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Incognito

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Incognito (*Incognito*—adverb, noun)

The Danish word (Italian *incognito*, from the Latin *incognitus*, “unknown”) means to appear in disguise, or to act under an unfamiliar, assumed name (or title) in order to avoid identification.¹ As a concept, incognito occurs in several of Kierkegaard’s works, but only becomes a subject of reflection in two: the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* by Johannes Climacus and *Practice in Christianity* by Anti-Climacus. Both pseudonyms develop the concept from their own perspective and must be understood on their own terms.² Johannes Climacus treats incognito as a category of existence, defining it as a comic contradiction that creates a disguise in order to hide and protect the inwardness of the existing individual. However, Anti-Climacus treats incognito as a category of communication. He defines it as “a sign of contradiction” that creates a disguise in order to activate and disclose the inwardness of a listener or reader.

I. Johannes Climacus and the Incognito as a Category of Existence

Johannes Climacus characterizes himself as a humorist who sees it as his task to take away knowledge by presenting it in an unfamiliar form.³ Climacus’ reflection on the incognito is part of this overall strategy. (a) According to him the incognito is made possible by the comic contradiction between the outer (which is only relative) and the inner (which relates to the absolute). This comic contradiction can manifest itself as irony or as humor, (b) Irony provides an incognito for the ethicist. (c) Humor provides an incognito for the religious person.

(a) *The Comic Contradiction Underlying the Incognito*. In a long footnote Climacus criticizes Aristotle’s definition of the comic as “a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others.”⁴ In his view this definition lacks reflection because the comic is conceived as something that is present in the situation itself, whereas it should be defined as a relation, namely, “the misrelation of contradiction,

1. *Ordbog over det danske Sprog*, vols. 1-28, published by the Society for Danish Language and Literature, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1918-56, vol. 9, columns 584-5.
2. Cf. *SKS* 22, 130, NB11:209 / *JP* 6, 6433.
3. *SKS* 7, 410 / *CUP1*, 451; *SKS* 7, 249 / *CUP1*, 276.
4. *SKS* 7, 466 / *CUP1*, 514.

but painless.”⁵ Climacus gives various “random examples” to illustrate his point. Imagine a man who is known to walk around in eccentric clothes, but suddenly turns up in formal attire. According to Climacus, this will usually be perceived as comic.⁶ However, in this case the comic is not present in the situation itself. Those who have never seen the man in question before will not detect anything comic in his way of dressing. Such examples, Climacus argues, show that the comic is never present in the situation as such, but is always the result of a misrelation, in this case, the misrelation between the way the man is usually dressed and the way he is dressed now. Climacus’ two forms of the incognito are made possible by this comic misrelation.

For Climacus the misrelation of contradiction can only be perceived as comic if it is painless for the observer (although it is not necessarily painless for the comic figure). The observer perceives the contradiction, but it holds no power over him; he knows that the contradiction is already set right in a higher existence-sphere (even though the comic figure is not aware of this).⁷ Climacus defines an existence-sphere as higher if it enables the observer to perceive the contradiction and to show him a way out of it. This way out can be realized by joining the qualitative opposites together, without canceling the contrast between them. Climacus defines the religious perspective as higher than the ethical because it shows a way out of the comic contradictions that are encountered within the framework of the ethical. The ethical, in turn, shows the way out of the contradictions of aesthetic immediacy and for that reason supersedes it. The aesthetic at best reveals the contradictions the aesthete is living in, but offers no way out. From this Climacus concludes that a misrelation can only be interpreted as comic if the existence-sphere of the observer is qualitatively higher than the existence-sphere of the comic figure he is observing; in all other cases it becomes a tragic contradiction that signifies despair.⁸ This also holds for Climacus’ two forms of the incognito.

(b) *Irony as an Incognito*. In his interpretation of the incognito Climacus defines irony as an existence-qualification, rather than as a mode of speech.⁹ The ironist discovers that all human actions are relative and that it is an illusion to measure the meaning of life in outward qualifications. The ironist can do this because he freed himself from the world of appearances in its entirety. When a nobleman thinks he is superior to the peasant because the day-to-day worries of the peasant are relative to him, he is not an ironist in Climacus’ sense. The superiority of the nobleman remains illusory as long as he does not comprehend that all human endeavors, including his own, are just as relative as the peasant’s.¹⁰ To an ironist both the peasant and the nobleman are entangled in a comic contradiction. The ironist discovers this contradiction and knows a way out of it. He knows this because he has made the “movement of infinity” that gives him access to a higher ideal: the infinite requirement

5. SKS 7, 466 / CUP1, 514.

6. SKS 7, 466 / CUP1, 516.

7. SKS 7, 472 / CUP1, 520.

8. SKS 7, 467 / CUP1, 516.

9. SKS 7, 456 / CUP1, 503-4.

10. SKS 7, 455 / CUP1, 502.

of the ethical. According to Climacus, however, the ironist only uses this absolute ideal to free himself from the trivialities that surround him.¹¹ In this way the ironist differs from the ethicist. The ironist applies the absolute requirement to existence in general to judge all human activities as relative; whereas the ethicist applies it to his own inner existence and acts upon it. Both the ironist and the ethicist realize that they have an absolute responsibility for their own life, but only the ethicist actualizes this responsibility by ethically committing himself to the choices he makes.

For the ethicist, Climacus argues, irony becomes an incognito that protects him against the trivialities of immediacy that threaten to undermine his ethical commitment.¹² Climacus does not give a clear example of this incognito, but it can be illustrated by contrasting it with hypocrisy, an incognito that in Climacus' eyes is illegitimate.¹³ The hypocrite assumes the appearance of someone who strives for the good and the righteous, although in reality he does not. The ethicist, on the other hand, assumes the appearance of someone who does not care about goodness and righteousness, although in truth it is all he cares for. The hypocrite inflates himself with his incognito and appears to be higher than he is, whereas the ethicist deflates himself with his incognito and appears to be lower than he is. According to Climacus, both structures—hypocrisy and irony—express the contradiction that the outer is not the inner, but they do this in completely opposite ways. In hypocrisy the outer prevails over the inner. The hypocrite hides his real nature in order to grasp the ethical as an outward ideal (and not as a personal obligation). For him this ideal lies outside his power because it is defined by the praise of others rather than by his relation to himself. For that reason his expression of the contradiction between inner and outer becomes a sign of despair (that is, it is a tragic contradiction, not a comic one). For Climacus irony as incognito is different; there the inner is joined with the outer, without canceling the contrast between them. The irony hides the real nature of the ethicist; however, the aim of this deception is not to trick the world into believing that he has realized the ideal. On the contrary, he knows that he cannot realize the ideal in external life and thus refrains from trying. He protects his inwardness by keeping his inner ethical passion apart from outer trivialities.¹⁴ For that reason the contradiction between inner and outer holds no power over him (that is, it is a comic contradiction, not a tragic one).

(c) *Humor as an Incognito*. According to Climacus, the humorist no longer believes in the ethical attempt to join the relative and the absolute together by inwardly placing his outward life under the infinite requirement of the ethical. The humorist discovers that he is unable to transform his own life and cannot bear the absolute responsibility for it. He does not despair over this insight but resigns himself to it and accepts it as inevitable. Climacus gives a simple example that can clarify the role of humor in this resignation. He pictures a man complaining to a girl about a mutual friend speaking ill of him in his absence. Now suppose, Climacus argues, that the girl replies the following; "Then I must count myself lucky, because he has

11. SKS 7, 454-5 / CUP1, 502-3.

12. SKS 7, 457 / CUP1, 504.

13. Cf. SKS 7, 294 / CUP1, 323.

14. SKS 7, 455-6 / CUP1, 503-4.

completely forgotten me.”¹⁵ According to Climacus, there is a hint of humor in this remark. The fact that the girl considers herself to be completely forgotten is sad and signifies suffering. However, the way she expresses this suffering indicates that she is resigned to it; it has no power over her any more. The same holds for the humorist, although for him suffering is not related to a particular misfortune, but becomes an inevitable aspect of life.¹⁶

This religious perspective is discovered by the humorist but only realized by the religious person. The humorist levels everything “on the basis of the abstract relationship with God, inasmuch as he does not enter into the relationship with God. It is precisely there that he parries with a jest.”¹⁷ Humor first suspends the relativity of reality and then opens up the possibility to regain it. The humorist, however, is not yet able to realize this possibility. This is remedied by the religious person who enters into a concrete relationship with God through faith. The story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son is an excellent illustration of this kind of faith. Abraham not only had to accept his son Isaac’s death (the resignation of humor), but he also had to receive him back without despairing over it (faith).¹⁸ Like Abraham, the religious person continually has to make a double movement in which he simultaneously relates himself absolutely to the absolute and relatively to the world around him.¹⁹ He can only make this double movement by virtue of an incognito. This incognito ensures that the religious person looks outwardly as all others, even though he inwardly differs radically from them.²⁰ If the religious person drops the incognito, this shows that he tries to realize his faith in relation to the relative world around him (for example, by denying himself joy and amusement). In that case he fails to make the double movement and re-enters the sphere of aesthetics.

Climacus gives two historical examples to illustrate this aesthetic understanding of religion in which the incognito is dropped: the monastic movement and speculative philosophy. The monastic movement attempted to express the inwardness of faith (which is directed towards the absolute) through a purification of outward existence (which is relative). This constituted a relative relation to the absolute.²¹ Speculative philosophy did the exact opposite. It presented the absolute as the outcome of a cumulative process that was itself relative. This constituted an absolute relation to relative ends.²² In both cases the qualitative distinction between the relative and the absolute was canceled, demonstrating that the religious was only understood aesthetically. For Climacus the incognito is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for a Christian. It is necessary for joining the absolute and the relative together, without blending the one into the other. It is not sufficient because the incognito of

15. *SKS* 7, 501 / *CUPI*, 552-3.

16. *SKS* 7, 407-10 / *CUPI*, 447-51.

17. *SKS* 7, 407 / *CUPI*, 448.

18. Cf. *SKS* 4, 131 / *FT*, 36; *SKS* 4, 143 / *FT*, 49.

19. *SKS* 7, 370 / *CUPI*, 407; *SKS* 7, 458 / *CUPI*, 505-6.

20. *SKS* 7, 459-60 / *CUPI*, 506-7.

21. Cf. *SKS* 7, 421 / *CUPI*, 409.

22. Cf. *SKS* 7, 421 / *CUPI*, 408.

the religious does not prevent the absolute relation to God from becoming a relation to an idol.²³

II. *Anti-Climacus and the Incognito as a Category of Communication*

Anti-Climacus claims merely to follow the thought-categories by creating an imaginary construction.²⁴ (a) He interprets the incognito as a strategy of indirect communication that is structured as “a sign of contradiction.” In his view this incognito can take on two qualitatively different forms; (b) the maieutic incognito and (c) the incognito that demands faith.

(a) *The Sign of Contradiction.* For Anti-Climacus the incognito is not just a contradiction but a “sign of contradiction.” Something becomes a sign when it directs attention to itself and is regarded as something different from what it immediately is.²⁵ Such signs make communication possible. Anti-Climacus highlights the involvement of the interpreter in this process. A beacon at sea is a sign for the captain, but not for the passenger who only sees a floating cask. The aim of the beacon is to transfer knowledge about the navigable depth. According to Anti-Climacus, the incognito is a special kind of sign that does not aim to transfer knowledge, but to confront the recipient with a contradiction, forcing him to make a choice that will disclose his own views on the matter.²⁶ This choice either concerns the recipient himself (the maieutic incognito) or the communicator (the incognito that demands faith).

(b) *The Maieutic Incognito.* For Anti-Climacus the aim of the maieutic incognito is to turn the listener away from the communicator, “to turn him inward in order to make him free.”²⁷ The communicator uses an incognito to make himself into an uninvolved bystander, “an absentee, an objective something, a nonperson.”²⁸ This unrecognizable nobody merely presents an imaginary construction that is “a unity of jest and earnestness.”²⁹ It is jest because the communicator is not personally involved in what he is telling; he presents it as a possibility. It is earnestness because the story aims at making the recipient self-active. This can be illustrated with the biblical parable of the rich man that the prophet Nathan uses to confront King David with his crimes. Nathan presents a possible case of injustice to David (jest).³⁰ David recognizes the injustice and condemns it. However, the aim of Nathan’s story is not to ponder fictional cases but to make David self-active (earnestness). In condemning the rich man, David condemns himself. The story transfers no new knowledge, but it only activates David’s moral framework. Kierkegaard himself employed this

23. Cf. *SKS* 7, 483-4 / *CUPI*, 531-2.

24. Cf. *SKS* 12, 135-6 / *PC*, 131; *SKS* 12, 146 / *PC*, 142.

25. *SKS* 12, 130 / *PC*, 124.

26. *SKS* 12, 131-2 / *PC*, 126-7.

27. *SKS* 12, 146 / *PC*, 142.

28. *SKS* 12, 138 / *PC*, 133.

29. *SKS* 12, 130 / *PC*, 125.

30. 2 Samuel 12:1-10.

maieutic incognito in most, if not all of his works and even used it in his personal life.³¹

(c) *The Incognito that Demands Faith*. The incognito that demands faith turns the communicator himself into a sign of contradiction. The incognito is used to create a contradiction between the communicator's true identity and his immediate appearance. Anti-Climacus illustrates this type of incognito with the story of a man who decides to test whether his beloved really believes him.³² To this end, he adopts the incognito of a libertine and a deceiver, the opposite of what he really is. Does she still believe him even though his behavior seems to contradict his declaration of love? Or does she fail to recognize his incognito and lose her faith in him? Her judgment will disclose if she truly believed him or not. The Christian conception of faith, Anti-Climacus argues, has a similar structure, although it concerns the relation not between two human beings (who are similar) but between God and the existing individual (who differ absolutely).

Anti-Climacus tries to understand the meaning of the historical event in which the God appears incognito in the form of a human being: the God-man. The incognito of God creates an indirect relationship between God and the human being. This indirect relationship is necessary, Anti-Climacus argues, because otherwise God would become an idol; a recognizable object that can be identified and known with certainty.³³ This idol does not demand faith and therefore differs radically from the Christian conception of the God-man (if it is taken seriously). The God-man is absolutely unrecognizable and cannot be directly known or even identified.³⁴ This does not mean that the God-man goes around unnoticed. He draws attention to himself by doing miracles and saying things like, "I am God; the father and I are one."³⁵ Statements like these do not give any information about the God-man; they only highlight the contradiction between his claim of being God and his appearance as a lowly human being. This contradiction turns the God-man into an object of faith. It confronts the recipient with a choice that will disclose whether he believes in him—notwithstanding his incognito—or not.³⁶

See also Aesthetic/Aesthetics; Authorship; Comic/Comedy; Ethics; Humor; Hypocrisy; Irony; Religious/Religiousness.

31. Cf. *SKS* 21, 351-2, NB10:185 / *JP* 6, 6388.

32. *SKS* 12, 145-6 / *PC*, 141.

33. Cf. *SKS* 12, 147 / *PC*, 143.

34. *SKS* 12, 133 / *PC*, 127-8.

35. *SKS* 12, 139 / *PC*, 134.

36. *Ibid.*