

The Trouble with Paraphrasing Kierkegaard

Writing about Kierkegaard presents numerous difficulties. Some stem from his poetic or literary style. This is particularly true when the goal is to clarify his philosophical positions and arguments. Such things seldom appear on the surface of his texts. To uncover them, one must acquire a knack for reading between the lines. One must develop a skill set more commonly associated with interpreting art than understanding philosophy.

Yet, writing about or even paraphrasing Kierkegaard requires no special literary talent. It demands no flair for the poetic, unless clarity and straightforwardness should count. The use of literary tropes might even be a defect. It might obscure one's explanation of Kierkegaard's ideas. It might undermine one's ability to make what he says more transparent. In addition, we already possess an adequate *literary* rendition of his views. We can open up his original texts if that is what we want.

The foregoing paragraph states an intuitive position. Many Kierkegaard commentators would accept it, even if few publicly have.¹ Several contemporary aestheticians might support it as well.² However, Kierkegaard rejects the view. He claims that we cannot paraphrase some of his ideas in a straightforward fashion. In the words of Johannes Climacus, these ideas defy "direct communication."³

What Kierkegaard says is both intriguing and troublesome. If true, it requires us to reassess how we write about Kierkegaard and, perhaps, how we think about form and content in general. Thus, we would like to know why Kierkegaard said it,

and whether we should believe him. My primary goal is to answer these questions. More precisely, I aim to piece together and defend the justification he offers for his position.⁴ At the end of the paper, I will discuss some implications for contemporary scholarship. A brief excursus into Kierkegaard's aesthetics will serve as my point of departure.

I. Unity of Form and Content

'Form' and 'content' are notoriously ambiguous words. Thus, 'a unity of form and content' can mean many things.⁵ Some scholars use the expression to pick out a *pro tanto* good-making feature of works of art. For them, 'content' refers to *what* an artwork represents, expresses, or embodies, i.e. its theme, meaning, or subject matter. 'Form', by contrast, refers to *how* an artwork presents its content to us or the manner in which it does so. Thus understood, form and content comprise a unity when the two elements fit together well. Such a fit occurs when the form of work of art serves as a particularly effective vehicle (and perhaps the only vehicle) for conveying its content.⁶ An example from Noël Carroll illustrates the idea:

[T]he content, subject matter, meaning or theme of *The Fall of Icarus* is the way in which epoch-making history passes us by unnoticed.... This theme is articulated by decentering the subject of the painting—Icarus's legendary fall—off to one side where it is likely to be missed, thereby presenting and reinforcing the meaning of the work through its visual appearance.... The very design of the painting brings its meaning home to us. It is a deftly suitable means for making us aware of what the painting is about.⁷

This position suffers from its share of problems.⁸ Nevertheless, several nineteenth-century philosophers embraced it. Hegel, for instance, defended a version in the lectures he gave on aesthetics during the 1820's.⁹ Some of the Danish Hegelians subsequently brought the view to Copenhagen. The aesthetician Johan Ludwig Heiberg (1791-1860) served as the primary conduit for the flow of ideas, writing and speaking about the matter extensively during Kierkegaard's student days.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, the tradition influenced *Either/Or* (1842). In fact, A, the pseudonymous author of the first volume, relies on it to explain the status of classic works of art.¹¹

As part of his explanation, A offers an account of why failing to exhibit a unity of form and content detracts from a work of art. On his view, the problem is not that disunity results in a loss of beauty or elegance, as we might expect. It is rather that disunity entails conveying content in an ineffective manner. More precisely, when the form and content of an artwork do not fit each other, the artwork represents its content inaccurately.

A develops this position in his essay on Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. He argues that we should regard Mozart's opera as the greatest of all works of art (*EO*, 1:51).¹² It deserves such reverence partly because it exhibits a *perfect* unity of form and content (*EO*, 1:56).¹³ Not only has Mozart hit upon a compelling way to present the opera's subject matter of erotic love. The chosen medium of music is the *only* way to accomplish the task:

The most abstract idea conceivable is the sensual [*Sandselig*] in its elemental originality. But through which medium can [the sensual, the immediate erotic] be presented? Only through music. It cannot be presented in sculpture because it has a qualification of a kind of inwardness; it cannot be painted, for it cannot be caught in definite contours. In its lyricism, it is a force, a wind, impatience, passion, etc., yet in such a way that it exists not in one instant but in a succession of instants, for if it existed in one instant, it could be depicted or painted. That it exists in a succession of instants expresses its epic character, but still it is not epic in the stricter sense, for it has not reached the point of words; it continually moves within immediacy. Consequently, it cannot be presented in poetry, either. The only medium that can present it is music...In Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, we have the perfect unity of this idea and its corresponding form. (*EO*, 1:56-57; translation altered)

In this passage, A revives a view defended by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) and Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the former of whom he cites explicitly (*EO*, 1:169). Lessing and Mendelssohn held that many if not all artistic mediums have limitations. Because of their physical properties, they cannot be used to represent certain things. For example, a painting only offers viewers an image of an individual time slice in the history of its object. Consequently, it can only accurately depict that which is confined to an individual time slice. It will do injustice to anything extended across time, including movement and change. Similarly, a sculpture only presents a three-dimensional body to those who behold it. Thus, it can only properly portray

such a body. It is ill suited to capturing actions, abstractions, and the inner stirrings of the soul.¹⁴

A's argument is largely¹⁵ an application of Lessing and Mendelssohn's theory. He begins by pointing out that the subject matter of *Don Giovanni* is both invisible and protracted in time. While erotic love is transitory, it lasts longer than an instant. In addition, it concerns the inward aspects of human life and not (just) the outward or bodily ones (see *EO*, 1:106). A concludes that no artist can accurately represent this subject matter in the medium of painting or sculpture.

Judge William, another of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, picks up this line of thought in the second volume of *Either/Or* (*EO*, 2:133-139). He begins with a similar assumption. Art, by which the judge means painting and sculpture, concentrates everything in the moment (*EO*, 2:133). It represents how things look at a given point in time. Therefore, art only has one appropriate subject matter, the class of things that exist merely for one moment or that we can reduce to what takes place in a moment. It will distort anything else (*EO*, 2:135).¹⁶

Like A, the judge believes that some things fall outside the domain of topics capable of accurate artistic depiction. His primary example is marital love. The ideal husband, the judge claims, does not express his love for his spouse simply by being faithful at one decisive point in time. He does so by remaining true to her at every moment of every day (*EO*, 2:138). The same holds for the ideal wife. Thus, marital love is essentially extended in time (*EO*, 2:138-139). Reducing it to what happens in a specific moment would obscure this fact. Consequently, art cannot accurately represent marital love:

Romantic love can be portrayed very well in the moment; marital love cannot, for an ideal husband is not one who is ideal once in his life but one who is that every day. If I wish to portray a hero who conquers kingdoms and countries, this can be done very well in the moment, but a cross-bearer who takes up his cross every day can never be portrayed in either poetry or art, for the point is that he does it every day. (*EO*, 2:135; see also 2:138)

The judge makes the same claim about humility:

Humility is hard to portray precisely because it is sequence, and... [the observer] really needs to see something that poetry and art cannot provide, to see its continuous coming into existence, for it is essential to humility to come into existence continuously, and if this is shown to him in its ideal moment, he misses something, for he senses that its true ideality consists not in its being ideal at the moment but in its being continuous. (*EO*, 2:135)

In summary, using painting or sculpture to portray something essentially extended in time does that thing violence. It compacts what is by nature protracted. The resultant work of art misleads viewers. It gives them the false impression that its subject matter can possess a pregnant or decisive moment.¹⁷

This general idea also receives attention from Johannes Climacus, yet a third one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms. Climacus makes an important contribution to the discussion because he focuses on linguistic media instead of painting and sculpture.

Take the following passage:

[J]ust as easy as it is to state that a human being is nothing before God, so is it difficult to express this in existence. But to describe and depict this in more detail is in turn difficult, because speech is surely a more abstract medium than existence, and in relation to the ethical all speech involves a little deception, because speech, despite the most subtle and skilled precautionary measures, always still has an appearance of the foreshortened perspective. Therefore, even if the discourse makes the most enthusiastic and most desperate effort to show how difficult it is, or makes an extreme effort in an indirect form, it still always remains more difficult to do than it appears in the discourse (*CUP*, 1:463).

Climacus asserts that the struggle to see oneself as nothing before God is always more difficult than it comes across in a description of the task. “Easier said than done,” we might put it. This point has interesting consequences. It entails that we cannot use language to represent the subject matter in question. At least not accurately. Not without “a little deception.” Thus, like A and Judge William, Climacus holds that presenting content in the wrong form gives people the wrong impression of it.

II. Form-Content Contradictions

Around the time Kierkegaard published these ideas on the relationship between form and content in works of art, he began to think about a parallel issue in academic discourse. He started to wonder whether expressing his philosophical

convictions might require the use of a particular style, perhaps one that differed from that found in the stereotypical academic treatise.¹⁸

Many of Kierkegaard's contemporaries shared his concern.¹⁹ Indeed, some of the early German Romantics, most notably Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772-1801)) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), raised a similar question.²⁰ They asked whether they could express their views accurately in a systematic fashion. In the end, they decided they could not and they abandoned the traditional systematic format in favor of a fragmentary one. Their reflections paved the way for Kierkegaard's.²¹

We might wonder, however, why *any* of them looked for a fit between the form and content of their philosophical writing. At first glance, their quest seems misguided. Unity of form and content is an *aesthetic* property. It is a good-making feature of *works of art*. Philosophical writing does not aim at the creation of art, let alone good art. (At least qua philosophical writing it does not do so.) Its goal is to provide clear and compelling accounts, explanations, or justifications of theories, phenomena, concepts, etc. Someone can perform these tasks and perform them well without constructing a work of art in the process. Thus, it should not count against a piece of philosophical writing if its form does not fit its content. And so Kierkegaard and the Romantics should not have troubled themselves with finding such a fit.

Yet they did, and we learn much by trying to understand why. Consider again the rationale behind criticizing a mismatch between the form and content of a work of art. A, Judge William, and Climacus explain the criticism by saying that artistically

representing content in the wrong form results in distortion. It involves failing to portray the subject matter accurately. I believe we catch a glimpse here of the problem bothering Kierkegaard, Novalis, and Schlegel. They may have feared that presenting content in the wrong form means expressing it in an impoverished way.

We can develop this suggestion by examining another passage from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In this one, Climacus says that a failure of fit between the form and content of one's communication can generate a contradiction. With a touch of sarcasm, he declares:

To require of a thinker that he *contradict* [*modsige*] his entire thought and his world-view by the *form* he gives his communication, to console him by saying that in this way he will be beneficial, to let him remain convinced that nobody cares about it, indeed, that nobody notices it in these objective times, since such extreme conclusions are merely tomfoolery, which every systematic day laborer regards as nothing—well, that is good advice, and also quite cheap.

(*CUP*, 1:75, my emphasis)

If correct, Climacus's view has interesting consequences. A contradiction in one's communication is not (merely) an aesthetic defect. It is a philosophical one. Thus, failing to meet the benchmark of a unity of form and content would result not (just) in bad art but in bad philosophy.

Is Climacus correct? I believe so. To see why, we must understand how the problem he mentions can arise. We must grasp how the style of a piece of communication (or writing) can contradict its content.

Climacus offers us little explicit help on this point. However, I surmise, by inference from some examples he uses, one of which we will inspect shortly, that he makes tacit use of a principle endorsed by several aestheticians today. The principle states that the style or form of one's writing can implicitly express a claim. Consequently, the form of one's writing is not entirely distinct from its content. Rather, the form contributes to the content or has a kind of content all its own.²²

With this principle in place, the possibility of a form-content contradiction follows relatively quickly. The implicit claims expressed by the *form* of a piece of writing can state one thing. The explicit claims expressed by the *content* of that piece of writing—i.e. the content not implied by the form and that I will call the lexical or semantic content—can state something else. These two sets of claims can then contradict each other.

This explanation gives rise to a new question. How can the style or form of a text implicitly express a claim? Once again, Climacus provides few overt answers. However, he does supply examples of form-content contradictions. Inspecting one will prove worthwhile.

The most telling example occurs in the lines immediately following the passage quoted above:

Suppose it was the life-view of a religiously existing subject that one may not have followers, that this would be treason to both God and men; suppose he were a bit obtuse...and announced this directly with unction and pathos—what then? Well, then he would be understood and soon ten would apply

who, just for a free shave each week, would offer their services in proclaiming this doctrine; that is, in further substantiation of the truth of his doctrine, he would have been so very fortunate as to gain followers who accepted and spread this doctrine about having no follower. (*CUP*, 1:75)

Note two points about the example. First, the lexical content of the speaker's communication is that human beings should not have followers. Second, the manner in which he communicates this content actually prompts people to become his followers. When he announces his message "with unction and pathos" he creates an atmosphere that encourages those who hear him to take up his cause.

The fact that the speaker induces people to become his followers *gives the impression* that becoming his follower is an appropriate course of action to take. To explain the source of this impression, we can appeal somewhat anachronistically to Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle. It states that we typically assume people engage in cooperative and rational behavior.²³ Although Grice does not explicitly say so, in part this means we presume that people will encourage others to do only what it is appropriate to do in a given situation. Accordingly, when we witness someone encouraging others to do something, we take it that he or she believes the action suits the circumstances. This pattern of thought underlies the impression mentioned above.

If the style employed by the speaker in Climacus's example *gives the impression* that becoming his follower is appropriate, it also *implies* that this is the case. However, such an implication contradicts the semantic content of the

speaker's communication. For, according to the semantic content, becoming a follower is *not* appropriate. Consequently, the speaker's communication falls prey to a form-content contradiction.

III. The Problem for Paraphrasing

The possibility of form-content contradictions discloses a subtle way paraphrasing can go awry. Consider the following example.²⁴ There exists a *SparkNotes* volume devoted to Kierkegaard.²⁵ It contains short summaries of several of his writings. It also provides a brief overview of his main arguments and ideas. On a charitable reading, the semantic content of the "SparkNote on Søren Kierkegaard" accurately captures the explicit meaning of the works it covers. Of course, it does not express or evoke the same profound emotions. It does not produce the same powerful effects. But such shortcomings hardly matter. A good paraphrase need only say the same thing as the original, not give rise to all the same experiences.²⁶

Given this initial positive assessment, should we consider the *SparkNotes* paraphrases a success? Not necessarily. A problem still would arise if

- (1) the form of the paraphrases implicitly expressed something that the form of the originals did not; and
- (2) this implication contradicted the lexical content of the originals.²⁷

If these conditions obtained, we could not rightly say that the *SparkNotes* volume said what Kierkegaard's original writings did. For in addition to expressing everything the originals did, it would also express something more. And this surplus content

would be at odds with the content of the originals. Thus, the *SparkNotes* volume would have distorted the meaning of Kierkegaard's texts to some degree.

Does the "SparkNote on Søren Kierkegaard" actually suffer from this problem? It seems likely. The abstract and systematic style of the "SparkNote" leads readers to reflect on the topics Kierkegaard broaches in a similarly abstract and systematic fashion. It thereby implies that such reflection is appropriate, a point Kierkegaard contests (*CUP*, 1:107-109, 1:301-315). Thus, the *SparkNotes* volume does not always say what Kierkegaard says. It sometimes expresses positions that contradict those found in his works. In this respect, it comes up short as a paraphrase (or series of paraphrases).

This illustration might not vex us too much. It shows that there are some stylistic restrictions on how we can successfully go about the paraphrase project.²⁸ We cannot use just any old format we feel like. But so what? As long as the restrictions do not rule out *every* approach, as long as they leave *some* options open, why should we fret?

According to Kierkegaard, stylistic restrictions should concern aspiring paraphrasers in a special case, namely *when the forbidden styles include the one they wish to use*. Turning to an example he discusses will clarify the point. The example will primarily deal with the paraphrase of *Postscript* attempted by his one-time protégé, Rasmus Nielsen (1809-1884). However, as we shall see, Nielsen employs a writing style that many of today's commentators have adopted. Thus, Kierkegaard's objection to Nielsen will apply to them as well.

IV. Nielsen's Paraphrase of Concluding Unscientific Postscript

We can begin with our own brief paraphrase of *Postscript*. Doing so is somewhat of a necessary evil. It is *necessary* because we cannot understand Nielsen's error without grasping the position he seeks to paraphrase. A quotation from *Postscript* would serve us best. However, Climacus presents his position so diffusely that no passage of reasonable length would do. Providing a paraphrase is somewhat *evil* because any problem plaguing Nielsen's paraphrase will threaten ours as well. I will return to this issue in the final section of the paper. For now we can proceed.

Postscript contains an account of two ways of approaching ethical and religious issues. On the one hand, there is *the objective way* (see *CUP*, 1:21-57). We can recognize it as the approach traditionally taken by academic scholars. Its primary purposes are the acquisition of true beliefs and the avoidance of false ones. Accordingly, it focuses on the theoretical and empirical justifications of various candidates for belief as well as the internal coherence of the same.

The objective approach is also tied to a specific attitude. Those who adopt it try to be *disinterested* and *dispassionate* in their intellectual labors (*CUP*, 1:21-22, 1:32, 1:55, 1:192-194). They fear that letting their goals, values, and emotions come into play will lead to bias and ultimately distortion, undermining their pursuit of the truth. Thus, they attempt to set aside their personal points of view along with any concern for the implications their inquiries might have for their lives. In Climacus's words, they strive to look at matters *sub specie aeterni* (*CUP*, 1:301-308).

On the other hand, there is *the subjective way* of approaching ethical and religious issues. It is opposed to the objective way in several respects. People who adopt it do not directly concern themselves with the justification or internal coherence of the doctrines they believe. They focus their attention on the matter of appropriation—of how to make these doctrines their own (*CUP*, 1:21). In other words, they concentrate on how to live out the doctrines within the confines of their everyday lives. Their attitude throughout this process also differs from that taken up by those who pursue the objective approach. They do not strive to be disinterested or dispassionate. They do not attempt to disregard the personal implications of their intellectual inquiries. Instead, they are passionately interested in what the ethical and religious doctrines they encounter mean *for them*—for who they are, how they should live, and what they should become (*CUP*, 1:165-177, 1:314, 1:317, 1:351).

The main thesis of *Postscript* is that we should take up the subjective approach when dealing with ethical and religious matters (*CUP*, 1:52-53, 1:199).²⁹ Whatever value the objective approach may have in other domains, it is inappropriate here.³⁰ Thus we have Climacus's famous dictum that, when it comes to ethics and religion, "subjectivity is truth" (*CUP*, 1:192-205).

Rasmus Nielsen sets forth his paraphrase of *Postscript* in a number of books and lectures published around 1850. His most important work in this vein is *Magister S. Kierkegaard's "Johannes Climacus" and Dr. H. Martensen's "Christian Dogmatics."*³¹ Herein Nielsen provides lengthy quotations from *Postscript* followed by painstaking analysis and commentary, the spirit of which I hope to have captured in the foregoing.

Kierkegaard has harsh words for Nielsen's project. He declares that he "not only cannot give approval but must categorically take exception to Professor Nielsen's books."³² However, his dissatisfaction does not stem from the fact that Nielsen gets Climacus's positions wrong. It stems from the fact that Nielsen presents these positions in the wrong style. In other words, Kierkegaard's objection does not concern *what* Nielsen says but *how* he says it. He concedes that because of Nielsen "many have now become aware of [Climacus's] cause."³³ But he adds that "the cause has retrogressed, *because it has acquired a less consistent form.*"³⁴

Nielsen's strategy involves presenting *Postscript* as it appears through an academic lens. He frames it within the context of a scholarly debate with some of the Danish Hegelians. He even portrays it as a contribution to the debate.³⁵ Most importantly, the manner in which Nielsen paraphrases *Postscript* reflects his own academic approach to the text: he uses an abstract, disinterested, and dispassionate style of writing.³⁶

To see the defect of Nielsen's strategy, it helps to step back and notice what often happens when we read a text. Usually, we enter into the frame of mind of the perceived author. We find ourselves viewing some part of the world or approaching some topic in the way the perceived author does. In the case of Nielsen's books, we are led to adopt a scholarly or academic mindset. More precisely, we are induced to take up the same objective approach toward the ethical and religious subject matter of *Postscript* as Nielsen does.

The fact that Nielsen's writing style encourages us to become objective gives the impression that doing so is appropriate. However, Climacus explicitly and

emphatically rejects this view. Herein lies the flaw in Nielsen's paraphrase. Its style implicitly expresses a claim that contradicts Climacus's main thesis.³⁷

To summarize, the semantic content of Nielsen's paraphrase is unproblematic. However, as discussed in the previous section, that is not good enough. To construct an adequate paraphrase—to say the same thing in a different way—the style one employs also must not imply anything at odds with the content of the original. Nielsen's paraphrase fails to meet this additional requirement. That is why Kierkegaard takes exception to it.³⁸

V. Implications for Contemporary Kierkegaard Scholarship

In the middle decades of the last century, Kierkegaard played the whipping boy in analytic philosophical circles. Members of these groups considered him a thinker who at best set forth shoddy arguments for dubious conclusions and at worst practiced the dark arts of misology. John Laird, for example, described his encounter with Kierkegaard's writings with the following derogatory remarks:

Even in a wide literary interpretation of “philosophy”—and no other could be appropriate—I found very little that seemed to be worth stating in a formal way.³⁹

Brand Blanshard wound up his attack on Kierkegaard in a similar vein:

One reads on with gathering disillusionment, coming in the end to realize that Kierkegaard, if a philosopher at all, is a distinct species of philosopher,

and that it is useless to look for clearly stated theses, still less for ordered arguments in support of them.⁴⁰

In general, Laird, Blanshard, and like-minded folk saw Kierkegaard as a figure of perhaps some literary interest, but not one worthy of sustained philosophical attention.

There has been a movement afoot in recent decades to counteract this impression. Many Kierkegaard scholars have endeavored to provide a more favorable picture of his work. As part of this process, they have offered up analytic reconstructions or paraphrases of the arguments and views contained in his writings.⁴¹ Their efforts have enjoyed success and Kierkegaard's philosophical reputation has grown.

It may sound strange to say it, but some Kierkegaard scholars dislike the direction in which things have gone.⁴² Their objection is an existential one. They believe that transposing the content of Kierkegaard's works into, as they put it, "APA-style arguments" robs these works of their most valuable possession.⁴³ It saps them of their ability to transform our lives, to teach us to become better human beings. Kierkegaard is a physician of the soul, these scholars say, one who treats our sickness unto death. Our particular strain of the sickness requires a poetic treatment. Handing us a set of propositions or an argument will do us no good, in part because our problem just is that we have an excessive attachment to propositions and arguments. Thus, a version of Kierkegaard without the literary trappings lacks the all-important therapeutic power of his originals.⁴⁴

On my account, putting an “analytic” face on Kierkegaard’s writings suffers from a different flaw. Because it involves approaching Kierkegaard as Nielsen does, it commits the same error: it distorts the meaning of some of Kierkegaard’s texts. This is no small problem. The analytic paraphrase project typically aims to lend Kierkegaard’s writings an air of greater philosophical respectability. To do so, it must capture the meaning of his works accurately. Otherwise, what it champions strictly speaking will not belong to Kierkegaard. *He* and *his* will not increase because of the effort.

There is danger here of serious fallout.⁴⁵ My conclusion threatens to render pointless much analytic scholarship on Kierkegaard’s *Postscript*. Indeed, if the resultant representations of this text are always *misrepresentations*, how can they help us? Will they not just lead us astray? Therefore, we might think that scholars of an analytic persuasion should jump ship. Indeed, on one plausible interpretation, this is the moral of *Postscript*’s final line: “Oh, would that no ordinary seaman will lay a dialectical hand on this work but let it stand as it now stands” (*CUP*, 1:630).

However, giving up on analytic scholarship of *Postscript* would be an overreaction.⁴⁶ If Kierkegaard effectively recommends it at the end of the book, he makes a mistake. The fact that an analytic paraphrase fails in the sense that it distorts the original does not entail that it is useless. Even a distortion of a text can serve as a stepping-stone to an accurate understanding of it. Moreover, we often need such stepping-stones. For example, many analytic philosophers will pay no mind to Kierkegaard’s writings until it is shown that these writings contain coherent arguments. Such arguments do not exist on the surface level of his texts. We must

piece them together out of the raw materials we find. That is to say, we must offer up careful, analytic paraphrases. Of course, we might hope that the sort of philosophers described above will ultimately engage with more than just some paraphrase. However, as Kierkegaard says in *Point of View*, we must begin where our audience is.⁴⁷

Thus, my position does not require Kierkegaard scholars—even those of an analytic bent, such as myself—to give up our stock in trade. However, it does oblige us to admit the flaws of our work so that we might mitigate the damage we do. At the very least, we must acknowledge that the style of our presentation can give a misleading impression of some of Kierkegaard's writings.⁴⁸ It can make our readers think he holds views or endorses courses of action that he does not.

VI. The Self-Reference Problem

A final consideration deserves attention. My paper appears to suffer from a self-reference problem. On the one hand, I argue that using an analytic writing style to paraphrase *Postscript* is misguided. On the other hand, I employ such a style, and do so while paraphrasing *Postscript*. Therefore, according to my own thesis, my paper is flawed.

This problem evades an entirely satisfactory solution. Nevertheless, I can soften the blow. First, it will not do to respond by dismissing my thesis as false. For if my thesis is false, there are no stylistic restrictions on paraphrasing Kierkegaard. So an analytic format is perfectly acceptable. Moreover, my use of it is no exception. Thus, if my reasoning is otherwise sound, my conclusion still goes through.

Matters seem worse if my thesis is true. Under this hypothesis, my attempts to defend Kierkegaard's position are flawed. In addition, they are flawed precisely because they proceed in an analytic fashion. However, my paper does not therefore lack all value. It still does something of merit—just not what meets the eye. Rather than offering a demonstration of my thesis, it provides a *performance* of my thesis. It *illustrates* how using the wrong style to paraphrase Kierkegaard creates difficulties. Such illustrations are compelling in their own right.

To recap, the mere fact that I employ the writing style I criticize does not cripple my paper. It does not entail that my thesis is false. Nor does it imply that I fail to provide support for the view I espouse.

Notes

¹ See, for example, C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1983), p. 14; Poul Lübcke, "Kierkegaard and Indirect Communication," *History of European Ideas* 12, no. 1 (1990): 31.

² See, for example, Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 86. For a dissenting view, see Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 2-53; Lawrence M. Hinman, "Philosophy and Style," *Monist* 63, no. 4 (1980): 512-529.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments,"* 2 vols., trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 79-80, 242. Subsequent references to this work are given in the text as *CUP* followed by a volume number and then a page number.

⁴ The justification is Kierkegaard's in the sense that it arises in his writings. Whether he believed it is another matter. He published some of the source texts under pseudonyms and he asks us not to attribute views found in these writings to him (see *CUP*, 1:627). I will generally respect this request.

⁵ See Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts*, p. 86; Meyer Schapiro, "On Perfection, Coherence, and Unity of Form and Content," in Bill Beckley and David Shapiro (eds.), *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics* (New York: Allworth Press, 1998), p. 7.

⁶ See A. C. Bradley, "Poetry for Poetry's Sake," in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1909), p.15; Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 125-127; Richard Eldridge, "Form and Content: An Aesthetic Theory of Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 23, no. 4 (1985): 303-316; Gordon Graham, "Learning from Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35, no. 1 (1995): 30; Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 60-68, 130-132; Kelly Dean Jolley, "(Kivy on) the Form-Content Identity Thesis," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48, no. 2 (2008): 193-204; Schapiro, "On Perfection, Coherence, and Unity of Form and Content," pp. 7-13.

⁷ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, p. 126.

⁸ See Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, pp. 131-136; Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts*, pp. 84-117. For instance, the view is inapplicable to abstract painting and absolute music, which lack recognizable content.

⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 102, 490. See also Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel and the 'End' of Art," *The Owl of Minerva* 29, no. 1 (1997): 3-5; David James "The Significance of Kierkegaard's Interpretation of *Don Giovanni* in Relation to Hegel's Philosophy of Art," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2008): 153; Terry Pinkard, "Symbolic, Classical, and Romantic Art," in Stephen Houlgate (ed.), *Hegel and the Arts* (Northwestern University Press, 2007), pp. 12-13.

¹⁰ See James, "The Significance of Kierkegaard's Interpretation of *Don Giovanni*," p. 147n2; George Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*, 2nd ed.

(London: SCM-Canterbury Press, 1999), pp. 16-18, 36-37, 99; Pattison, "Kierkegaard and Genre," *Poetics Today* 28, no. 3 (2007): 479; Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 210-212; Jon Stewart, *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark, Tome I, The Heiberg Period: 1824-1836* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 2007), pp. 178-182.

¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1987), vol. 1, pp. 49-57. Subsequent references to this work are given in the text as *EO* followed by a volume number and then a page number. See also James, "The Significance of Kierkegaard's Interpretation of *Don Giovanni*," pp. 154-155; Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*, pp. 96-99, 105; Pattison, "Kierkegaard and Genre," pp. 482-483; Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, pp. 212-214; Sylvia Walsh Utterback, "Don Juan and the Representation of Spiritual Sensuousness," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47, no. 4 (1979): 627-644.

¹² For a discussion of A's essay, see Thomas Henry Croxall, "Kierkegaard and Mozart," *Music and Letters* 26, no. 3 (1945): 152-156; James, "The Significance of Kierkegaard's Interpretation of *Don Giovanni*," pp. 154-155; George Pattison, "Søren Kierkegaard: A Theatre Critic of the Heiberg School," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 23, no. 1 (1983): 26-27; Pattison "Kierkegaard and Genre," pp. 482-483; Utterback, "Don Juan and the Representation of Spiritual Sensuousness," pp. 632-637; Martin Yaffe, "An Unsung Appreciation of the 'Musical-Erotic' in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*: Hermann

Cohen's Nod toward Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*," in R. L. Perkins (ed.), *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Either/Or, I* (Mercer University Press, 1995), pp. 77-78.

¹³ See Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*, p. 96.

¹⁴ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), chapters 2, 3, and 16; Moses Mendelssohn, "Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences," *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 177-181. See also Paul Guyer, "18th Century German Aesthetics," in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition).

¹⁵ When A (and later Judge William) extends the argument to cover poetry in addition to painting and sculpture, he goes beyond Lessing and Mendelssohn's theory. His rationale for this move is that erotic love is a primitive impulse that has not reached the level of linguistic consciousness. Therefore, we cannot capture it in a linguistic medium such as poetry, although we can talk about it (see *EO*, 1:70-71, 1:95, 1:101-115).

¹⁶ For other discussions of Judge William's view, see Michael Fried, *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 144-147; Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 109-111.

¹⁷ Both the judge and A presuppose a resemblance theory of artistic representation. A theory that allowed for symbolic representation would create

problems for them. For a discussion of this point, see Fried, *Menzel's Realism*, pp. 143-147.

¹⁸ See Genia Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 52-57.

¹⁹ Pattison, "Kierkegaard and Genre," p. 478.

²⁰ Karl Ameriks, "Introduction: Interpreting German Idealism," in Karl Ameriks (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 10-12; Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 128.

²¹ See K. Brian Söderquist, "Friedrich Schlegel: On Ironic Communication, Subjectivity, and Selfhood" in Jon Stewart (ed.), *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries: Literature and Aesthetics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

²² For example, Kivy states: "For the way in which the artist employs the medium is, in effect, part of the content, because it expresses something in the artist's point of view about the content" (*Philosophies of Arts*, p. 117). Martha Nussbaum attributes much the same view to the ancient Greeks, but what she says also reflects her own position: "Forms of writing were not seen as vessels into which different contents could be indifferently poured; form was itself a statement, a content" (*Love's Knowledge*, p. 15). See also Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 147-148; Jenefer Robinson, "Style and Personality in the Literary Work," *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985): 227-

247; Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 1-25.

²³ H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in P. Cole & J. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics, 3: Speech Acts* (New York: Academic Press, 1975), pp. 45-48.

²⁴ A different version of this example was developed by Lawrence Hinman in "Philosophy and Style," pp. 514-518.

²⁵ SparkNotes Editors, "SparkNote on Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)," SparkNotes LLC, last modified 2005, <http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/kierkegaard>.

²⁶ See Kivy, *Philosophy of Arts*, pp. 104-106.

²⁷ A weaker version of the second condition would suffice. A problem would arise if the form of the paraphrase implied something *different* from the lexical content of the original. However, we cannot do away with the second condition altogether. If the form of the paraphrase implied something already contained in the lexical content of the original, no problem would arise.

²⁸ Cf. Hinman, "Philosophy and Style," p. 514.

²⁹ See Evans, *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* chapter 7; Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Logical Status of Religious Beliefs," in Stephen Toulmin, Ronald W. Hepburn, and Alasdair MacIntyre (eds.), *Metaphysical Beliefs* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1957), p. 184; Louis P. Pojman, *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (San Francisco, CA: International Scholars Publications, 1999), pp. 127-143; Robert C.

Roberts, "Thinking Subjectively," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 2 (1980): 71-92.

³⁰ Antony Aumann, "Kierkegaard's Case for the Irrelevance of Philosophy," *Continental Philosophy Review* 42, no. 2 (2009): 223-224; James Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Works as Authors," in Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr (eds.), *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 311n35; John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 13-18; Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, p. 486.

³¹ Rasmus Nielsen, *Mag. S. Kierkegaards "Johannes Climacus" og Dr. H. Martensens "Christelige dogmatik": En Undersøgende Anmeldelse* (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1849).

³² Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 7 vols., trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, assisted by G. Malantschuk (Indiana University Press, 1967-1978), vol. 6, entry 6869.

³³ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 6, entry 6574.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 6, entry 6574; my emphasis.

³⁵ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 6, entry 6574.

³⁶ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 6, entry 6574. See also Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, ed. P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting, (Copenhagen: Gyldendals, 1909-1948), vol. X.6.B, pp. 110-127. For a contemporary example of the kind of "objective" writing under discussion, see Louis P. Pojman, *The*

Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion (The University of Alabama Press, 1984).

³⁷ It might appear as though a contradiction can be escaped here. Climacus's thesis states that we must approach ethical and religious matters in a subjective fashion. A contradiction arises only if this thesis is itself an ethical or religious matter. It might not be. It might be a higher order statement about ethical and religious matters. If so, Climacus's thesis would not forbid us from approaching it (i.e. the thesis itself) in an objective fashion or from encouraging others to do so. Thus, paraphrasing the thesis in an objective fashion would not engender a form-content contradiction. However, the underlying assumption here is false. According to Climacus, how we approach ethical and religious matters *is* an ethical and religious matter. In particular, single-mindedly adopting the objective approach here is an ethical or religious failing. It involves a kind of self-forgetfulness that indicates a defect of character. For a discussion of the point, see Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres*, pp. 48-51.

³⁸ Compare Climacus's remarks concerning scholarly treatments of *Philosophical Fragments* (CUP, 1:274n*).

³⁹ Quoted in Brand Blanshard, "Kierkegaard on Faith," *The Personalist* 49, no. 1 (1968): 19.

⁴⁰ Blanshard, "Kierkegaard on Faith," p. 20.

⁴¹ See, paradigmatically, the work of Evans and Pojman.

⁴² See, e.g., Edward Mooney, "Kierkegaard at the APA: Comments on Evans," Keynote Address, Søren Kierkegaard Society Group, 2008 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association.

⁴³ Mooney, "Kierkegaard at the APA."

⁴⁴ Mooney, "Kierkegaard at the APA"; Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres*, pp. 38-41, 52-58.

⁴⁵ For a similar suggestion, see Thomas Henry Croxall, "Kierkegaard on Music: A Paper Based on Kierkegaard's Essay: 'De umiddlebare erotiske Stadier, eller Det Musikalsk-Erotiske' from *Enten Eller*, vol. I," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 73 (1946): 11; Anthony Kearney, "Confusing the Issue? A.C. Bradley's Theory of Poetry and its Contents," *Victorian Poetry* 41, no. 2 (2003): 253-255; Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts*, p. 87.

⁴⁶ See David Hills, "Problems of Paraphrase: Bottom's Dream," *The Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic, and Communication* 3 (2008): 13.

⁴⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 45-47.

⁴⁸ Disclaimers of various sorts already populate the literature on Kierkegaard. The ones Evans provides are typical. For example, he expresses hesitancy about attributing to Kierkegaard views penned under pseudonyms. See *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* pp. 6-9. In addition, he admits the irony of writing philosophical commentaries on works that criticize philosophy. See *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* p. xiii; *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge

University Press, 2009), p. ix. Finally, he allows that Kierkegaard's goals were not primarily philosophical and that the value of his writings lies less in their academic contributions than in their ability to transform people's. See *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript,"* pp. 2-3, 14-15; *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 18. However, these acknowledgments do not address the specific problem I raise. They do not mention how changing the style in which some of Kierkegaard's positions are communicated misrepresents these positions.