

KIERKEGAARD'S  
*Concluding Unscientific  
Postscript*

A Critical Guide

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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Kierkegaard's Socratic pseudonym*

## A profile of Johannes Climacus

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The subject of this report is a fictional character and so-called pseudonymous author, one Johannes Climacus, a self-described “humorist” who is “thirty years old” and was “born in Copenhagen” (CUP 520).<sup>1</sup> Only known relative, father, deceased (CUP 135). Possible physical features: “medium in height, with black hair and brown eyes.”<sup>2</sup> Pastimes: “loafing and thinking”; “subjective author” of two books, *Philosophical Crumbs* (or *Fragments*) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, both edited by S. Kierkegaard (CUP 156, 158).<sup>3</sup> Philosophically notable characteristics: has an “ardent enthusiasm” for Socrates (KW 7: 111); seems to endorse the view he attributes to Socrates that being a philosophical “midwife . . . is the highest relationship a human being can have with another” person;<sup>4</sup> has claimed with respect to his own development and philosophical undertakings that the “only one who consoles [him] is Socrates”;<sup>5</sup> may himself be a Socratic figure, perhaps representing Kierkegaard’s “idealization of the Socratic within the context of nineteenth-century Danish Christendom.”<sup>6</sup>

Obtaining an understanding of Climacus has proved difficult; he remains under surveillance. The following (provisional) report includes an overview of Climacus’ two works and the two therapeutic, experimental stances he

The author of this “report” would like to thank David Berger, Bridget Clarke, Rick Furtak, and K. Brian Söderquist for their comments on an earlier draft.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. CUP 16. Kierkegaard, by comparison, was 32 when the *Postscript* was published in 1846. If Climacus was 30, this means that he was 28 when *Philosophical Crumbs* was published in 1844. On the significance of Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms, see especially CUP 527–531.

<sup>2</sup> See PAP VI B 40:26. This is a draft of the *Postscript*, cited in the Hongs’ “Supplement,” KW 12<sup>2</sup>: 49.

<sup>3</sup> Hannay translates the title of Climacus’ first book, *Philosophiske Smuler*, as *Philosophical Crumbs*, as does Marilyn Piety in *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*.

<sup>4</sup> KW 7: 10; SKS 4: 219 (trans. modified).

<sup>5</sup> CUP 135; SKS 7: 150 (trans. modified). See also KW 7: 55, 65–66, 101–102. Socrates compares his practice of philosophy to midwifery in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, 148e–151d.

<sup>6</sup> Muench, “The Socratic Method of Kierkegaard’s Pseudonym Johannes Climacus” [henceforth “Climacus’ Socratic Method”], 139. See also Muench, “Understanding Kierkegaard’s Johannes Climacus in the *Postscript*” [henceforth “Understanding Climacus”].

adopts in relation to his readers (together with a few orienting observations about Climacus); a brief examination of Kierkegaard's unfinished manuscript *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*; and a more detailed account of Climacus' diagnosis of what he thinks has gone wrong in Christendom and how this relates to his decision to become an author.

#### CLIMACUS AND HIS TWO BOOKS

Climacus' first book, *Philosophical Crumbs*, is a rather slender volume that hypothetically investigates the difference between a Socratic conception (broadly construed) of the individual's relation to the truth and a Christian conception (though the latter is not identified as "Christian" until the very end of the book).<sup>7</sup> Throughout the body of *Crumbs*, Climacus experimentally adopts the persona of someone who is "ignorant" of Christianity, pretending in the process that the Christian conception he sketches is "a whimsical idea of [his] own" (KW 7: 9, 109).<sup>8</sup> In the preface Climacus calls this work a "pamphlet" and denies that it makes "any claim to being a part of the scientific-scholarly [*videnskabelige*] endeavor" that modern philosophers have undertaken, notably Hegel and his followers (KW 7: 5).

Climacus' second book, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, is a kind of sequel to *Philosophical Crumbs* in the form of a postscript (though at over six times the length of the original work it is not a typical postscript). Climacus also calls this work a "pamphlet" and, together with his use in the title of *uvidenskabelig* (unscientific, unscholarly), again seems to be trying to designate his books as somehow different in kind from the systematic philosophical treatises that are the norm of his day.<sup>9</sup> The *Postscript* is a multifaceted work that has a number of different aims. Climacus claims that the short first part of the work (CUP 19–50) constitutes "the promised

<sup>7</sup> Cf. CUP 304–305. The non-Christian conception should only be "broadly construed" as Socratic since, while it is tied to Socrates in *Crumbs*, it is also characterized by appeal to what is usually taken to be a Platonic notion, namely the theory (or myth) of recollection that Socrates invokes in the *Meno* (81a–e). For Climacus' purposes in *Crumbs*, the chief idea is that according to the Socratic conception an individual (perhaps with the help of a philosophical midwife) can discover the truth within herself or himself through the use of her or his own faculties, whereas on the Christian conception an individual has lost this capacity by having become a sinner. Climacus distinguishes more finely between Socrates and Plato with respect to recollection in the *Postscript*. See especially CUP 173–175.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. CUP 237. The experimental stance that Climacus adopts in *Crumbs* is discussed in "Climacus' Socratic Method"; see also "Understanding Climacus," 436–438.

<sup>9</sup> CUP 6; SKS 7: 12 (trans. modified). Hannay translates "Piece" (in modern Danish "pjece") as "piece"; following the Hongs, "pamphlet" has been used in this report.

sequel" to *Crumbs*, while the longer second part (CUP 51–526) is "a renewed attempt on the same lines" as his first book; he also claims, however, that this second part of the book represents "a new approach to the problem of the *Crumbs*" (CUP 18, emphasis added; cf. CUP 11, 12). While in *Crumbs* Climacus develops the Christian outlook without mentioning Christianity by name (except at the end of the book), in the *Postscript* he explicitly raises Christianity as a topic at the start and experimentally presents himself as someone who is seeking to answer the question, appropriately cast in the first person, "How can I, Johannes Climacus, become a Christian?"<sup>10</sup> In raising this question as he does, in a context in which "all the others [imagine that they] have faith *already* as something given, as a trifle they do not even think very highly of," Climacus acknowledges that his activity may appear to be a kind of "madness" (CUP 18, emphasis added; cf. CUP 307). At the same time, he maintains that by posing things in the first person, though the "problem concerns only [him by himself]," if this is "properly posed, it will concern each in the same way" (CUP 18).<sup>11</sup> The experimental, Socratic stance that Climacus adopts in the *Postscript* is the very stance that Kierkegaard draws attention to in *The Point of View* and *On My Work as an Author* (and later claims, in "My Task," that he himself has adopted in relation to his contemporaries).<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard maintains that if one is to engage those who are under the illusion that they already are Christians (even as their lives are governed by "aesthetic or, at most, aesthetic-ethical categories"), then "it must be done indirectly, not by someone who loudly declares himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by someone who, better informed, even declares himself not to be a Christian" (KW 22: 43).<sup>13</sup> He singles out Climacus as his principal example of someone who adopts this stance: "The one who introduced the issue [of becoming a Christian] did not *directly* define himself as being Christian and the others as not being that; no, just the *reverse* – he denies being [a Christian] and concedes it to the others. This Johannes Climacus does" (KW 22: 8n).

While *Philosophical Crumbs* principally consists of Climacus' therapeutic engagement of a particular kind of reader, the *Postscript* has much greater

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., CUP 16–17, 520. The experimental stance that Climacus adopts in the *Postscript* is discussed in "Understanding Climacus," 438–439. On the need to help reacquaint readers with hearing the first-personal "I" see, e.g., CUP 262. See also JP 1: 656; PAP VIII<sup>2</sup> B 88 and JP 6: 6440; SKS 22, NBII:223.

<sup>11</sup> The importance of employing the first-personal "I" will not be directly addressed in this report.

<sup>12</sup> *The Point of View*, KW 22; "My Task," in *The Moment and Late Writings*, KW 23: 340–347. "My Task" is examined in detail in Muench, "Kierkegaard's Socratic Point of View"; an abridged version, with a different first section, appears in *A Companion to Socrates*, ed. Ahbel-Rappe and Kamtekar, 389–405.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. JP 1: 388; SKS 22: 289, NB13:26 and JP 6: 6237; SKS 21: 55, NB6:73.

ambitions. In this work, in addition to employing a second experimental means of therapeutically engaging his readers, Climacus presents his diagnosis of what he thinks has gone wrong in Christendom. In the process, he provides his readers with an account of how he became an author (thereby anticipating the several accounts that Kierkegaard will later write about himself and his larger authorship); critically responds to a review of his first book and provides his own conception of *Crumbs* and how he thinks it ought to be read;<sup>14</sup> and develops both an account of indirect communication (which helps to explain how he conceives of his different means of engaging his readers) and a conception of philosophy that he ties to the ancient Greeks and to Socrates in particular.<sup>15</sup> While his own philosophical endeavors seem opposed to the modern, Hegelian style of doing philosophy,<sup>16</sup> Climacus does seem to want to tie what he is doing to this ancient Greek approach to philosophy, where, on his view, the chief result obtained by a thinker is not a written work but a particular kind of life: "in Greece a thinker was not someone leading a self-effacing existence who produced works of art, but was himself an existing work of art" (CUP 254).

Climacus has many facets, exhibiting both a capacity for rigorous thinking and a propensity to use irony and humor. He characterizes himself as a "dialectician" who shares with earlier thinkers from antiquity a "passion for distinctions" (KW 7: 108, 91; see also CUP 411–412). This means that in general he should be expected to be philosophically rigorous when he discusses and defines concepts. Writing in response to the publication of Martensen's *Dogmatics*, Kierkegaard seems to endorse this picture of Climacus: "My most popular book is more stringent in definition of concepts, and my pseudonym Johannes Climacus is seven times as stringent in definition of concepts" (JP 6: 6449).<sup>17</sup> At the same time, despite the fact

<sup>14</sup> Frederik Beck, review of *Philosophical Crumbs, Neues Repertorium für die theologische Literatur und kirchliche Statistik* 2 (1845): 44–48; reprinted in *Kierkegaardiana* 8 (1971): 212–216; cf. SKS 17: 245. Climacus' critique of Beck's review appears in a long footnote in the *Postscript* (CUP 230–232). This footnote is discussed in "Climacus' Socratic Method," 144–147; see also Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," 204–207.

<sup>15</sup> Climacus characterizes the alternative, Socratic conception of philosophy as a "more simple-minded philosophy, propounded by someone existing for the existing" and which "will especially bring the ethical to light" (CUP 103).

<sup>16</sup> While the Hegelian manner of doing philosophy, with its attention to world history, may shed light on the development of human culture, Climacus maintains that it does not provide individuals with resources for trying to understand themselves in the midst of their unfolding, unfinished lives: "That is why a Hegelian cannot possibly understand himself with the aid of his philosophy; he can understand only what is past and finished. But someone still living is surely not dead" (CUP 257; SKS 7: 280, trans. modified).

<sup>17</sup> Also in SKS 22: 154, NB12:16. Cf. *The Book on Adler*, KW 24: 43: "Climacus' exposition is rigorous, as the matter entails" (emphasis added).

that he is "not without a certain dialectical dexterity," Climacus is bound to strike first-time readers as quite unlike most philosophical authors they have encountered (CUP 524). Both in his personal presentation and in his manner of writing, Climacus remains an elusive yet stylistically intriguing figure. He is someone who frequently employs irony and humor in his writings while also insisting that this is not incompatible with the deepest seriousness. In fact, he seems committed to upholding an ideal that he attributes to the German thinker Gotthold Lessing, that of combining "jest and earnest[ness]" in one's writings and written self-presentations, so that it is "impossible for a third party to tell which is which – unless the third party [knows] it by himself" (CUP 58; cf. KW 7: 72). According to one of Kierkegaard's other pseudonyms, Anti-Climacus, this is to employ a type of indirect communication:

It is indirect communication to place jest and earnestness together in such a way that the composite is a dialectical knot – and then to be a nobody oneself. If anyone wants to have anything to do with this kind of communication, he will have to untie the knot himself.<sup>18</sup>

Climacus connects the use of irony specifically to ethical matters: "If someone says . . . that the only means I possess are a little irony, a little pathos, a little dialectic, my reply would be: What else should someone wanting to present the ethical have?"<sup>19</sup> Humor, in turn, has a special connotation in the *Postscript* (and Kierkegaard's writings more generally) and is held to be concerned with religious matters (see, e.g., CUP 420–424, 461–464).<sup>20</sup> While Climacus frequently appeals to Socrates as his chief example of someone who employs irony to help illuminate the ethical, he calls himself a humorist and so invites his readers to treat him as someone who serves an analogous role with respect to the religious.

Because Climacus assigns such philosophical importance to irony and humor and because his writings frequently exhibit these literary devices (and the existential stances he associates with them), readers who seek to

<sup>18</sup> *Practice in Christianity*, KW 20: 133. Anti-Climacus is Kierkegaard's Christian pseudonym. On the prefix "Anti" in his name, which the Hongs claim signifies not "against" but "before" (indicating "a relation of [higher] rank"), and his relationship to Climacus and the other pseudonyms, see, e.g., KW 20: xii–xiii and KW 22: 6. Kierkegaard claims that existentially speaking he would place himself "higher than Johannes Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus," but also seems to identify with both of them, as though they each represented in ideal form a part of his own personal nature: "There is something inexplicably felicitous in the antithesis: Climacus–Anti-Climacus, I recognize so much of myself and my nature in it that if someone else had invented it I would believe that he had secretly observed my inner being" (JP 6: 6433; SKS 22: 130, NB11:209 and JP 6:6532; SKS 22:361, NB14:30).

<sup>19</sup> CUP 128; SKS 7: 142–143 (trans. modified).

<sup>20</sup> See also Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*; Söderquist, "Irony and Humor in Kierkegaard's Early Journals."

understand him and his two books will thus be faced with interpretive demands that are not normally encountered when reading more standard philosophical prose (akin, perhaps, to some of the difficulties involved with reading one of Plato's dialogues). In a draft of a lecture on indirect communication that was never delivered, Kierkegaard seems to acknowledge that readers have found it difficult to appreciate the manner in which his pseudonymous works combine earnestness and jest:

The really right kind of earnestness, especially as regards ethical communication, would certainly appear to most people to be jesting . . . In pseudonymous books published by me the earnestness is more vigorous [than can be expressed in this lecture], particularly in those passages in which the presentation will appear to most people as nothing but jest. This, as far as I know, has not previously been understood at all. (JP I: 656)

The difficulty of making judgments about works that combine earnestness and jest may help to explain why there have been such radical disagreements about what to make of *Crumbs* and the *Postscript*, together with their elusive fictional narrator/pseudonymous author.<sup>21</sup> Like Socrates, Climacus comes across as someone who combines a dialectical rigor with an unusual, often elusive sensibility that keeps attentive readers on their toes.

#### THE CORRUPTION OF A NAÏVE JOHANNES CLIMACUS BY SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Before turning to consider Climacus' account of how he became an author and his diagnosis of what's gone wrong in Christendom, it may be helpful to distinguish him from a figure who appears in Kierkegaard's unfinished manuscript *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*.<sup>22</sup> This text is thought to have been written circa 1842–43, and so prior to the 1844 publication of *Crumbs* and the 1846 publication of the *Postscript*. While this work is sometimes taken to provide a sort of "intellectual biography" of Climacus, C. Stephen Evans rightly notes that "we have no real basis for assuming that the subject of [*De Omnibus*] is identical with the author

<sup>21</sup> See Muench, "Understanding Climacus," on two competing ways in which Climacus has been conceived.

<sup>22</sup> KW 7: 113–172; PAP IV B 1:103–150. In this report this text will be referred to as *De Omnibus*. On dating this manuscript, see SKS κ18: 369 and KJN 2, JJ:288. For a thoughtful reading of how this work might be read to anticipate issues that arise in *Crumbs*, see Howland, "Johannes Climacus, Socratic Philosopher," in his *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, 10–27. See also Stewart, "Kierkegaard's Polemic with Martensen in *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*," in his *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, 238–281.

of *Philosophical Fragments*," or the *Postscript*.<sup>23</sup> It is true that there is a character that appears in this work who is named "Johannes Climacus," but he is quite unlike the Johannes Climacus who is the subject of this report. One danger of tying *De Omnibus* to Climacus' writings is that one may be tempted to read these later works through the lens of this manuscript and its particular concerns. The Johannes of *De Omnibus* is called "a young student" by the manuscript's unnamed narrator, someone who is "now in his twenty-first year" and who is "ardently in love . . . with thinking" (KW 7: 118–119). His name is associated in the text with the Greek monk of the same name from late antiquity (c. 525–616 CE) who wrote *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.<sup>24</sup> The activity that the young Johannes appears to enjoy more than anything is going up and down the rungs of the ladders of thought that he constructs: "It was his delight to begin with a single thought and then, by way of coherent thinking, to climb step by step to a higher one, because to him coherent thinking was a *scala paradisi* . . . this up-and-down and down-and-up of thought was an unparalleled joy . . . for his whole life was thinking" (KW 7: 118–119, 123).<sup>25</sup>

Though Kierkegaard did not complete the adventures of the young Johannes, his plan seems to have been to create a character who "thinks that to philosophize is not to talk or to write but in all quietness to do honestly and scrupulously what the philosophers say one should do."<sup>26</sup> Young Johannes sets his sights on the thesis "*de omnibus dubitandum est*" (everything is to be doubted) and decides to spend however long it takes to "think it through," resolving not "to let go of it" prior to this "even though it were to cost him his life" (KW 7: 131). Kierkegaard thus seems to conceive of the young Johannes as a character who will naïvely try to follow the dictates of modern philosophy and suffer the consequences accordingly:

The plan of this narrative was as follows. By means of the melancholy irony, which did not consist in any single utterance on the part of Johannes Climacus but in his whole life, by means of the profound earnestness involved in a young man's being sufficiently honest and earnest enough to do quietly and unostentatiously what the philosophers say (and he thereby becomes unhappy) – I would strike a blow at [modern speculative] philosophy. Johannes does what we are told to do – he actually doubts everything – he suffers through all the pain of doing that, becomes cunning, almost acquires a bad conscience. When he has gone as far in

<sup>23</sup> Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> The title is *Klimax tou paradeisou* in Greek; *Scala paradisi* in Latin. See, e.g., SKS κ17: 488–489; Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 8–9. The surname "Climacus" is a Latinized form of the Greek term for ladder, *klimax*. Hence in English young Johannes (or Climacus himself for that matter) might be called "John Ladder."

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Genesis 28:12; John 1:51. <sup>26</sup> PAP IV B 6 (draft of *De Omnibus*, cited in KW 7: 235).

that direction as he can go and wants to come back, he cannot do so. He perceives that in order to hold on to this extreme position of doubting everything, he has engaged all his mental and spiritual powers . . . Now he despairs, his life is wasted, his youth spent in these deliberations. Life has not acquired any meaning for him, and all this is the fault of philosophy.<sup>27</sup>

While it is certainly possible to maintain that there is some sort of family resemblance between the 21-year-old Johannes who falls victim to modern philosophy and the pseudonym of 28 or 30 who is encountered in *Crumbs* and the *Postscript*, it is important that the young Johannes' vulnerability to corruption by speculation not be allowed to color how Climacus' own relation to philosophy is conceived. If, as has been suggested, Climacus is a Socratic figure, then it is to be expected that he will not be similarly vulnerable to corruption but instead, through having obtained what he calls a certain "dialectical fearlessness," will turn out to be someone who is in a position to combat the corrupting influence of this manner of doing philosophy (CUP 14).<sup>28</sup> He is someone who, like Socrates, may even be able to help the young Johanneses of his day (cf. CUP 274).

In *De Omnibus* the story of the young Johannes and how he becomes a victim of modern speculative philosophy is a means by which the unnamed narrator seeks to combat this manner of doing philosophy.<sup>29</sup> While Climacus employs different, more Socratic means in his two books, the target remains the same: Hegelian-style modern philosophy. That this common target is forever joined in Kierkegaard's mind with the words "Johannes Climacus" can perhaps best be seen by examining an early passage from the journals, dated January 20, 1839: "Hegel is a Johannes *Climacus*, who does not storm the heavens like the giants by putting mountain upon mountain, but *climbs aloft* [*entrer*] by means of his syllogisms."<sup>30</sup> Here the emphasis is on Hegel and his potentially blasphemous desire to obtain entry into heaven through speculative thinking. The phrase "Johannes Climacus" does not function as a name but rather helps to pick out the concept "is a Johannes Climacus" (cf. "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy"). If Hegel is a blasphemous Johannes Climacus, the young

Johannes of *De Omnibus* might be characterized as a further instance of this concept, a naïve Johannes Climacus who suffers from having placed his trust in speculative philosophy. By contrast, the subject of this report, noted pseudonymous author of *Crumbs* and the *Postscript*, might be characterized as a third instance of this concept, a Socratic Johannes Climacus.

#### CLIMACUS DISCOVERS HIS TASK

Of all Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, Climacus is the only one who shares with Kierkegaard a desire to develop an account of his authorship and to explain to his readers why he, Johannes Climacus, began writing and why his works take the peculiar form that they do.<sup>31</sup> In the *Postscript* he describes "two events in [his] life that made [him] decide to be an author" and also recounts the circumstances surrounding the publication of his first book.<sup>32</sup> These moments within the text appear at the end of two chapters in Part Two of the *Postscript* and in an appendix to the second of those chapters, and are set apart from the rest of the text by being written in the past tense (CUP 155–158, 197–210, 210–251). In seemingly stepping back from his therapeutic engagement of his readers and speaking more directly about what he has been doing and why, Climacus follows the example set by Socrates in Plato's *Apology*. Unlike most Platonic dialogues where Socrates is portrayed as in the midst of questioning and refuting the one he is speaking with, in the *Apology*, as part of his defense, Socrates characterizes in more general terms how he became a philosopher and why.<sup>33</sup> In doing so, he draws attention to his aim of making people aware of their ignorance (where they think they know things they do not) and why this activity of being a "gadfly," which has made him quite unpopular, might be understood as being divinely sanctioned.<sup>34</sup> Socrates' remarks are offered to help the jury better understand him and his philosophical activities. Climacus' autobiographical, diagnostic remarks can play a similar role in helping to bring him and his own philosophical activities more clearly into view. Accordingly, the remainder of this report will be focused on these remarks.

The first time that Climacus takes up the topic of how he became an author, he begins by noting that "it is now about four years since [he] got

<sup>27</sup> PAP IV B 16 (draft of *De Omnibus*, cited in KW 7: 234–235).

<sup>28</sup> Hannay's translation omits two sentences that include a later reference to "dialectical fearlessness." See KW 12<sup>1</sup>: 14; SKS 7: 23 (lines 31–32).

<sup>29</sup> In the *Postscript* Climacus considers on multiple occasions a scenario remarkably similar to the one envisaged by Kierkegaard for *De Omnibus* and suggests that depicting such a scenario might provide an "indirect assault" on Hegel's philosophy by means of a kind of "satire" (CUP 259–260). See also, e.g., CUP 161, 213–214.

<sup>30</sup> KJN I, DD:203; SKS 17: 277 (trans. modified). On the nautical connotations of "*entrer*" see SKS K17: 489.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Burgess, "Kierkegaard's Climacus as Author."

<sup>32</sup> PAP VI B 83:2 (draft of the *Postscript*, cited in KW 12<sup>2</sup>: 104).

<sup>33</sup> See especially *Apology* 20c–24b; 28b–31a.

<sup>34</sup> Plato, *Apology* 30e. See Muench, "Understanding Climacus," 435–437; "Kierkegaard's Socratic Point of View," 140–146.

the notion of wanting to try [his] hand as an author" (CUP 155). Since the *Postscript* was published in 1846, this seems to refer to 1842 (which is about when Kierkegaard probably first began writing *Either/Or*), and it means that two years will elapse after this event before Climacus will publish his first book, *Philosophical Crumbs*, in 1844. Climacus draws attention to the fact that the event in question took place on a Sunday while he sat smoking a cigar in front of a café in Frederiksberg Gardens. Readers are thereby alerted to the fact that the subject is not spending his Sunday at church or doing quiet penance at home, but is out on the town and visibly enjoying himself in public.<sup>35</sup> He adds that this has been his "usual" practice (CUP 155). Climacus describes himself as a kind of perpetual graduate student, someone who "had been a student for a half-score of years," and while he denies that he has ever been "lazy" he does admit that all of his activity has been "a sort of brilliant *inactivity*" (CUP 156, emphasis added). Over the years his normal practice has been to read a great deal and then spend the rest of the day "loafing and thinking, or thinking and loafing," without ever having much to show for it (CUP 156). In case his readers aren't quite yet settled in their opinion of him, Climacus adds that the principal reason that he hasn't been more productive is because he has been held "constantly in check" by what he calls an "inexplicable persuasive power"; he says this "power was [his] indolence" (CUP 156). The subject thereby marks himself as a loafer, a non-productive good-for-nothing who appears to be religiously suspect.

At the same time, Climacus finds himself surrounded by people who have made it their personal mission to benefit the age. Speaking to himself, he observes:

Wherever you look about you . . . in literature or in life, you see . . . the many benefactors of the age who know how to do favors to humankind by making life more and more easy, some with railways, others with omnibuses and steamships, others with the telegraph, others through easily grasped surveys and brief reports on everything worth knowing, and finally the true benefactors of the age, who by virtue of thought make spiritual existence systematically easier and yet more and more important — and what are *you* doing?<sup>36</sup>

After momentarily having his reflections interrupted by the need to light a new cigar, Climacus suddenly has the thought that he too "must do

<sup>35</sup> There was a "law of Sunday observance" in Copenhagen at the time (CUP 522; SKS 7: 562, trans. modified). According to the SKS commentary, this law set the closing times of stores and forbade loud, noisy activities, especially during times when Church services were being held. See SKS 17: 376.

<sup>36</sup> CUP 156; SKS 7: 171 (emphasis added, trans. modified).

something." But what? Since his "limited abilities" will keep him from being able to "make anything easier than it has become," he concludes that he "must, with the same humanitarian enthusiasm as the others, take it upon [himself] to make something more difficult" (CUP 156–157)! He points out that there might be a real use for this sort of thing since, when all of society's benefactors are seeking to make things easier, there remains "one possible danger": that things will become "altogether too easy." Climacus thus claims that he "conceived it as [his] task to create difficulties everywhere."<sup>37</sup>

Having impressed upon his readers that he is a loafer who has never really amounted to anything and having tied this to his indolence, Climacus seems to want to convince them that in fact this is all for the best. Far from making him an object of scorn, his being an indolent loafer is actually a good thing! Not only has this helped to ensure that there is at least one person who has the time to work against the tendencies of the age, but this very condition may also help him to address his "embarrassing situation [of] having accomplished nothing" (CUP 157). To help illustrate this, Climacus introduces the following rather Socratic image:

When at a banquet, where the guests have already overeaten, someone is intent on having more courses brought on, another on having an emetic on hand, it is surely true that only the former has grasped what it is the guests demand. But I wonder if the latter might not also claim to have reflected on what their demand could be.<sup>38</sup>

With this image, a distinction is introduced between what people may say they want (e.g., having things made "easier") and that which might actually be conducive to their health. While Climacus' initial portrait of the age seemingly draws a contrast at his own expense between the benefactors (especially the "true benefactors of the age, who . . . make spiritual existence systematically easier") and loafers such as himself, the image of the banquet invites readers to rethink this situation, to examine more closely whether those who are being celebrated as benefactors are in fact the ones who are willing to serve the next course to a populace which has "already overeaten," while those who refuse to do so, those who may even be trying to make things more difficult, turn out to be the true benefactors. Climacus thereby invites his readers to consider whether he might be a loafer, as he puts it in the preface to *Crumbs*, both "out of indolence, *ex animi sententia*

<sup>37</sup> CUP 157; SKS 7: 172 (trans. modified).

<sup>38</sup> CUP 157; SKS 7: 172 (trans. modified). Cf. CUP 231.

[by inclination], *and* for good reasons.”<sup>39</sup> His readers are also in this way alerted to the real possibility that what they are in the habit of conceiving of as earnest and serious may actually be contributing to an unhealthy condition, while what can at first strike them as frivolous and ridiculous may in fact be an expression of a task that is directed at what is truly needed.

#### CLIMACUS MAKES A RESOLUTION

Climacus returns to the topic of how he became an author toward the end of the next chapter of the *Postscript* (CUP 197–210). At the end of the first episode, he had concluded that his task was to make something difficult, but what precisely he was to make difficult was left unspecified. Two months have passed and a second momentous event takes place, also, as it happens, on a Sunday. The scene is a graveyard: “the garden of the dead” (CUP 197). It is “rather late in the day, towards evening,” and Climacus is there “contrary to [his] usual practice.” He does not explain why he has gone to the graveyard, instead offering his readers his reflections about the “eloquence” of the dead and his praise for “the one living who outwardly relates as a dead man to his inwardness” (CUP 197–198).<sup>40</sup> The mood established is reflective and somber, perhaps a bit too somber for such a jesting narrator.

The subject reports that while he was at the graveyard he had occasion to observe two figures standing beside a fresh grave, “an elderly man with chalk-white hair and a child, a boy of about ten,” who is his grandson; the recently deceased is the boy’s father and the old man’s son (CUP 198). Climacus claims that in the “transfiguring glow of the evening the old man’s dignified figure assumed even more solemnity, and his voice, calm and yet emotional, enunciated the words distinctly”; while speaking to his grandson, occasionally he would pause, “his voice choked with weeping, or the mood coming to a halt in a sigh” (CUP 199). Two things occupy the old man. First, he is concerned for the child and tries to impress upon his grandson that even though he no longer has anyone “to cling to except an old man . . . who himself longed to leave the world,” there is “a God in heaven” and a savior in “Jesus Christ.” At the same time, he is grieving over the loss of his son, who he thinks had lost his faith despite (or as a result of) “all his wisdom” (CUP 199). The old man doesn’t want his grandson to suffer the same fate and so finds himself trying to warn him of a “wisdom

which would fly beyond faith, . . . a seeming mainland which to the mortal eye might look like a certainty higher than faith.” He stresses that for the believer “this mirage . . . of eternity in which a mortal cannot live, but in which, if he gazes into it, he loses his faith” is something above all to be “feared” (CUP 199).<sup>41</sup>

Climacus informs his readers that he immediately understood the old man’s concerns, in part because his earlier studies had also “led [him] to discern a dubious relation between a modern Christian speculation and Christianity,” though he admits that prior to this event this “dubious relation” had “not occupied [him] in any decisive way” (CUP 202). Not only does he believe that the old man has been wronged but he is especially moved by the old man’s inability (given his apparent lack of higher education) to explain how exactly his son’s “wisdom” had corrupted his faith:

The venerable old man’s sorrow over losing his son, not just in death but, as he understood it, still more terribly through speculation, moved me profoundly, while the contradiction in his position, that he was unable to explain how the enemy force operated, became for me a decisive summons to find a definite clue. The whole thing appealed to me like an intricate criminal case in which the very complex circumstances made pursuit of the truth difficult. This was something for me.<sup>42</sup>

In response to the old man’s sorrow and his situation, Climacus resolves to try to get to the bottom of things. Yet, in announcing his resolution, he shifts away from the pathos he has been cultivating, describing his thinking as follows: “You are after all tired of life’s diversions, you are tired of girls that you love only in passing, you must have something that fully occupies your time. Here it is. Find out where the misunderstanding between speculation and Christianity lies. This, then, was my resolution” (CUP 202).<sup>43</sup>

In first characterizing his resolution in relation to the moving story of the old man and then in more comic terms, Climacus seemingly complicates what exactly to make of this resolution. Is it genuine? Or perhaps merely a whim? At any rate, readers are reminded yet again that this is an unusual philosophical author, one who requires that they remain alert and engaged if they are to understand him and his writings.

The subject claims that upon making this resolution he did not speak to anyone about it. Even as his studies were “now put in more definite

<sup>39</sup> KW 7: 5; SKS 4: 215 (emphasis added; trans. modified).

<sup>40</sup> The term “inwardness” appears throughout Kierkegaard’s corpus and pertains to the individual’s inner life, notably concerning the ethical and religious aspects of a person.

<sup>41</sup> For a more extensive treatment of this overheard conversation and its effect on Climacus, see Edward Mooney’s contribution to this volume.

<sup>42</sup> CUP 202; SKS 7: 219 (trans. modified).

<sup>43</sup> With “resolution” substituted for Hannay’s “resolve.”



order" and he "tried through [his] own reflection to pick up a clue to the ultimate misunderstanding," he claims that what repeatedly helped him to keep from transforming his "deliberations into erudite learning" was how "the venerable figure of the old man hovered before [his] mind."<sup>44</sup> All three figures of this story in fact seem to have significance for Climacus and help to structure his activity as a writer and thinker. The grandfather represents a traditional religious simplicity that seems under threat, while the young man, who is in effect the murder victim in this "criminal case," serves as a warning to readers about what can happen to a person who becomes too taken up with speculative philosophy (cf. the young Johannes of *De Omnibus*). The grandson represents the future generation. If he is to retain his religious faith, he will need help. Tradition, as found in the grandfather, will seemingly not be enough. He seems to require something more if he is to protect himself from the corrupting influence of speculation, especially if, like his father, he is drawn to philosophy. What he may need more than anything is the assistance of a Socrates or a Climacus.

With respect to himself and his understanding of his own task, Climacus claims that one result of this encounter in the graveyard was that he "acquired a more specific understanding of [his] own bright idea that [he] must try to make something difficult" (CUP 202). In particular, he comes to conceive of his task above all as one of making it "difficult" to become a Christian: "[W]hen culture and the like have managed to make it so easy to be a Christian, it must surely be in order for the single individual, according to his poor ability, to make it difficult, if he nevertheless does not make it more difficult than it is" (CUP 322).<sup>45</sup>

#### CLIMACUS' DIAGNOSIS AND THE NEED FOR INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

Having discovered a task and having resolved to try to determine how an involvement with speculative philosophy may have led to the spiritual death of the old man's son, Climacus reports that after "many failures" he traced the source of this problem to what he takes to be a more general tendency of the age: "in the end it became clear to me that the deviation of speculation . . . might lie much more deeply in a tendency of the whole age – might lie in the fact that, due to the quantity

of knowledge, one has *forgotten* what it is to exist and what inwardness means."<sup>46</sup>

Climacus both identifies a condition to which the age is prone, a condition of forgetfulness, and points to what he takes to be the source of this condition, a large "quantity of knowledge." As he later puts it, because people "know too much" they have forgotten something (CUP 230). Perhaps the most natural way to take this claim is that people are overwhelmed by so much knowledge that they wind up forgetting some of it (a kind of modern-day information overload). But Climacus seems to have in mind something different. He joins Kierkegaard in distinguishing between aesthetic capacities, which concern objects and require the subject to be disinterested, and ethical and religious capacities, which concern the subject employing these capacities and require her or him to be interested (either in oneself and one's relations with other human beings, or in a divine Other).<sup>47</sup> It is important to keep in mind that the term "aesthetic" has a much broader connotation in Kierkegaard's writings than that which only pertains to objects of beauty. Aesthetic capacities are held to be appropriate for apprehending a range of things, including pleasure, objects of art, natural objects, and objects of the intellect (including, for example, mathematical objects). Climacus' basic diagnosis seems to be that people have fallen into the habit of one-sidedly exercising their aesthetic capacities, leading them to neglect themselves and those parts of a person's nature that involve the use of ethical and religious capacities. Having fallen into the habit of approaching the world in a disinterested fashion, as though it were merely an objective realm to be known, people have lost track of the subjective realm of action and inwardness. A condition of knowing too much, aesthetically speaking, seems to foster a condition of ethical and religious forgetfulness.<sup>48</sup>

Climacus complicates this picture, however, by seeming to allow that, in a setting where people are awash with (aesthetic) knowledge, these habits of thought spill over into the ethical and religious realms. It is not simply that, because they are in the habit of approaching things in a disinterested fashion, they have lost sight of what can come into view only if it is approached in an interested fashion, but they also seemingly come to know a lot about the ethical and religious even as they fail to make proper use of this knowledge in their individual lives. Climacus maintains, for example, that, with respect to Christianity, people have become so knowledgeable

<sup>44</sup> CUP 202; SKS 7: 220 (trans. modified). Cf. KW 12<sup>1</sup>: 241 and PAP VI B 41:8 (draft of the *Postscript*, cited in KW 12<sup>2</sup>: 64–65).

<sup>45</sup> See also, e.g., CUP 231, 320, 466, 494.

<sup>46</sup> CUP 202–203; SKS 7: 220 (emphasis added; trans. modified, following KW 12<sup>1</sup>: 209).

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., CUP 271, 445, 479–480. <sup>48</sup> Cf. *The Sickness Unto Death*, KW 19: 94.

about it that it no longer readily makes an impression on them: because the "Christian truth" has become "common knowledge," it has gradually "become such a triviality" that a "primitive impression" of it is acquired only with difficulty (CUP 230n-231n).

Here Climacus relies on a distinction between what might be called *mere* knowledge of an ethical or religious truth and action-generating knowledge. It might seem that since ethics and religion are inherently practical in nature, it simply makes no sense to attribute knowledge to someone whose life nevertheless does not reflect what that person supposedly "knows." Instead of affirming, however, that such a person must be entirely lacking in knowledge about the ethical and the religious, Climacus maintains that in such a case the individual's relationship to what he knows is such that this knowledge fails to make an appropriate, action-motivating impression on him. As the pseudonym Anti-Climacus puts it, people may know how to "expound" abstractly about the ethical and the religious even though this knowledge "exercises no power" over their lives (KW 19: 90). In such a situation, according to Climacus, what a person knows is best characterized as something that he knows "by rote."<sup>49</sup>

Climacus seems to think that modern speculative philosophy is a striking example of this larger tendency of the age. While he does not object to abstract philosophical reflection *per se*, since it too has its appropriate applications and objects of inquiry (see CUP 49, 64), he does draw attention to how the proper exercise of the speculative philosopher's aesthetic capacities results in his "losing himself in objectivity, vanishing from himself" (CUP 50). This may be appropriate when one seeks to illuminate and comprehend a given object, but it is not appropriate for reflecting about a subject, namely the individual herself or himself *qua* ethical and religious agent:

[F]or the speculating philosopher the question of his personal eternal happiness just cannot arise, for the very reason that his task consists in getting more and more away from himself, and becoming objective, thus vanishing from himself and becoming speculation's contemplative power. (CUP 49)

This can have particular consequences for ethics and religion; by regularly engaging in speculation, speculative philosophers may fall out of the habit of attending to themselves and conceiving of themselves as practical agents. One result of abstraction, according to Climacus, is that it "removes that in which the decision lies: the *existing subject*" (CUP 247; emphasis in

<sup>49</sup> CUP 222; SKS 7: 240 (trans. modified).

original). By doing philosophy in this way the individual "forgets" herself or himself, effectively losing sight of herself or himself as an ethical and religious being (CUP 268; cf. CUP 121).

Climacus reports that after he came to the conclusion that "the misfortune of the age is . . . precisely that it had acquired too much knowledge and forgotten what it is to exist and what inwardness means" (CUP 217), he also concluded that to write about this he would have to employ an "indirect" form of communication: "When I had grasped this, it also became clear to me that, if I wanted to communicate anything on this point, the main thing was that my exposition be in the *indirect* form" (CUP 203).<sup>50</sup> Notice that Climacus seems to think that he will be able to communicate with readers who suffer from this condition of ethical and religious forgetfulness only if he employs a non-straightforward manner of writing. That is, if he is to *remind* his readers of what has been forgotten, he will have to find a way to get around or past their present habits of thought and their current appetite for knowledge.<sup>51</sup> This means, in his view, that his writing must be given a non-didactic form and not come across as providing his readers with yet another thing to know: "[A]bove all it must not be done didactically . . . If this is imparted as a piece of knowledge, the recipient is led to the misapprehension that he is getting something to know" (CUP 209).<sup>52</sup> One other thing worth noticing about this passage is that it is a pseudonym who concludes that *he* must make use of indirect communication. So while Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms may be one means of engaging in indirect communication, there are presumably other means of indirection that are available to the pseudonymous authors themselves.<sup>53</sup>

#### THE COMIC FULFILLMENT OF CLIMACUS' RESOLUTION

Climacus concludes his account of how he became an author in a lengthy, rather peculiar appendix (CUP 210-251).<sup>54</sup> He reports that once he had

<sup>50</sup> See also, e.g., CUP 217, 230.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Ralph Henry Johnson, *The Concept of Existence in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 173-209 (a chapter on "The Art of Reminding").

<sup>52</sup> Cf. PAP VI B 40:45 (draft of the *Postscript*, cited in KW 12<sup>2</sup>: 62) and PAP VI B 40:39 (draft of the *Postscript*, cited in KW 12<sup>2</sup>: 60).

<sup>53</sup> On indirect communication, see "Climacus' Socratic Method," 140-143.

<sup>54</sup> This is one of the oddest yet most interesting stretches of text within Kierkegaard's body of writing, in which Climacus, one of Kierkegaard's fictional characters, provides his readers with a kind of overview of Kierkegaard's entire corpus prior to the *Postscript*, discussing both Kierkegaard's edifying speeches and each of the earlier pseudonymous works. This is the first attempt within Kierkegaard's writings to identify an overriding aim or point of view for the authorship as a whole, and in *The Point of View* Kierkegaard calls this "a section with which [he] would ask the reader to become familiar" (KW 22: 31).

arrived at the diagnosis that people had forgotten what it is to exist and what inwardness means, he then "resolved," as part of his attempt to help remind them of what had been forgotten, "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" (CUP 209). His desire not to arrive "too soon" at what will become one of the central topics of inquiry in both *Crumbs* and the *Postscript* is indicative of his more general sense that when it comes to the ethical and the religious (and the specifically Christian) there seems to be massive conceptual confusion in his day and the frequent running together of different terms and categories: "Just because in our age people know only too much, it is easy enough to confuse everything in a confusion of language, where aestheticians adopt the most decisive Christian religious categories with intellectual wit, and priests use them thoughtlessly in bureaucratic formalisms that are indifferent to the content" (CUP 226; cf. CUP 215, 304–305).

Climacus reasons that "if one had forgotten what it is to exist religiously, no doubt one had also forgotten what it is to exist humanly" (that is, ethically).<sup>55</sup> In order to avoid terminological confusion, he thinks it would be appropriate to "start from the ground" and first portray the difference between an individual who solely employs aesthetic categories and an "individual human being who is existing on the strength of the ethical" (CUP 210, 213). He thinks that he first ought to define the inner life and the nature of inwardness in more general terms, and make clear what role this plays in the different stages of human development. That way, when he arrives at a closer examination of Christianity itself and the precise nature of what it is to exist as a Christian, he will hopefully be able to help prevent further conceptual confusion: "Christianity . . . is inwardness, though note well, not just any inwardness, which was why the preliminary stages had to be firmly insisted upon – that was my idea" (CUP 236–237). In fact, he claims that by the time of the publication of *Philosophical Crumbs*, "the determining of existence-inwardness had come to the point where the Christian-religious could be brought out without immediately being confused with all manner of things" (CUP 227). Thus it is one of Climacus' philosophical aims to help his readers to obtain a greater conceptual clarity about ethical and religious concepts and their proper employment.

If in reading the previous paragraph one is struck by the similarity between the point at which Climacus said he planned to begin his task (contrasting a life governed by an aesthetic life-view with one governed

by an ethical life-view) and the plan of Kierkegaard's first pseudonymous work *Either/Or*, this would not be off the mark. In fact, Climacus claims that before he was himself able to act on the first phase of his task, lo and behold, out came *Either/Or*:

The task was set, and I foresaw that the work would be protracted enough . . . What happens? There I sit and out comes *Either/Or*. It did exactly what I had wanted. The thought of my solemn resolution made me quite wretched. But then I thought again: you haven't promised anyone anything, and seeing it is done anyway, all is well.<sup>56</sup>

But, as he tells it, things get worse for this budding philosophical author. He claims that "step by step, just as [he] wanted to begin the task of carrying out [his] resolution by *working*, out came a pseudonymous book which did what [he] had wanted to do."<sup>57</sup> Not only does Climacus claim that he is forever "intending to do" what the other pseudonymous authors end up doing (so that he himself is repeatedly always arriving "too late in regard to the doing"), but he also maintains that it is only by reading what the other pseudonyms have written that it becomes clear to him what his own intentions are.<sup>58</sup>

There was something curiously ironical in it all. It was just as well I had never talked to anyone about my resolution, that not even my landlady had seen any sign of it in me. For otherwise people would have laughed at my comic situation, for it is certainly amusing that the cause I had resolved to take up prospered though not through me. And that it indeed prospered was something I was persuaded of from the fact that whenever I read one such pseudonymous work, what I had wanted became clearer. I became in this way a tragically interested witness of the productions of V. Eremita and other pseudonyms. (CUP 210–211)

While Climacus seems to go out of his way to bring the comic into relief in this section of the *Postscript* (exhibiting in the process the extent to which he may even possess a certain "genius" for the art of loafing), he also makes a number of substantive observations about these works and what he thinks their aims are (CUP 156). Whatever one makes of his discussion of these individual works, one thing that does not vary throughout this discussion is his basic diagnosis. He frequently reminds his readers that it is his view that (1) people suffer from a peculiar kind of forgetfulness (a forgetfulness concerning ethical and religious existence and inwardness), and that

<sup>56</sup> CUP 210; SKS 7: 228 (trans. modified).

<sup>57</sup> CUP 210; SKS 7: 228 (emphasis added; trans. modified).

<sup>58</sup> CUP 219, 215; SKS 7: 237, 233 (trans. modified).

<sup>55</sup> CUP 209. Cf. CUP 70 and JP 1:390; PAP κ<sup>2</sup> A 453.

(2) this condition of forgetfulness is tied to their knowing too much.<sup>59</sup> He has acknowledged that the other pseudonymous books may have been written for reasons that he, as “a reader,” has not been able to detect (CUP 211). At the same time, he remains convinced that they are “also significant for [his] little crumb of production” and so can be understood as part of his task of making it difficult to become a Christian. In this sense, Climacus treats the other pseudonymous books above all as “moments in the realization of the idea [he] had conceived but from which [he] was ironically exempted from realizing” – at least, that is, until he somehow manages to find the wherewithal to write *Crumbs* and later the *Postscript*.<sup>60</sup>

This concludes the present report. Agents remain on the case.

<sup>59</sup> Climacus appeals to this diagnosis at least once during his discussion of each of the pseudonymous works.

<sup>60</sup> CUP 226.