exists, or does not, and demonstration in any case is utterly superfluous.<sup>15</sup> As Evans points out, this argument for the pointlessness of demonstrating God's existence is not very compelling; we can imagine someone who is simply undecided endeavoring to reason their way to a conviction on the matter.<sup>16</sup>

A more interesting argument turns on a point of interpretation. The expression "to demonstrate the existence of the god" is taken to indicate that a presupposed unknown, which exists, is proven to be the god through demonstration. Climacus criticizes this angle as well, saying that anyone who expresses her intentions this way is being unclear, because she does not actually demonstrate anything at all, but only develops the definition of a concept.<sup>17</sup> In this case we have a descriptive enterprise rather than a demonstration, and Climacus tells us that the supposed demonstration "becomes an expanded concluding development of what I conclude from having presupposed that the object of investigation exists."<sup>18</sup> This is not necessarily wrongheaded, but it is not an act of demonstration.

The underlying premise of this objection is that one cannot argue from essential conclusions to concrete existence, but only from concrete existence to essential conclusions. Essential conclusions can only further elaborate their own relations, and this elaboration, however much it may develop on its own terms, cannot elaborate the actual existence of its object. We are here reminded of Hume's distinction between the relation of ideas and matters of fact, the former can be necessary while the latter are only ever contingent. Climacus uses the example of a stone, and asserts that one does not demonstrate that it exists, but only that something which exists is a stone. Without essentially presupposing that something exists, or on the other hand, having concrete evidence for the

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 40.

existence of the object, there is no way to argue essentially for some thing's existence. What is developed through demonstration is merely the essential definition of a presupposed concept, not the concrete existence of an object. Thus Climacus makes the strong claim that "whether one wants to call existence an *accessorium* [addition], or the eternal *prius* [presupposition], it can never be demonstrated."<sup>19</sup>

Climacus holds this to be true no matter what existence one wants to demonstrate, and Evans argues for the general dubiousness of the overarching claim, citing the ordinary life practices that he believes might demonstrate existence through argument, such as the physicist's proof of "hitherto unknown subatomic particles."<sup>20</sup> Yet I believe that Climacus' critique remains intact. While arguments about elements of the physical universe, however minute, indicate evident, existing data that attests to the phenomenon's existence, existence could not be definitively proven by argument alone if the evidence suddenly vanished. The repeatability of experimentation required by the scientific method is a crucial determination of whether or not something exists within the shared field of the scientific community, and moreover "ordinary life" demonstrations—however persuasive—only speak definitively on behalf of directly observable data, "proof" in a more colloquial sense. This is still arguing from existence to essential conclusions, which Climacus does not dispute the possibility of.

In another line, Climacus's critique of the argument from design is closely related to his criticism of the ontological argument, insofar as one must already presuppose that the god exists in order to interpret what God's works actually are. As he says, "the works from which I want to demonstrate [the god's] existence do not immediately and directly exist, not at all." Our idea of what God's works are, "the wisdom in nature and the goodness or wisdom in Governance,"<sup>21</sup> is the result of an interpretation that already presupposes the existence of the divine, and only tacks on the forgone conclusion that God is the author of these works.

Climacus also includes a lengthy footnote charging Spinoza's perfection argument with an "unclear use of language." Spinoza, he believes, "by immersing himself in the concept of God, aims to bring being out of it by means of thought . . . not as an accidental quality but as a qualification of essence."<sup>22</sup> What results, Climacus argues, is a tautology, whereby the essence of the concept "God" is seen to contain within itself a necessary perfection, which conceptually "entails a greater and more necessary existence." Conversely, the more necessary a being is, the more perfect it must be. Climacus asserts that Spinoza has involved himself in a circular argument, which although it develops the definition of the concept of God as perfect and thus necessarily existing, the sense of

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>20</sup> Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 67.

<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 41 fn.

necessary existence is still only ideal. So when the argument is disambiguated to reflect the uncertainty of the god's concrete existence, it runs: "if god is possible, then he is *eo ipso* necessary" which Climacus believes is better put by Leibniz.<sup>23</sup>

Climacus tells us that "what is lacking here is a distinction between factual being and ideal being."<sup>24</sup> For Climacus the fundamental confusion of the factual contingency and ideal necessity in Spinoza's proof serves to circumvent the difficulty of bringing God's ideality into factual, that is to say, contingent being.<sup>25</sup> I would argue that he is here reiterating in more detail the general objection made with regard to demonstration in general. Where an ideal existence is posited, the understanding is concerned solely with logical consistency. But where an actual existence is posited, a contingent matter of fact, there must be some kind of evidence from which the idealization springs to which it and points, something that can be shared in the process of proof. If logical necessity were enough to produce such evidence, logically consistent sophistry would bring about the concrete experience of all sorts of strange things, such as the untraversable millimeter, as in Zeno's famous refutation of motion.

Given the incommensurability which Climacus posits between the ideal and the actual, the factual truth of the god's existence cannot issue from attempts to demonstrate it. We can understand this in terms of the difference between the teacher as occasion and the teacher as savior. If we can demonstrate the existence of God and all that it implies for our salvation by writing up a proof, then we have the condition for eternal happiness already within us. He asserts in contrast that the existence of the god can only be recognized once the proof is "let go." Utterly frustrated in its attempts to necessitate the god's existence through an essential line of thinking, the understanding as it were sets aside its pen and paper. When the understanding gives its project up in this way, Climacus posits the possibility of a "diminutive moment" which is the thinker's contribution to the emergence of the god.<sup>26</sup> When the understanding admits defeat in deference to the impossibility of demonstration there is an instantaneous leap, a moment which allows the actual existence of the unknown God to re-emerge, even as the indeterminacy of this existence still poses a problem for the understanding.

Yet this seems to be a paradox, that the experience of God's existence can only emerge from the demonstration by a leap, which seems in fact to be a leap precisely away from the activity of understanding and demonstration. At the beginning of the third chapter, entitled "The Absolute Paradox (A Metaphysical Caprice)," Climacus assures us that we "must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like a lover without passion: a mediocre fellow." The paradox of thought represents a certain ultimatum for the understanding, wherein thinking comes to a crisis and the individual is decisively defined by her reaction to that crisis. While a dispassionate thinker remains detached from such ultimatums, placidly going

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 42 fn.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 41 fn.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 42 fn.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 43.

about her daily activities without concerning herself with such deep conflicts, the passionate thinker is one who, without really understanding her own inclination, seeks out the paradox in her impassioned pursuit of what lies beyond the understanding's limitations.<sup>27</sup> Climacus explains: "The ultimate potentiation of every passion is always to will its own downfall, and so it is also the ultimate passion of the understanding to will the collision, although in one way or another the collision must become its downfall. This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think."<sup>28</sup>

As soon as the ultimate paradox shows itself, and the understanding comes to realize that there cannot be a necessary fulfillment of its aim to know that and how God exists, this collision throws the thinker into a state of insecurity.<sup>29</sup> After all, what is the thinker without thinking? The force of the ultimate paradox to destabilize the understanding in this way shows that what thought runs up against is something which absolutely cannot fall under the auspices of the understanding, baldly manifesting the inadequacy of thought itself. What is this absolute barrier against which the understanding struggles? Climacus calls it simply "the unknown," and he asserts that this passion of thought for the unknown is "fundamentally present everywhere"—literally "in the ground"—of thought and the single individual.<sup>30</sup> Insofar as the unknown is experienced as emerging from the ground of thought and from the single individual, there is a factual certainty that the unknown exists, whereas as soon as the understanding tries to grasp the unknown as the known, this existence recedes into obscurity. As Climacus puts it: "The paradoxical passion of the understanding is, then, continually colliding with this unknown, which certainly does exist but is also unknown and to that extent does not exist."<sup>31</sup>

In order to understand Climacus' contradictory claim, I have occasion to consult other works within Kierkegaard's signed and pseudonymous oeuvre. Although we are strictly forbidden by the historical author to collapse his views with those of the pseudonymous authors, we are permitted to suppose that insofar as Kierkegaard claims at least a civil responsibility for the views expressed,<sup>32</sup> we may find some resonance among them. With this note of precaution, I have found that consulting Anti-Climacus's book *The Sickness Unto Death* illuminates his counterpart's notion of the unknown as presented in the *Fragments*. In a chapter entitled "The Universality of This Sickness (Despair)," Anti-Climacus includes the unknown as an element in the despair that pervades all humankind. He writes: "There is not one single living human being who does not despair a little, who does not secretly harbor an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony, an anxiety about an unknown something or a something he does not even dare to try to know, an anxiety about some possibility in existence or an anxiety about himself, so that . . .

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 38-9.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 37. Emphasis mine.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 627.

he carries around a sickness of the spirit that signals its presence at rare intervals in and through an anxiety he cannot explain.”<sup>33</sup>

This passage communicates several formal aspects of the unknown which Climacus either does not elaborate or is content to pass over. First, we find corroboration for the notion that the unknown is a universal element of human experience. Second, this unknown produces an unrest which the individual either evades or is confounded by, producing a spirit sick with the anxiety of frustration. The third is the rarity with which this precipitated sickness manifests itself, which lends support to Climacus’s earlier assertion that the passionate mind—who in some sense willfully exacerbates his own despair—is exceptional in some respect. We might conclude that the unknown, however universally encountered, does not necessarily incite the ultimate passion of thought to will its own downfall. It is perhaps even common for human beings to suppress the anxiety the experience of the unknown gives rise to, even though they may never rid themselves of it. The implication is that the problem of the unknown and the unrest it leads to must be taken up decisively by a passionate mentality devoted paradoxically to overcoming the ultimate limitation of her own understanding.

The universality of the unknown does not in any way suggest that it is better known in itself. Despite the universal pervasiveness which Climacus and Anti-Climacus assert, there is still virtually nothing we can say about the unknown. Returning to the *Fragments*, we may be justified in our surprise when Climacus suddenly names it: “let us call this unknown the god.”<sup>34</sup> This transition seems bold and presumptuous of a certain understanding, and so I have again looked outside the text of the *Fragments* for an elucidation. Within *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, a signed work of Kierkegaard’s, a discourse entitled “On the Occasion of a Confession” ties the notion of the unknown to the concept of God as the highest good:

Among the many goods there is one that is the highest, that is not defined by its relation to the other goods, because it is the highest, and yet the person wishing does not have a definite idea of it, because it is the highest as the unknown—and this good is God. The other goods have names and designations, but where the wish draws its deepest breath, where this unknown seems to manifest itself, there is wonder, and wonder is immediacy’s sense of God and is the beginning of all deeper understanding.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast to the sickness represented by Anti-Climacus, it seems that this *Discourse* portrays the unknown as having the possibility of manifesting

---

<sup>33</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 22. Emphasis mine.

<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, ed. and trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 18.

itself positively within human experience, fulfilling a wish at its deepest level. The sense of wonder replaces anxiety as a positive response to the appearance of the unknown, and here we are given to understand that a passionate desire and wonder as a response are very closely linked, though it is still too much to interpret them as causally connected. Further, Kierkegaard attests to this wonder as “the beginning of all deeper understanding,” and this is very clearly an allusion to revelation. The implication is perhaps that there is a fundamental difference here, the despair that results from the sense of the unknown as a threat is in marked contrast to the experience of wonder as a fulfillment of some deepest desire.

So we can understand Climacus when in the interlude of the *Fragments*, he characterizes “the wonder” as the passionate sense for some thing’s coming into existence,<sup>36</sup> and he is here referring to the incarnation of the god as a servant, but as he says in the fifth chapter, wonder “is only for faith, inasmuch as the person who does not believe does not see the wonder.”<sup>37</sup> There is some link then between the experience of the unknown as the wondrous immediacy of the god’s existence and the passion of faith as desire, but I am here anticipating somewhat.

More basically, what these passages from *Sickness Unto Death* and *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* show us, in relation to Climacus’s text, is that the experience of the unknown gives the possibility of two diametrically opposed reactions as experienced by the human understanding: the first, a universal and perhaps inescapable despair; the second, a wondrous and immediate revelation of the god and the deeper understanding that it precipitates. We can bring this extreme ambivalence back into touch with Climacus’s third chapter by interpreting that these experiences of the unknown are brought on by the paradox as an ultimatum. Human understanding, thrown into contact with the unknown, must resist the paradox’s demand for its self-sacrifice, and yet this self-sacrifice promises to make possible the object of the understanding’s impossible passion: the thought of the unthinkable.

Yet the understanding and the unknown are at odds in such a way that where the understanding advances, the unknown recedes; as the understanding seeks to subject the unknown to its established categories, the unknown remains indefinable. It is only when the understanding ceases to pursue this limitation that the unknown as an experience comes rushing back. Thus it is that “the understanding has the god as close as possible and yet just as far away.”<sup>38</sup> The understanding’s paradoxical passion is thus the irresistible urge to subject the unknown to its own standard of truth, which is impossible, whether, as Climacus says “it risks a sortie through *via negationis* [the way of negation] or *via eminentiae* [the way of idealization].”<sup>39</sup> In fact, “the understanding does not go beyond this; yet in its paradoxicality the understanding cannot stop reaching it and being engaged with it, because wanting to express its relation to it by saying

---

<sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 80.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 46

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

that this unknown does not exist will not do, since just saying that involves a relation.”<sup>40</sup>

So we come to understand, paradoxically, that despite our developing the concept of the unknown, it is in fact “the absolutely different in which there is no distinguishing mark.” Although it seems that we are on the verge of discovering it with this definition, we must realize that in this we are only walking the understanding’s path of negation, and thus mistaking a known negative for the unknown. The understanding, Climacus tells us, “cannot absolutely transcend itself and therefore thinks as above itself only the sublimity that it thinks by itself.” Amidst these efforts, ideal and negative, the absolutely different becomes the relatively different and is thus “in dispersion” and the intellect may fantasize anything it likes.<sup>41</sup> With this, Climacus divulges a devastating consequence: “This [absolute] difference cannot be grasped securely. Every time this happens, it is basically an arbitrariness, and deepest in the fear of God there madly lurks the capricious arbitrariness that knows it itself has produced the god.”<sup>42</sup>

However irresistible the urge to think and speak the unknown, human thought cannot escape the capricious self-assertion of its own understanding. The understanding can only ever posit the unknown as a modification of itself, and thus the absolute difference of the unknown God represents an absolute frontier to the passion of understanding, which Climacus describes as both its torment and its incentive.<sup>43</sup> The absolute paradox incites the highest point of tension, which despite the will of the understanding cannot be domesticated by essential determinations. It is the paradox, therefore, that makes Climacus’s case for revelation. As he says: “If a human being is to come truly to know something about the unknown (the god), he must first come to know that it is different from him, absolutely different from him. The understanding cannot come to know this by itself (since, as we have seen, it is a contradiction); if it is going to come to know this, it must come to know this from the god.”<sup>44</sup>

We should remember from the synopses of the first and second chapters that in order for the historical moment to have decisive significance for the attainment of an individual’s salvation, the god as mortal servant must give the condition for understanding the truth. This condition now emerges as the possibility of realizing (in some way) the absolute difference, which must be revealed by the god. Insofar as the human being could not lack the condition for understanding the truth essentially, or be deprived of it accidentally, the god as servant must remind the individual that she is the untruth, and thus that the truth she seeks is absolutely different from her. The single individual’s consciousness of her own complicity in separating herself from and indeed polemicizing the truth is the consciousness of her sinfulness, and thus we find that the absolute

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Translation slightly altered from the Hongs’s: “. . . and at the very bottom of devoutness there madly lurks the capricious arbitrariness that knows it itself has produced the god.”

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 46.

difference between the human being as untruth and God as the truth is sin. “Thus the paradox becomes even more terrible, or the same paradox has the duplexity by which it manifests itself as the absolute—negatively, by bringing into prominence the absolute difference of sin and, positively, by wanting to annul this absolute difference in the absolute equality.”<sup>45</sup>

The hope of coming to understand this absolute difference, which the understanding by virtue of its own fault closes off for itself, is thus the condition of the possibility of coming to an eternal consciousness in relation to the truth and thus the possibility of an eternal happiness and salvation. The understanding tries to grasp the difference because it is the condition of the possibility of its fulfillment, but insofar as the understanding cannot grasp this difference once and for all, but forever wants to remake it in its own image, the paradox that the difference nevertheless must be grasped is offensive in the extreme from the understanding’s point of view, since it demands the ultimate self-sacrifice. What results is suffering, the despair of offense, because as Climacus says “at its deepest level, all offense is a suffering.”<sup>46</sup> The understanding cannot come any closer to the god and simultaneously with this realization of inadequacy and the understanding knows that it is to blame.

But at the point where this offense against the understanding incites the greatest passion, Climacus describes the hopeful possibility of the understanding coming to a mutual agreement with the paradox. If the understanding can come to a moment when it is not offended by the paradox’s demand for its self-sacrifice, the two can meet in a happy convergence of purpose. The understanding in its highest passion can join the paradox and willingly desire its own downfall. This momentary, passionate desire for the absolutely different to become absolute equals moves the individual—momentarily—into the possibility of an absolute relation with the truth. This wonder-full surrender is the happy passion of faith, and wrought as it is from the struggle of the understanding and the suffering of offense, it is still perhaps only a momentary passion. The human being remains irremediably the untruth, and even while we may attain to the happy passion of faith and submit our understanding to its own limitations, this itself is not salvation, but only the door we have to open and re-open every moment, in order to be ready for God’s grace.

A human being cannot do more than this, what I have called “being ready,” and here I am obliged to strike an autobiographical note before concluding.<sup>47</sup> In a draft of this paper that was previously presented at a meeting of philosophers and theologians at Mt. Allison University in the summer of 2006, I had presented an interpretation of the happy moment of faith as a “sustaining glimpse of the eternal.” It is worth noting the performative aspect of this mistake for the sake of bringing home the real difficulty that Climacus has presented us in

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>47</sup> I am grateful to Anthony Auman of Indiana State University for bringing my attention to this mistake and for indicating the particular passage in the *Postscript* which serves to elucidate it. I am deeply indebted to him for his feedback throughout the writing of this paper.

the absolute paradox. In an effort to give content to an aspect of Climacus's work that is in fact the very center of his discussion, I fell prey to that irresistible self-assertion of understanding's concepts with regard to what cannot be understood in these terms. In my enthusiasm, I did not take to heart the grim warning of Climacus that at bottom, all supposed grasp of what the paradox presents is essentially an arbitrariness, a lurking self-centered creativity that seeks to ameliorate the real pain of a spiritual sacrifice. A colleague reminded me in the interim of a passage in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in which Climacus explicitly mocks all those who claim in their vanity to have a "higher understanding" or to be "glimpsing" the eternal in the moment of faith. Climacus's admonitions seemed tailored to my wish to interpret the paradox as a gateway to salvation, and I was forced to admit that I had failed to heed his warnings in the *Postscript*: "But therefore it is not meritorious, as long as one is in time, to want to dabble in explanation, that is to fancy that one is in eternity. As long as one is in time, the qualitative dialectic charges every attempt of that sort with being illegitimate dabbling. The qualitative dialectic continually enjoins that one is not to flirt in *abstracto* with that which is the highest and then want to dabble in it, but one is to comprehend one's essential task in *concreto* and essentially express it."<sup>48</sup>

What follows in the text is a parody of a church pastor, who fancies that he has caught a glimpse of something higher, and is now with busy officiousness trying to make an explanation "with a profound hint" of what he has seen. The scene is comic, as members stand one after another and, "in a tense posture," squint and glimpse into the distance, trying to see what His Reverence has seen. The ladies take off their hats so as to better catch the prophetic words as they fall from the height of the pulpit. Climacus's contempt is scathing: "And most ludicrous of all is the notion that this glimpsing is supposed to be something higher than the passion of faith. If it is to be anything, it must rather be tolerated as a weakness in a weaker believer who does not have the strength passionately to accentuate incomprehensibility and therefore has to glimpse a little, because all glimpsing is impatience."<sup>49</sup>

Climacus goes on, and we are forced to admit that our striving toward an explanation of Christian faith is in fact impossible. We simply cannot talk about it. In this paper, I have attempted to give expression to this fact in the explication of Climacus's experimental departure from the Socratic relation to the truth, as well as through his discussion of attempts to prove God's existence essentially, and yet the discussion in its first formulation still fell short of the requirement that the truth cannot be revealed in terms of human thinking. Insofar as the beginning assertion of this paper has any truth at all, and Kierkegaard's oeuvre can be seen as a prolific attempt to convince us of this paramount difficulty of Christian faith, we are brought to wonder about the paradoxical nature of

---

<sup>48</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 562-3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

Kierkegaard's own task, and whether there is here a serious self-referential problem. If there is, it is the self-referential problem of a Christian understanding, a problem which the task of Christian faith holds at its very center, and moreover in the "qualitative dialectic" of human consciousness itself.

In his work entitled *Kierkegaard and Consciousness*, Adi Shmuëli takes on this paradox of thought in the wider sense with regard to existence in general. His assessment serves to remind us of the problem asserted by Climacus in relation to ontological proofs. The inherent difficulty of understanding the difference between the essential and the existent is not to be overlooked in any circumstance, and not only in religious striving. The paradox of thought is always with us, whether we look toward God or toward ourselves. "Kierkegaard's ideas on existence embody a philosophical contradiction of an internal nature. If consciousness does not encompass existence, if one cannot think about transcendent being, by the same token one cannot know that this being exists; and consequently, neither would one know how to speak of it."<sup>50</sup>

If we are to accept this prodigious assertion, then the point is not only that the moment of faith is outside any and all philosophical discussions but that existence in general is something which cannot be spoken about. What can be spoken about will only ever be revealed in essential determinations, and it is here that philosophy comes to a point where it must realize its own inadequacy as a discipline of thought in relation to existence. I believe Shmuëli is right when he asserts that this is not something which Kierkegaard realizes and yet ignores, as one might be inclined to think given the thousands of pages comprising his literature. Rather, this sense of contradiction is "part of the design of that literature, calculated to force a new kind of consciousness upon the reader."<sup>51</sup> With this interpretation, we are able to recognize the value of reading Kierkegaard's works as performative texts, insofar as we are invited to contemplate ourselves through them, to make mistakes and to change our minds about them. So perhaps we need not, as thinkers, admit defeat in the face of this paramount difficulty, but rather we must come to recognize how our projects of explanation with regard to the existence of God are always poised on the razor's edge of failure, and that whatever we do assert has its highest possibility as a maieutic occasion for another's passionate striving.

---

<sup>50</sup> Adi Shmuëli, *Kierkegaard and Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.