

*International Kierkegaard  
Commentary*

*Concluding Unscientific Postscript  
to "Philosophical Fragments"*



edited by  
Robert L. Perkins

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International Kierkegaard Commentary  
Concluding Unscientific Postscript  
to "Philosophical Fragments"

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Robert L. Perkins

## Sigla

- AN *Armed Neutrality and An Open Letter*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968. (*Den betæbnede Neutralitet*, written 1848–1849, publ. 1965; "Foranledigt ved en Ytring af Dr. Rudelbach mig betræffende," *Fædrelandet*, no. 26 [31 January 1851].)
- C *The Crisis [and a Crisis] in the life of an Actress*. Trans. Stephen Crites. New York: Harper & Row, 1967. (*Krisen og en Krise i en Skuespillerindes Liv*, by Inter et Inter. *Fædrelandet* 188–191 [24–27 July 1848].)
- CA *The Concept of Anxiety*. Kierkegaard's Writings 8. Trans. Reidar Thomte, in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980. (*Begrebet Angest*, by Vigilius Haufniensis, ed. S. Kierkegaard, 1844.)
- CD *Christian Discourses*, including *The Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air and Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1940. (*Christelige Taler*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1848; *Lilien paa Marken og Fuglen under Himlen*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1849; *Tre Taler ved Altergangen om Fredagen*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1849.)
- CI *The Concept of Irony*; "Notes on Schelling's Berlin Lectures." Kierkegaard's Writings 2. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989. (*Om Begrebet Ironi*, by S. A. Kierkegaard, 1841.)
- COR *The Corsair Affair*. Kierkegaard's Writings 13. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982.
- CUP,1 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Two volumes. Kierkegaard's Writings CUP,2 12:1-2. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992. (*Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*, by Johannes Climacus, ed. S. Kierkegaard, 1846.)
- EO,1 *Either/Or*. Two volumes. Kierkegaard's Writings 3 and 4. Trans. EO,2 Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987. (*Enten/Eller I-II*, ed. Victor Eremita, 1843.)

- EPW *Early Polemical Writings*. Kierkegaard's Writings 1. Trans. Julia Watkin. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990.
- EUD *Eighteen Unbuilding Discourses*. Kierkegaard's Writings 5. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990. (*Åtten opbyggelige taler*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1843-1845.)
- FPOS L *From the Papers of One Still Living*. See EPW.
- FSE *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself!* Kierkegaard's Writings 21. JFY Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990. (*Til Selvprøvelse*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1851, and *Dømmer Selv!* by S. Kierkegaard, 1852.)
- FT *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. Kierkegaard's Writings 6. Trans. R. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983. (*Frygt og Bæven*, by Johannes de Silentio, 1843, and *Gjentagelsen*, by Constanthin Constantius, 1843.)
- JC "Johannes Climacus or *De omnibus dubitandum est*." See PF JC.
- JFY *Judge for Yourself!* See FSE.
- JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk. Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, (1) 1967; (2) 1970; (3-4) 1975; (5-7) 1978. (From *Søren Kierkegaard's Papirer* I-XI<sup>3</sup> and XII-XIII, 2nd ed., and *Breve og Akstykker vedrørende Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Niels Thulstrup, I-II, 1953-1954.)
- JSK *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*. Trans. Alexander Dru. London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1938. (From *Søren Kierkegaard's Papirer* I-XI<sup>3</sup> in 18 volumes, 1909-1936.)
- KAUC *Kierkegaard's Attack upon "Christendom," 1854-1855*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1944. (*Bladartikler* I-XXI, by S. Kierkegaard, *Fædrelandet*, 1854-1855; *Dette skal siges; saa være det da sagt*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1855; *Øieblikket*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1-9, 1855; 10, 1881; *Hvad Kristus dømmer om officiel Christendom*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1855.)
- LD *Letters and Documents*. Kierkegaard's Writings 25. Trans. Hendrik Rosenmeier. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978.
- LY *The Last Years*. Trans. Ronald C. Smith. New York: Harper & Row, 1965. (From *Søren Kierkegaard's Papirer* XI<sup>1</sup>-XI<sup>2</sup>.)
- NSBL "Notes on Schilling's Berlin Lectures." See CI.
- OAR *On Authority and Revelation, The Book on Adler*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1955. (*Bogen om Adler*, written 1846-1847, unpublished, Søren Kierkegaard's *Papirer* VII<sup>2</sup> 235; VIII<sup>2</sup> B 1-27.)
- P *Prefaces: Light Reading for Certain Classes as the Occasion May Require*. Trans. William McDonald. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1989. (*Forord: Morskabslæsning for Enkelte Stænder efter Tid or Leilighed*, by Nicolaus Notabene, 1844.)
- PC *Practice in Christianity*. Kierkegaard's Writings 20. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991. (*Indøvelse i Christendom*, by Anti-Climacus, ed. S. Kierkegaard, 1850.)
- PF *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*. Kierkegaard's Writings JC 7. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985. (*Philosophiske Smuler*, by Johannes Climacus, ed. S. Kierkegaard, 1844. "Johannes Climacus eller *De omnibus dubitandum est*," written 1842-1843, unpublished, *Søren Kierkegaard's Papirer* IV C 1.)
- PV *The Point of View Etc., including The Point of View for My Work as an Author, Two Notes about "The Individual," and On My Work as an Author*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. London/New York/Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1939. (*Synspunktet for min Forfatter-Virksomhed*, by S. Kierkegaard, posthumously publ. 1859; *Om min Forfatter-Virksomhed*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1851.)
- R *Repetition*. See FT, R.
- SLW *Stages on Life's Way*. Kierkegaard's Writings 11. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988. (*Stadier paa Livets Vej*, ed. Hilarius Bogbinder 1845.)
- SUD *The Sickness unto Death*. Kierkegaard's Writings 19. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980. (*Sygdommen til Døden*, by Anti-Climacus, ed. S. Kierkegaard, 1849.)
- TA *Two Ages: The Present Age and the Age of Revolution. A Literary Review*. Kierkegaard's Writings 14. Trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978. (*En litterair Anmeldelse. To Tidsal-dre*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1846.)
- TDIO *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. Kierkegaard's Writings 10. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. (*Tre Talte ved tænkte Leiligheder*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1845.)

UDVS *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Kierkegaard's Writings 15. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. (*Obyggelige Taler i forskjellig Aand*, 1847.)

WL *Works of Love*. Trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. (*Kjerlighedens Gjerninger*, 1847.)

*The Reality of the World  
in Kierkegaard's Postscript*<sup>1</sup>

M. G. Piety

The objective of this paper is to debunk the long-standing myth that the metaphysics of Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is fundamentally antirealist, or "acosmic." One of the most respected statements of this view is Louis Mackey's article, "The Loss of the World in Kierkegaard's Ethics,"<sup>2</sup> so I shall use it as the point of departure for the present essay.

Mackey begins his article by acknowledging that Kierkegaard's metaphysics are basically realist.<sup>3</sup> He argues, however, that this realism is implicitly contradicted by two remarks in the *Postscript* that are central to the argument of this book: "(1) The ethical reality of the subject is the only reality. (2) All realities other than his own, the subject encounters only in the mode of possibility, by thinking them."<sup>4</sup>

The difficulty, argues Mackey, is that the claim that one encounters the reality of others only in terms of possibility appears to imply that other people cannot affect one directly. More particularly, it appears to imply that the presence of other people cannot directly require that one relate to them ethically. One may

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<sup>1</sup>This paper has benefitted greatly from criticisms and revisions suggested by Paul A. Bauer, Hubert L. Dreyfus, George Pattison, and Robert L. Perkins.

<sup>2</sup>Louis Mackey, "The Loss of the World in Kierkegaard's Ethics," *Review of Metaphysics* 15/4 (June 1962): 602-20. Repr. first in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Josiah Thompson (Garden City NJ: Doubleday & Co./Anchor Paperback, 1972) 266-88; and then in Louis Mackey, *Points of View* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986). Subsequent references to this article will be to *Points of View*.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Mackey, *Points of View*, 145.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 143.

choose to behave ethically toward the people with whom one comes into contact, but the operative word here appears to be "choose." That is, it appears the claim that one is related to the reality of others only in terms of possibility implies one is absolutely free to choose to relate to them ethically or not as one pleases. It thus appears that ethical commitment, on Climacus's view, is generated from the individual's freedom alone rather than from the response of the individual to the reality of the needs of others or of the ethical demand itself.<sup>5</sup> That is, it appears that the reality of the world drops out of the ethics of the *Postscript*.

It is clear, however, that Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of the *Postscript*, did not intend his remarks to be interpreted in this way. "[T]o make the subjective individual's ethical actuality the only actuality," he observes, "could seem to be acosmism. That it will so appear to a busy thinker who must explain everything, a hasty pater who traverses the whole world, demonstrates only that he has a very poor idea of what the ethical means for the subjective individual" (CUP, 1:341).

I will argue that the purported acosmism of the *Postscript* has its roots in the confusion of epistemological with ontological issues as well as in the mistaken supposition that Climacus subscribes to the existentialist view that human freedom is absolute. The metaphysics of the *Postscript*, I will argue, is inherently realist and it is this realism which provides the foundation for the views on ethics that are expressed in this work.

### 1. Reality and Actuality

What must be addressed first is whether the remarks in the *Postscript* which provide the foundation for the charge that this work is fundamentally acosmic will, in fact, support such an interpretation. The first difficulty concerns the fact that Climacus never claims that the only reality there is for an existing individual is his own ethical reality. What he claims is that "[t]he only actuality [Virkelighed] there is for an existing person is his own ethical actuality" (CUP, 1:316).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 152.

<sup>6</sup>Emphasis added.

"Reality" (*Realitet*) and "actuality" (*Virkelighed*) have been assumed by English-speaking Kierkegaard scholars in the past to be synonymous in Kierkegaard's authorship.<sup>7</sup> This is undoubtedly a result of the fact that the Danish "*Virkelighed*" was often translated as "reality" rather than actuality in the first English translations of Kierkegaard.<sup>8</sup> It is, however, now nearly universally agreed that these expressions are *not* synonymous.<sup>9</sup> "Reality," Gregor Malantschuk argues, refers, according to Kierkegaard, to the "presence [tilstedeværelse]" of a thing "without any further determination of how it came to be there,"<sup>10</sup> whereas, "actuality" is always the result of a process of actualization.<sup>11</sup> Ideas, according to Kierkegaard, have reality as such and so does every *created* thing, but only the latter have actuality as well.<sup>12</sup> That is, only the latter have "come into existence" (PF, 74).

This distinction between reality and actuality can be seen in Climacus's remark in the *Postscript* that "[e]xistence is always the particular; the abstract," he argues, "does not exist [existerer ikke]" To conclude from this, he continues however, "that the abstract does not have reality [*Realitet*] is a misunderstanding" (CUP, 1:330).

The reality of the world is never questioned by Climacus. One cannot help but believe in the reality of the world on his view.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Cf., e.g., Mackey, *Points of View*, 146n.4.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, and *Postscript*, Swenson-Lowrie translation, 292.

<sup>9</sup>Cf., e.g., Robert Widenman, "Kierkegaard's Terminology and English," *Kierkegaardiana* 7 (1968): 116-18; Gregor Malantschuk, *Nøglebegreber i Søren Kierkegaards lærnkning*, ed. Grethe Kjær and Paul Müller (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1993) 210-12, and Anton Hügli, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität und die Objektivität des Erkennens bei Søren Kierkegaard*, Basler Beiträge zur Philosophie und Ihrer Geschichte (Basel: Editio Academica, 1973) 103.

<sup>10</sup>Malantschuk, *Nøglebegreber i Søren Kierkegaards lærnkning*, 210. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 210. Cf. PF, 73-75 (i.e., the section entitled "Coming Into Existence").

<sup>12</sup>Cf., e.g., JP 2:1587 (The translation of this entry is highly problematic. Considerations of space do not permit a detailed explication of it here. It will thus suffice to direct the reader to the original text.); CUP, 1:330; Mackey, *Points of View*, 146n.; Malantschuk, *Nøglebegreber i Søren Kierkegaards lærnkning*, 210-12; and Widenman, "Kierkegaard's Terminology and English," 116.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. C. Stephen Evans on how genuine skepticism is impossible according to Climacus: "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God: Subjectivity as the



The reality of other people is thus self-evident according to Climacus. Assurance, he asserts, that the people with whom one comes into contact are really there is equivalent to one's sense impressions of these individuals.<sup>14</sup> It is "nonsense" he argues, for example, to demand of someone with whom one comes into contact that he or she prove he or she is "really there [*er til*]" (CUP, 1:39).<sup>15</sup> A person's actuality is not equivalent, however, to his mere presence. It is not something that can be sensed. "Actually," according to Climacus, "is interiority infinitely interested in existing" (CUP, 1:325).

Just as the reality of the world is simply assumed by Climacus, so is the reality of ethics simply assumed.<sup>16</sup> The actuality of human beings, as it is presented in the *Postscript*, is inherently ethical.<sup>17</sup> It is a result of the efforts of the individual to bring his existence into conformity with his understanding of how he ought to exist.

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Ground of Properly Basic Religious Beliefs," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988): 30. This is clearly Kierkegaard's own position (cf., e.g., WL, 230, and Martin Slotty, "Die Erkenntnislehre S. A. Kierkegaards," diss., Friedrich-Alexanders-Universität, Erlangen, 1915, 20). The impossibility of universal doubt is, in fact, one of the themes of *Johannes Climacus* (JC, 113-72).

<sup>14</sup>Compare this with Kierkegaard's claim that it is possible to "sensibly convince oneself" of the presence of another person and that person, Kierkegaard continues, "can quite sensibly convince one that he is really there [*er til*]" (OAR, 108). The Danish text of this passage appears in *Nutidens Religiøse Forvirring. Bogen om Adler*, ed. Julia Watkin (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1984) 142.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. PC, 204, and Slotty, *Die Erkenntnislehre*, 22. The Hong's translate *er til* as "exists." Existence is, however, a technical term for Kierkegaard that is often used by him in a manner synonymous with "actuality" (i.e., *Virkelighed*; cf., e.g., PC, 129). The expression *er til* is etymologically related to *Tilværelsen* (cf. Christian Molbech, *Dansk Ordbrug, Anden forøgede og forbedrede Udgave* [Copenhagen: Gylden-dal, 1859]. *Anden Deel*, s.v. *Tilværelse*) and should thus be understood to refer to reality rather than actuality.

I want to make clear here that I am not arguing that it is Kierkegaard's position that we "know" other people are real. Whether our belief in the reality of other people amounts to knowledge is irrelevant to the argument of the present essay.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Alastair Hannay's assertion that "Kierkegaard's psychology flatly acknowledges the reality of ethics and attempts no scientific explanation of it" Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* [London/New York: Routledge, 1982] 160).

<sup>17</sup>Cf. CUP, 1:328. It is important to acknowledge, of course, that every created thing, on Climacus's view, has actuality and that *only* human actuality is inherently ethical.

"[A]ctuality," explains Climacus, "is not the external action but an interiority in which the individual annuls possibility and identifies himself with what is thought in order to exist in it" (CUP, 1:339). That is, it is the result of the individual's annulling the possibility of the correspondence between what he thinks he ought to do and what he does, by the establishment of the actuality of such correspondence.<sup>18</sup> A person's actuality is thus equivalent, on Climacus's view, to his ethical development. That is, "[E]xisting ethically," he argues, "is actuality" (CUP, 1:319).<sup>19</sup>

The difficulty with distinguishing the technical senses that the expressions "reality" and "actuality" have in the *Postscript* is that it is not clear that they are always used by Climacus in these senses. It is thus possible that when he argues that "[t]he only actuality there is for an existing person is his own ethical actuality" (CUP, 1:316) and that he is related to every other actuality only in terms of possibility, what he means by "*Virkelighed*" is what he normally means by "*Realitet*." In order to determine whether this is the case, we will have to go to the section of the *Postscript* from which this reference has been taken.

"Existing ethically," argues Climacus, "is actuality, but instead of that the age has become so predominantly an observer that not only is everyone that but observing has finally become falsified as if it were actuality" (CUP, 1:319).<sup>20</sup> The concern of the passage in question is explicitly epistemological, as is apparent from the following reference. "All knowledge about actuality is possibility. The only actuality concerning which an existing person has more than knowledge . . . is his own actuality" (CUP, 1:316). That is, the concern of the passage in question is not whether one will choose to behave ethically toward people with whom one comes into contact, but whether "the ethical" is something that can be observed in the "world" or in human history as the Danish theologian and former tutor of Kierkegaard, Hans Lassen Martensen, argued it could.<sup>21</sup> This is, in fact, a recurrent theme of the *Postscript* which,

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<sup>18</sup>Actuality, according to Climacus, annihilates possibility; "not merely the possibility that is excluded but even the possibility that is accepted" (PF, 74).

<sup>19</sup>Emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. CA, 22.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. CUP, 1:320.

it has been argued, is actually a polemic directed against Martensen's "peculiar epistemology [*egenartet Erkendelseslære*]."22

Climacus never asserts that other people are possibilities in the sense that one may or may not choose to be obligated to relate to them ethically. It is not the reality of other people that becomes possibility from the perspective of the subjective, existing individual, it is their moral character. It is not, however, this character in itself (i.e., ontologically), but only to the extent that it is an object of knowledge (i.e., epistemologically). That is, one's judgments of the moral character, or ethical development, of other people are possibilities in the sense that they may or may not correspond to reality.

The reality of the world is never questioned in the *Postscript*. Climacus develops no formal defense of realism because such a defense would be superfluous. We cannot help but believe in the reality of the world on his view. It is the reality of other people, rather than their actuality, toward which we are ethically obligated according to Climacus. That is, we are not obligated to behave ethically only toward people who are themselves ethically developed, or engaged in a process of such development. Christianity asserts that our ethical obligation is toward our "neighbor [*Næsten*]" (WL, 44-60), and our neighbor, explains Kierkegaard, is the person "we see" (WL, 159-174).

This may sound like far too theological a metaphysics to impose on the *Postscript*, a work by a pseudonym who denies he is a Christian. It is important in this context to appreciate, however, that religion and Christianity are not synonymous on Climacus's view and that Climacus is clearly religious in the more general sense.<sup>23</sup> Even more important, however, is the fact that there is reason to believe he is religious in the specifically Christian sense.

I have argued elsewhere that Climacus deliberately undermined the purported objectivity of the *Philosophical Fragments*, that to accept what he said in the "Interlude" section of this work was to express an implicit bias in favor of a Christian rather than a

<sup>22</sup>Arlid Christensen, "Efterskriftens Opgør med Martensen," *Kierkegaardiana* 4 (1962): 48.

<sup>23</sup>That is, he never questions whether there is, in fact, a God.

Socratic interpretation of existence.<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard writes in his journal that Climacus compresses the content of Christianity "to its least possible minimum simply in order to give all the more powerful momentum toward becoming a Christian" (JP, 6:6574).<sup>25</sup> One may legitimately wonder, however, why an author who was not a Christian would try to lead his reader in the direction of a Christian interpretation of existence. Christianity or, more specifically, what it means to become a Christian is the subject of both the *Fragments* and the *Postscript*. But why would someone who was not a Christian go to such lengths to describe what was really involved in becoming a Christian?

If we look closely at Climacus's purported denials that he is a Christian, what we find is not that he denies that the Christian interpretation of existence is the true interpretation, but that he is reluctant to identify himself as a Christian lest he be criticized for falling short of the ideality of Christian existence.<sup>26</sup> By denying that he is a Christian he can thus direct attention away from an examination of the extent to which his life is an expression of Christian truth and toward the issue of what it means in general to become a Christian.

<sup>24</sup>M. Piety, "A Little Light Music: The Subversion of Objectivity in the *Fragments*," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1994) 47-62.

<sup>25</sup>The Hongs' translation actually reads, "In the pseudonymous writings the content of Christianity has been compressed . . .," etc. The Danish phrase that the Hongs have translated as "In the pseudonymous writings" is, however, *Hos pseudonymen* which translates literally as "as the pseudonym has it/according to the pseudonym" (cf. Jens Axelsen, *Dansk-Engelsk Ordbog* [Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1984] s.v. *hos*). The heading under which the reference appears is "On Professor Nielsen's Relation to My Pseudonym Johannes Climacus." It is thus clear that the reference here is not to the pseudonymous writings as a whole, but to Climacus's writings in particular.

<sup>26</sup>Cf., e.g., CUP, 1:466 and 1:617-23. It is interesting to note in this context that Kierkegaard never denies Climacus is a Christian, but only emphasizes that Climacus himself denies this (cf., e.g., JP, 6:6431; 6:6433; 6:6439; Pap. X<sup>1</sup> A 636 and Pap. X<sup>5</sup> B 20 [there is no English translation of these passages]; JP, 6:6349; 6:6597; and 6:6598). Even more important in this context, however, is the fact that Kierkegaard asserts in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* that Climacus does not describe himself directly as a Christian (PV, 145-146n.) which would seem to imply that he is in fact describing himself indirectly as a Christian.

Kierkegaard appears to have believed, however, that this rhetorical strategy on Climacus's part would be relatively transparent to his readers; thus he refers in a letter to Rasmus Nielsen, a professor of philosophy at the University of Copenhagen, to Climacus's "humorous" denial that he is a Christian.<sup>27</sup> That is, Climacus's denial is "humorous" because it is otherwise obvious that he is a Christian and that he is denying it only to direct attention away from himself and toward the issue with which he is concerned as an author.<sup>28</sup>

The fact, however, that it appears Climacus is what one might call a closet Christian does not necessarily make him immune to the criticism that his thought is acosmic. That is, the fact that there is an ethical-religious distinction, on his view, between an individual's reality and his actuality does not in itself demonstrate that his thought is essentially realist. One could argue that even if Climacus's claim that one is related to the actuality of others only in terms of possibility were correctly understood to refer not to the reality of these people, but to their moral character as a possible object of knowledge, the extrapolation from possibility in the epistemological sense to possibility in the ethical sense would still be compelling to the extent that human freedom is portrayed in the *Postscript* as absolute, or equivalent to *liberum arbitrium*.

If moral commitment, according to Climacus is, in fact, something that one can either choose to have or not to have as one pleases—i.e., if there is nothing which influences one in either direction, then it would appear that even from an ethical perspective, the reality of other people is translated, according to Climacus, into possibility. That is, if one could legitimately be said not to appreciate that there were any such thing as ethical obligation except in a hypothetical sense, then the metaphysics of the *Postscript* would be fundamentally acosmic.

<sup>27</sup>LD, 298-99. I am indebted to Paul A. Bauer for bringing this remark to my attention.

<sup>28</sup>Humor, I believe, plays a far more important role in Kierkegaard's thought than has traditionally been appreciated by scholars (cf., e.g., C. Stephen Evans, "Kierkegaard's View of Humor: Must Christians Always be Solemn?" *Faith and Philosophy* 4 [1987]: 176-86).

## 2. *Liberum arbitrium*

There are surprisingly few references to freedom in the *Postscript* and what references there are can only properly be understood when placed in the context of what is generally appreciated about Kierkegaard's views on freedom as these views are expressed other places. In general, it appears that Kierkegaard rejects the notion that human freedom can be equated with *liberum arbitrium*.<sup>29</sup> Genuine "*liberum arbitrium*," he argues in his journals "is really never found" (JP, 2:1240). Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonymous author of *The Concept of Anxiety*, calls such freedom "a thought-unthing [*Tanke-Utting*]" (CA, 49),<sup>30</sup> and argues that "[t]o maintain that freedom begins as *liberum arbitrium* (which is found nowhere, cf. Leibniz) that can choose good just as well as evil inevitably makes every explanation impossible" (CA, 112).<sup>31</sup>

Several prominent Kierkegaard scholars have argued that human freedom is limited on Kierkegaard's view.<sup>32</sup> The interpretation of Kierkegaard as a proponent of the view that this freedom is absolute continues, however, to be popular, both among Kierkegaard scholars and among philosophers in general. It is widely believed, for example, that the foundation of subjective commitment, according to Kierkegaard, is an absolutely free choice.

This can be seen, in particular, in the interpretation Alasdair MacIntyre has given of Kierkegaard's views on the nature of ethical commitment. That is, MacIntyre argues that the foundation of

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Poul Lübcke, "Selvets ontologi hos Kierkegaard," *Kierkegaardiana* 13 (1984): 58.

<sup>30</sup>Thomte actually translates *Tanke-Utting* as "nuisance for thought." It is not clear, however, whether *Tanke-Utting* refers to the inability of thought to comprehend *liberum arbitrium*, or whether it is meant to imply that such freedom is, in effect, a figment of the imagination, or something which has no existence outside of thought. I have chosen the literal translation of *Tanke-Utting* (i.e., thought-unthing) because it preserves this ambiguity.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. EO II, 173-74.

<sup>32</sup>Cf., e.g., Birgit Bertung, *Kierkegaard, Kristendom og Konsekvens* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1994) 60, 77, and 83; Hügli, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität und die Objektivität des Erkennens bei Søren Kierkegaard*, 224; and Gregor Malantschuk, "Studier i Frihedens Betærelse hos Søren Kierkegaard," *Frihed og Eksistens* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1980) 235-49.

ethics, according to Kierkegaard, is nothing other than the individual's free choice to accept an ethical *Weltanschauung* as definitive.<sup>33</sup> That is, ethical prescriptions are valid, on this interpretation, only to the extent that they are accepted as valid by a given individual. The difficulty is that the view that ethical prescriptions derive their force purely from an individual's choice to view them as forceful inevitably makes every explanation of why anyone would ever make such a choice impossible. That is, it appears, as MacIntyre points out, that "no rational justification can be given" for this choice.<sup>34</sup> One cannot, for example, choose to accept ethical prescriptions as valid on the grounds that this is the right thing to do because this would betray that one had already accepted them as such.

The question is thus whether Kierkegaard in fact subscribes to such a view of the foundation of ethics and, in particular, whether this view can be found in the *Postscript*.<sup>35</sup> I asserted above that Climacus never questions the reality of ethics. It is clear, however, that he does not believe everyone is immediately in possession of an ethical world view in the sense that everyone consciously subscribes to this view. He is, in fact, particularly interested in how it is that one comes consciously to hold such a view.

One of the characteristics of an ethical world-view, according to Climacus, is that it sees suffering as essential to human existence. This is not, he acknowledges however, a view of existence to which one is immediately inclined to subscribe. "[T]he *life-view of immediacy*," he asserts, "is good fortune" (CUP, 1:433). That is, the view of life that is immediately appealing considers that life is basically pleasant and that suffering is thus a result of misfortune. "Misfortune," Climacus observes, however, is for the immediate individual

like a narrow pass on the way of immediacy. Now he is in it, but essentially his life-view must continually imagine that it will in turn end because it is something alien. If it does not end, he

<sup>33</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 38.

<sup>34</sup>MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 40.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. C. Stephen Evans's argument against "voluntaristic" readings of Climacus's works in "Kierkegaard and Plantinga," 29-30.

despairs, whereby immediacy ends, and the transition to another understanding of misfortune is made possible, that is, to comprehending suffering, an understanding that does not merely comprehend this or that misfortune but essentially comprehends suffering. (CUP, 1:434)

Only an ethical, or ethical-religious, interpretation of existence comprehends suffering on Climacus's view. One does not actually choose such an interpretation of existence, according to Climacus, however, one merely chooses not to deceive oneself concerning the significance of one's subjective experience.<sup>36</sup>

"The ethical," argues Climacus in the *Postscript*, is both "easy to understand" (CUP, 1:472).<sup>37</sup> and "infinitely valid in itself" (CUP, 1:142).<sup>38</sup> Not only is ethical knowledge unproblematic on Climacus's view, "[t]he ethical," he argues, "is the only certainty, to concentrate upon this the only knowledge that does not change into a hypothesis at the last moment, to be in it the only secure knowledge" (CUP, 1:152).

We saw in the preceding section that Climacus is concerned in the *Postscript* to discredit the view that the ethical is something that can be observed in the world or in human history. "In order to study the ethical," he argues, "every human being is assigned to himself" (CUP, 1:141). That is, "each individual," on his view, "actually and essentially comprehends the ethical only in himself, because it is his co-knowledge with God. In other words, although in a certain sense the ethical is infinitely abstract, in another sense it is infinitely concrete, indeed, the most concrete of all" (CUP, 1:155).

The ethical is "concrete" in that knowledge of it, on Climacus's view, is simply part of the way a person is constructed. This is not to say, again, that everyone consciously subscribes to an ethical

<sup>36</sup>This is a considerable refinement of the views I expressed in "Kierkegaard on Rationality" (*Faith and Philosophy* 10 [1993]: 365-79; repr. in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology of Contemporary Views*, ed. Melville Y. Stewart [Boston: Jones and Bartlett, 1996]). This refinement is, in part, a product of comments and criticisms I received from Hubert L. Dreyfus and Stuart E. Dreyfus.

<sup>37</sup>Emphasis added. Cf. Kierkegaard's claim in his journals that "the thing which a person [et Menneske] actually ought to do is always easy to understand . . . infinitely easy to understand" (JP, 3:2874).

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 160, and Slotty, *Erkenntnislehre*, 40.

life-view, but that experience would inexorably lead anyone to this view who did not systematically deceive himself concerning its significance. Ethical knowledge is, in this way, built into the essence of the individual. It is for this reason Climacus refers to ethical knowing as "essential knowing" (CUP, 1:198). It is also for this reason that Christianity, on his view, "is not a matter of knowing" (CUP, 1:215).<sup>39</sup>

When Climacus argues that ethical knowledge is "the only knowledge that does not change itself into a hypothesis at the last moment," he is making a clear distinction between the individual's appreciation of what he actually ought to do and what it would be the case he ought to do if he decided to adopt an ethical *Weltanschauung*. The latter represents what one could refer to as a hypothetical imperative. A hypothetical imperative represents how one ought to behave if one wished to be ethical. When Climacus argues, however, that ethical knowledge is "the only knowledge that does not change itself into a hypothesis in the last moment," the imperative in question is categorical. To be aware of what Climacus refers to as "the absolute ethical distinction between good and evil" (CUP, 1:134) is to be aware that one is obligated to instantiate the good,<sup>40</sup> independently of whether one wishes to be so obligated. "The ethical," according to Climacus, is "the absolute" (CUP, 1:142).

Climacus is not concerned in the *Postscript* to get his reader to accept ethical prescriptions as valid. He assumes the reader has already done this. Neither is he concerned to enlighten his reader as to the precise substance of these prescriptions. He assumes the reader already knows this. What he is most interested in appears to be what one could call the dialectic of self-deception or what he refers to as the phenomenon of the "subtle conscience" (CUP, 1:604) that endeavors to explain away a responsibility while

<sup>39</sup>Kierkegaard argues that Christianity is not essentially concerned with knowledge, but with the transformation of the individual's will. That is, the problem is not that the individual does not know what he ought to do, but that he does not want, or will to do what he knows he ought (cf. JP, 4:4953, 6:6966, 2:1202; WL, 96; EUD, 215; and SUD, 94-95).

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Kierkegaard's claim that "[t]he most limited poor creature cannot truthfully deny being able to understand this requirement" (FSE, 35).

remaining unaware that this is what it is doing.<sup>41</sup> The "subtle conscience" knows very well what it ought to do, it just doesn't want to do it.<sup>42</sup> It is for this reason Climacus speaks throughout the *Postscript* about the importance of "willing" the ethical.<sup>43</sup>

One does not, according to Climacus, choose to accept ethical or ethical-religious prescriptions as valid, one chooses not to deceive oneself concerning either the substance of these prescriptions as such or the issue of whether one has succeeded in living according to them. That is, when Climacus speaks about the importance of willing the ethical he is making an appeal to the reader's conscience, which according to Kierkegaard, is a "witness who is always and everywhere present" (SV XII, 285). The reader is directly asked to acknowledge that she has not lived, and is not living as she should. It is for Climacus only in the sense that a person chooses not to deceive herself in this way, that she is truly free. That is, freedom on Climacus view, is not equivalent to *liberum arbitrium*, but is associated rather with the ethical,<sup>44</sup> or with willing the good.<sup>45</sup> "[T]he person," he explains, "who rubs the

<sup>41</sup>Cf. CUP, 1:604.

<sup>42</sup>"Every person," argues Kierkegaard, "always understands the truth a good deal farther out than he expresses it existentially. Why does he not go farther out then? Ah there's the rub! I feel too weak (ethically too weak) to go as far out as my knowledge extends [som jeg erkender]" (JP, 2:2301). The difficulty is that although Kierkegaard argues that "[i]n this way everyone becomes guilty before God and must make this admission" (JP, 2:2301), people do not want to make this admission. Rather than admit that they have failed to behave as they knew they ought to have behaved, they try to conceal from themselves their inherent ethical, or ethical-religious knowledge (Cf. SV X, 174; JFY, 158-59; FSE, 117-18, and JP, 1:523) in an effort to deceive themselves into believing there is nothing wrong with their behavior. "[T]his," argues Anti-Climacus, "is how perhaps a great many people [en stor Mængde Mennesker] live, they work gradually at eclipsing their ethical and ethical-religious knowledge which would lead them out into decisions and conclusions that their lower nature does not much care for" (SUD, 94). Cf. JP, 3:3705.

<sup>43</sup>Cf., e.g., CUP, 1:135-37 and 1:343.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. CUP, 1:135.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. CUP, 1:136. Climacus also refers to guilt as an expression of freedom in the negative sense (i.e., as an expression of the failure to actualize one's freedom to do the good. Cf. CUP, 1:534).

wonderful lamp of freedom becomes a servant—the spirit [of the lamp] is the Lord" (CUP, 1:139).<sup>46</sup>

### 3. *The Religious Dimension of Ethics in the Postscript*

It should now be clear that the ethics of the *Postscript* is not founded on acosmism. There is never any question in the *Postscript* of whether other people are in fact real. Not only are other people real, on Climacus's view, their mere presence makes an immediate appeal to our conscience, which he asserts is our "co-knowledge" with God.<sup>47</sup>

But if there is no question concerning the reality of other people in the *Postscript*, what about the reality of God? Climacus's remark that "God is negatively present in . . . subjectivity" (CUP, 1:53) seems to imply that we can only assume God is the ultimate source of our ethical knowledge. God, it appears, is no more than a postulate.

It is important, in this context, to appreciate, however, that the claim that "God is negatively present in subjectivity," is intended to refer to the potential for a concrete God relationship that resides in human subjectivity, it is not meant to reduce all God relationships to such negative presence.<sup>48</sup> God is negatively (i.e., potentially) present, according to Climacus, in the existence of a person who does not yet believe, but he is clearly positively (i.e., actually) present in the existence of the person who does believe. Belief, according to Climacus is, in fact, the means by which one comes to know God. That is, one becomes acquainted with God, on

<sup>46</sup>Cf. Kierkegaard's claim in *Works of Love* that "[d]uty . . . makes a person dependent and at the same moment eternally independent. 'Only law can give freedom.' Alas we very often think that freedom exists and that it is law that binds freedom. Yet it is just the opposite; without law, freedom does not exist at all, and it is law that gives freedom" (WL, 38). Cf. also JP, 2:1241, 3:3281; EO II, 174; and Lübcke, *Seibets ontologi*, 58.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. CUP, 1:141.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. Cornelio Fabro's observation that Kierkegaard scholars have "too often reduced the meaning of Kierkegaard's work to its negative moment," in "Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic," *A Kierkegaard Critique*, ed. Howard A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962) 158.

Climacus's view, through belief in Christ.<sup>49</sup> When Climacus argues that our ethical knowledge is knowledge we share with God, the God he is referring to here is thus not merely an empty postulate, but the real source of this knowledge.

It may seem at times to the reader of the *Postscript* that Climacus wants to reduce divine reality to absurdity and paradox. Climacus argues, however, that "[w]hen I believe, then assuredly neither faith nor the content of faith is absurd" (JP, 6:6598).<sup>50</sup> This claim may appear, at first, to be at odds with his claim in the *Postscript* that if an individual "understands that it [i.e., Christianity] is not the absurd, then he is *eo ipso* no longer a believing Christian" (CUP, 1:558). The argument of the *Postscript*, however, is twofold. Climacus argues first, that "*viewed objectively*, it [Christianity] is the absurd" (CUP, 1:210) and second, that this is *not* the proper perspective from which to view Christianity.<sup>51</sup>

"Christianity," argues Climacus,

wants to give the single individual an eternal happiness, a good that is not distributed in bulk but only to one, and to one at a time. Even though Christianity assumes that subjectivity, as the possibility of appropriation, is the possibility of receiving this good, it nevertheless does not assume that as a matter of course the subjectivity is all set, as a matter of course has even an actual idea of the significance of this good. This development or remarking of the subjectivity, its infinite concentration in itself under a conception of the individual's highest good, an eternal happiness, is the developed possibility of the subjectivity's first possibility.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. PF, 68-69. "[T]o know [kjende] God" in the sense of to be acquainted with him, argues Kierkegaard, "is crucial and without this knowledge a human being would become nothing at all" (EUD, 326). Kierkegaard's authorship is rich with references to acquaintance knowledge of God (cf., e.g., EUD, 321, 326; and JP, 1:1351) or of Christ (cf., e.g., PC, 172).

<sup>50</sup>Cf. C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press, 1983) 239-40; and Sylvia Walsh, "Echoes of Absurdity: The Offended Consciousness and the Absolute Paradox in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*," *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Philosophical Fragments*, 33-62.

<sup>51</sup>This point is made so often throughout the *Postscript* that it would be impractical to provide a list of references here. CUP, 1:130 is, however, a particularly straightforward reference and may thus be helpful for the reader who has not yet appreciated that this is a central theme of the *Postscript*.

Christianity, therefore, protests against all objectivity; it wants the subject to be infinitely concerned about himself. (CUP, 1:130)

"Like," argues Climacus, "is understood only by like" (CUP, 1:52). This means that since Christianity, on his view, is essentially something subjective, it can only properly be understood from a subjective perspective. "With reference," he explains, "to a kind of observation in which it is of importance that the observer be in a definite state [e.g., a subjective state], it holds true that when he is not in that state he does not know anything whatever" (CUP, 1:52). That is, since Christianity is essentially something subjective, one must be passionately or subjectively engaged with it in order to understand it. "Christianity," argues Climacus, "cannot be observed objectively" (CUP, 1:57).

Christianity, on Climacus's view, is "absurd" when viewed merely objectively. That is, its absurdity cannot be rationalized away as Martensen, for example, attempts to do in his *Christian Dogmatics*.<sup>52</sup> What Climacus objects to is not that faith can give the believer insight into the nature or substance of Christian truth, but that it can give the believer insight into the purported objective necessity, or inherent rationality of this truth.

#### 4. *The Reality of the World in Kierkegaard's "Postscript"*

The development of an individual, according to Climacus, is associated, as we saw in part two, the appropriation of ethical-religious truth in the sense that the individual brings his or her existence into conformity with the ideal of how one ought to exist that is provided by God through his or her conscience. Freedom, as we saw in part one, is equivalent to the decision to establish such conformity. Hermann Deuser explains, however, that "the chance of freedom—to be able to decide to do the good . . . —exists only if the self, in the act of deciding, stands in relation to something else. That is, the chance exists only if the self does not produce itself and have merely itself as a goal."<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup>H. Martensen, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. William Urwick (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1866).

<sup>53</sup>Hermann Deuser, "Kierkegaards *Verteidigung der Kontingenz*: »*Daß etwas Inkommensurables in einem Menschenleben ist*,«" *Kierkegaardiana* 15 (1991): 113 (my

The reality of the world is never questioned in the *Postscript*. The concern of this work is epistemological rather than ontological. Belief in the reality of the external world is more fundamental, on Climacus's view, than is skepticism concerning this reality. Climacus is thus not in the least interested in the skeptical question of whether there is an external world or a moral law. He is interested rather in the nature of ethical knowledge and the ethical consequences that this has.

Because our conscience, according to Climacus, is the source of our ethical knowledge, this knowledge is essentially reflexive. That is, it tells us how we ought to relate to those around us as well as whether we have been successful in this regard. It cannot, however, give us any definitive information about the ethical significance of the behavior of others. I can extrapolate from my own experience and speculate about what my conscience might tell me if I were in a situation similar to that of another person, but since I cannot actually "make myself into the other person" (CUP, 1:321), I can never be certain that I have properly understood his situation. Our judgments concerning the ethical significance of the behavior of others are thus merely possibilities in the sense that they may or may not correspond to reality.

But if ethical knowledge is essentially reflexive, then it is inherently unethical to judge the behavior of others. It is a confusion of the essence of the ethical to suppose, as speculative philosophy does, that it can be observed in the world.

Speculative philosophy, the target of much of the polemic of the *Postscript*, has, on Climacus's view, lost sight of the essence of the ethical as a direct result of its striving for objectivity. The essence of the ethical is subjective in the sense that it resides in each individual's conscience. Yet speculative philosophy abstracts from individuals as such. It is, in fact, the activity of speculative philosophy of abstracting from the world, from particular individuals and the concrete relations between them that, for Climacus, makes it comic.<sup>54</sup> That is, speculative philosophy, on his view, has "forgotten in a kind of world-historical absentmindedness what it

translation); and SUD, 13-14.

<sup>54</sup>Cf., e.g., CUP, 1:190, 1:357, 1:533.

means to be a human being, not what it means to be human in general . . . , but what it means that *we*, you and I and he, are human beings, each one of us individually" (CUP, 1:120).<sup>55</sup> It is, one could argue, the antirealism of speculative philosophy that is the target of much of the polemic of the *Postscript*. That is, the problem with speculative philosophy, on Climacus's view, is precisely that it has confused the concrete world with the abstraction of the "world historical."<sup>56</sup>

The reality of the world is the foundation upon which the ethics of the *Postscript* rests. If the world, according to Climacus, had no reality (*realitet*) in itself, it would be impossible, on his view, for the individual to achieve actuality (*virkelighed*). That is, the actuality of human beings is synonymous in the *Postscript* with their ethical development. Our ethical, or ethical-religious, obligations are not, however, things we can fulfill in isolation from the rest of the human community. Climacus in fact ridicules the suggestion that we should, in order to develop ethically-religiously, isolate ourselves from "the confusion of the world" (CUP, 1:415 and 1:459). It is, on his view, precisely in "life's multiplicity" (CUP, 1:415), or in our relations to the individuals with whom our activities bring us into contact, that our actuality as human beings is painstakingly won.

<sup>55</sup>Emphasis added. The Hongs' translation actually reads "each one on his own." This is not incorrect. It seems to me, however, to lend credence to the cosmic interpretation of Kierkegaard. The Danish phrase translated by the Hongs as "on his own" is *hver for sig* which may also be translated simply as "each" (cf. Axelsen, s.v. *hver*, and Molbech, *Første Deel*, s.v. *hver*).

<sup>56</sup>Cf. J. Heywood Thomas's claim that "Kierkegaard's self-appointed task in philosophy was to provide a corrective for what he regarded as the System's obsessive concern or preoccupation with the world-historical," "Kierkegaard's View of Time," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 4 (1973): 33.