

CHAPTER 5

*The Kierkegaardian ideal of “essential knowing” and
the scandal of modern philosophy*

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According to the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the scandal of modern philosophy is not that it has attempted unsuccessfully to prove the reality of the objective world, but that it has failed to offer the kind of knowledge that “essentially relates to existence” (CUP 166). In other words, it does not promote or facilitate a mode of subjective thinking that would be appropriate for human beings in pursuit of wisdom. This complaint motivates the appeal for an alternative to modern speculation that dominates the central portions of the *Postscript*. Although this work takes issue with many recent trends in philosophy, it ultimately aims not to oppose philosophy but to renew the philosophical tradition.

THE ANCIENTS AND THE MODERNS

Kierkegaard’s affinity for ancient philosophy is widely recognized. Both he *and* his pseudonyms often refer to the ancient Greeks as a point of comparison when disparaging more recent philosophers. As Louis Mackey has noted, Kierkegaard’s “rejection” of modern philosophy is inversely related to his “veneration for the Greeks,” and one major goal of his authorship is to reinstate a classical model of philosophical thought and practice.¹ This has less to do with any specific position defended during ancient times than it does with the spirit of ancient philosophy, as Kierkegaard quite correctly understood it. For the Greeks, philosophy was primarily a mode of life guided by the love of wisdom, a reflective discipline oriented toward

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¹ Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet*, 268–269. On Kierkegaard’s relation to ancient Greek thought, see also Roberts, “Existence, Emotion, and Virtue” and Furtak, “Kierkegaard and the Passions of Hellenistic Philosophy.”

the end of illuminating human existence. Abstract discourse was meant to provide a guide for the perplexed, and a person was known as a philosopher not by virtue of mastering this discourse but by allowing it to penetrate the way that he lived.² The authenticity of those who “loved wisdom” in the “old days,” Kierkegaard claims, stands out in contrast with the *dishonesty* of many philosophers in the modern age: this is why, as he writes, “the Greeks still remain my consolation” during a time when the philosophical tradition has drifted away from its original ideals.³

Among Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authors, “Johannes Climacus” is one who seems to be especially preoccupied with this contrast between ancient Greek and modern European philosophy. Because he seeks to offer a “more Socratic way of doing philosophy,” he has been described as a kind of “Socratic philosopher” in his own right.⁴ In the *Postscript*, he shows an admiration for the classical ideal of a thinker as “someone inspired in existing and impassioned by his thought” (CUP 258), and he expresses a hope that “every Greek as well as every rational human being will understand what I am saying here” (CUP 161).⁵ He speaks fondly of Socrates (CUP 67, 135) and of “that subtle little Socratic secret” that truth is found in a “taking to heart” of beliefs that can transform a person – not in a neutral, unconcerned endorsement of “a sum of propositions” (CUP 33). No doubt, Socrates is an exemplary representative of the Greek understanding that “truthfulness should be attributed to persons and not to propositions.”⁶ Yet Socrates is not the only embodiment of the Greek conception of philosophy that Climacus holds in high esteem. Aristotle and Plato are foremost among a number of other ancient thinkers who are singled out for approval throughout the *Postscript*,⁷ and Greek philosophy *in toto* is often cited as a gold standard that epitomizes philosophy as it ought to be. For instance, Climacus alludes to the Greeks as proof that “inwardness” and “subjectivity” can exist outside of Christianity (CUP 233).

Because of the emphasis on ethics and the care of the soul that prevails in ancient philosophy from Socrates through the Hellenistic

² Cf. Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 172–173.

³ PAP v A 98; KJN 2, JJ:288 and PAP IX A 148; JP 3: 3314.

⁴ I quote Muench, “Understanding Kierkegaard’s Johannes Climacus in the *Postscript*,” 439; and Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, 55.

⁵ See also CUP 254: “I also know that in Greece a thinker was not someone leading a self-effacing existence who produced works of art, but was himself an existing work of art.”

⁶ As I have pointed out before: see Furtak, *Wisdom in Love*, 43–44.

⁷ Plato is chastised for tending toward speculation (CUP 173), but his conception of love is applauded more than once (CUP 78, 103). See Plato, *Symposium* 203b–c, 205d–206e.

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schools – indeed, “Greek philosophy always had a relation to ethics” (CUP 104) – Climacus could have in mind any number of classical thinkers that exemplify passionate, subjective thinking. What is noteworthy is that the philosophical approach that Climacus favors is fairly widespread and well represented in ancient philosophy, so that we can grasp his meaning when he praises Trendelenburg as a “Greek thinker” (CUP 93); or when he says that to “live like a Greek philosopher” in the contemporary age would be a matter of “expressing existentially” a “life-view” (CUP 295–296), an achievement which would presumably be exceptional in the context of modern philosophy. As a case in point, he observes that even an ancient philosopher who sought skeptical equanimity did so “within existence” (CUP 266), knowing that this goal was “very difficult” to attain (CUP 335–336; cf. 33–34).⁸ Along the same lines, Aristotle at his most theoretical speaks of contemplation as an activity, and one that constitutes the best mode of existence for such creatures as we are; and when the Platonists recommend that we purify ourselves by attending to universal truths, even this is a path suited for human beings, a practice whose transformative effects are described in first-personal, experiential terms.⁹ Similarly, in Stoicism both logic and cosmology are essentially related to ethics, since one must study the nature of both mind and world in order to live with wisdom.

In short, even the less evidently practical aspects of ancient Greek philosophy were integrated into an examined life. This is what the author of the *Postscript* – like its “editor,” Kierkegaard himself – admires most of all about the “beautiful Greek way of philosophizing” (CUP 84) in which reflection is an activity engaged in by someone in particular, who never forgets his or her identity as a distinctive existing person (CUP 258–259, 277). Such a mode of reflection would pertain to life in the way that philosophy ought to, according to the *Postscript*. This, however, raises an important question. If Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous work, and the *Postscript* in particular, can be seen as a renewal of the classical Greek approach to philosophy, then what relation does it have to the modern philosophical tradition that

⁸ By contrast, Hegel uses the term “it” to describe the skeptical mentality: “it” attains a certain freedom, “it” overcomes desire, and so forth. See *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§ 202–206. According to Climacus (CUP 45–46), this way of speaking is one sign of a decadent tradition: for modern-day intellectuals, it is “speculative philosophy” itself that “doubts everything,” etc. So we talk about “it” as if “it were a man, or as though a man were speculative philosophy.” Anyone who sought to emulate the Greek conception of philosophy in the modern day “would be considered a lunatic” (CUP 295).

⁹ See, e.g., Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177a–1179a; Plato, *Phaedo* 79a–80e, 114c; Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6, 111.8, v.9. On why it is that, for the Stoics, “morals become unintelligible apart from cosmology,” see MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 104–105.

extends from Descartes through Kant and beyond, and which is largely devoted to the problem of knowledge? It might appear that the best answer is: none whatsoever. And it is precisely because Kierkegaard advocates “the Greek concept of philosophy” as the human search for wisdom that Jon Stewart regards him as participating in an altogether “different tradition of philosophy.”¹⁰ On this reading, it would seem to be an odd mistake to view the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as part of the modern philosophical canon. At most, Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous author would stand outside this tradition as curious onlookers, commenting from the sidelines much in the manner of Samuel Johnson.

Whether accusing Hume of insincerely feigning peace of mind in relation to his own mortality, or trying in vain to refute Berkeley by “striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone,” Dr. Johnson offers little more than a marginal commentary on the arguments of the most prominent modern philosophers.¹¹ His remarks, regardless of how memorable they may occasionally be, are usually impatient and sometimes uncomprehending (as when he imagines that the sensible qualities of stones are denied by Berkeley’s doctrine); and he does not contribute substantially to the critique of Humean skepticism or to the appraisal of subjective idealism. So it is fair to say that Johnson does not play a leading role in the modern philosophical tradition. In what is arguably his most philosophical work, the novella *Rasselas*, Johnson follows a young prince as he wanders through Arabian lands and takes part in a series of conversations about moral and spiritual issues – such as, for example, whether to get married; or how to find a vocation and way of life.¹² Now, these topics might be at home in Plato’s *Republic* or Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, not to mention *Either/Or*, but they are hardly addressed by philosophical texts such as the *Meditations on First Philosophy* or the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Not only are *Rasselas* and his interlocutors blissfully ignorant of Descartes and company, but Johnson’s philosophical fable does not seem to be animated by any serious polemical aims. It may appeal to readers who are fond of the portrayals of ancient sages that can be found in Diogenes Laertius, but it is happy to leave recent philosophy aside. If *Rasselas* stands more or less apart from the modern philosophical tradition, this is because it is simply doing something else.

But it is not so easy to make the same claims about the tale of Johannes Climacus and *his* philosophical reflections. Admittedly, Kierkegaard might

¹⁰ Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, 642–644.

¹¹ Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 426–427 and 333.

¹² Johnson, *Rasselas*, chapters 10 and 29–30. In *Rasselas and Other Tales*, 43, 106–114.

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resemble Dr. Johnson in his use of narrative modes of writing to explore conceptual questions. Yet when Kierkegaard introduces his own story about a young thinker, he defends his use of this literary form by saying that it is a way of countering “the detestable untruth that characterizes recent philosophy,” which differs from “older philosophy” by having decided that it is ridiculous to do what one said one would do.¹³ Johannes Climacus himself makes a similar point when he contends in the *Postscript* that, currently, philosophers doubt everything only “in print” (CUP 266). These are the words, not of an author who is located decidedly outside the history of modern philosophy, but of a critical participant in the Western philosophical tradition who regards the modern philosophers as having failed *by their own standards*. This is what distinguishes Kierkegaard’s project from that of many other literary authors: even as it deviates from recent philosophy, it insists that we interpret this very deviation as a philosophically significant gesture.

Of course, an author who rejects the way in which modern philosophers are going about their business cannot be expected to abide by the same procedures. Kierkegaard is exploring conceptual issues that have perennially been at the heart of Western philosophy, yet he is skeptical as to whether these issues can be adequately handled through the conventional philosophical methods of his time. This, in part, is why he remains among “the most misunderstood of all modern thinkers” despite his profound influence – in some cases overtly acknowledged, and in others blatantly concealed – on so many other post-Kantian philosophers.¹⁴ As Stanley Cavell has argued, if you mount a philosophical challenge to philosophy itself – as Heidegger and Wittgenstein do, no less than Kierkegaard and Nietzsche – then the question of “whether what you are composing is or is not philosophy is necessarily unstable.”¹⁵ Climacus is aware that he would effectively “contradict himself” if he were to employ a form of exposition that is inappropriate to the subject matter of his investigation (CUP 128). If we assume that knowledge must have an impersonal character, and that the truth can be known only by a dispassionate observer, then the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* will not qualify as a contribution to modern epistemology. Needless to say, however, we ought to be cautious about presuming that our criteria are settled in this respect. Otherwise we run the risk of dismissing a revisionary work by virtue of the same prejudice that it is inviting us to question.

¹³ Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus*, KW 7: 117.

¹⁴ Walsh, *The Modern Philosophical Revolution*, 179.

¹⁵ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 133.

THE FALSE PROMISE OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY

The alleged failure of modern philosophy to do what it claims to be doing is simultaneously a failure to do something that needs to be done. Johannes Climacus is not trying to change the subject, but he *is* trying to change the nature of the conversation. It is fine for philosophers to be concerned about knowledge, as long as they remember that “the knower is one who exists,” for this would lead them to employ a mode of reflection that pertains to human existence (CUP 165–166). The plea for “essential knowing” is nothing other than an attempt to return philosophy, the love of wisdom, to a focus on *wisdom* as a “form of understanding that unites a reflective attitude and a practical concern.”¹⁶ Essential knowing, after all, is a sort of *knowing*; the *Postscript* does not advise us to forsake the tasks of epistemology (CUP 166–167). It does, however, suggest that the systematic arguments of the modern philosophers will not help us to find the kind of knowledge that we are seeking. They are therefore “misleading,” tricking the person who “reaches out for the truth” into pursuing a “chimera” or a “phantom” instead (CUP 259–260, 265). This charge against recent philosophy brings to mind an image from *Either/Or*, since it insinuates that philosophical explanations are often as deceptive as a sign that says “Pressing Done Here” located in a store window (KW 3: 32). If you bring in your shirts to be ironed, you find out to your chagrin that it is not a laundry but a thrift store, and that only the sign is for sale.

What warrant is there for the claim that modern philosophy fails on its own terms to accomplish exactly what it sets out to do? At the outset of the modern tradition, in Part One of his *Discourse on Method*, René Descartes promises to look for truth “in order to see my way clearly in my actions,” and to avoid getting lost in idle speculations that are of no consequence as far as practical life is concerned.¹⁷ He speaks in a personal voice, admirably enough perhaps, and he doubts only for the sake of arriving at true beliefs.¹⁸ Yet, according to Climacus, Descartes ends up neglecting “ethical knowledge,” allowing his identity as a “particular

¹⁶ Kekes, “Wisdom,” 912.

¹⁷ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, in *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 6.

¹⁸ In *Fear and Trembling*, Descartes is commended for speaking as if his method “had significance only for him” (KW 6: 5–7). Thanks to Paul Muench for reminding me to mention this. Likewise, Kierkegaard pays tribute to him for displaying earnest personal concern for others by not drawing them into “the same doubt” (JP 1: 736). However we interpret these remarks, they are conspicuous owing to their complimentary tone. Indeed, as Rasmussen notes, virtually “all other comments on the philosophy of Descartes made by Kierkegaard are of a negative or polemical nature.” See “René Descartes,” 12–14.

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existing human being” to become a “matter of infinite indifference” (CUP 265–267). We need to search no further than Part Three of the *Discourse on Method* to see where the fatal step has been taken:

Just as it is not enough, before beginning to rebuild the house where one is living, simply to pull it down, and to make provision for materials and architects or to train oneself in architecture . . . but it is also necessary to be provided with someplace else where one can live comfortably while working on it; so too, in order not to remain irresolute in my actions while reason required me to be so in my judgments, and in order not to cease to live as happily as possible during this time, I formulated a provisional code of morals, which consisted of but three or four maxims.¹⁹

The “house” in question is the house of his opinions, which are being demolished in order to be rebuilt on more solid foundations. What is maddening about Descartes’ analogy is that, even as he admits that he cannot live without *some* ethical beliefs, he portrays *all* of his beliefs collectively as a dwelling place that he can leave behind in order to live elsewhere during the construction. Kierkegaard would say that our ideas must be conceived as the building we inhabit, even while “remodeling,” or else the way that we are thinking about them is radically confused. And this is not the only problem with the Cartesian image. In an unpublished journal entry, Kierkegaard develops a line of criticism that is continuous with the above comments by Climacus:

The point on which the skeptics should really get caught is the ethical. Ever since Descartes, all of them have believed that during the time they were doubting, they dared not say anything definite with respect to knowledge. But on the other hand, they dared to act because with respect to action they could be satisfied with the probable. What an enormous contradiction! (KJN 2, JJ:83; cf. JP 3: 3308)

When Descartes exempts practical reason from his method of doubt, as if it were only important to strive for accuracy in one’s *theoretical* opinions, he neglects his professed intention of navigating his way with clarity. Climacus shares the Cartesian anxiety enough to be moved by an imperative to hunt for reliable knowledge: as he says, “I feel this need to know what I am doing” (CUP 151). The rich “philosophy of subjectivity” that he develops in the *Postscript* is motivated by the quintessentially modern epistemological ambition of showing how the subjective conditions of thought can provide a truthful view of reality.²⁰ What he seeks, however,

¹⁹ *Discourse on Method*, 13.

²⁰ Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, 145. In another journal entry (KJN 1, AA:23), Kierkegaard vows to analyze “subjective receptivity,” not “as something sickly and unsound” but

is not just any knowledge, but *essential knowing* that is relevant to the complexities of human existence: and for this, adherence to three or four maxims will not be sufficient. Speculative philosophy attempts “to get the individual to transcend himself objectively,” he says, yet this simply cannot be done (CUP 166).²¹ To separate the thinker from his thoughts is disingenuous at best, and it may be tantamount to intellectual suicide. When Descartes makes this move, he violates his own premises and turns the search for wisdom into a parody of itself – that is, a merely academic exercise.

All of this might seem to be making a scapegoat of Descartes to an unjust degree; still, we should keep in mind that Cartesian philosophy is merely emblematic of a philosophical outlook that is pervasive in the modern era. In the *Postscript*, allusions to specific modern philosophers are often indirect, and the paradigm that is being attacked is more frequently identified by definite description than through the names of its advocates. The target of the Kierkegaardian polemic is not one figure or another, but “all of modern philosophy” from Descartes to Hegel.²² It is therefore beside the point to worry about whether Descartes, Hegel, or Martensen is the chief target of a critical remark that applies equally to all three. In the intellectual climate of Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen, the impersonal Cartesian ego and the principle of universal doubt were celebrated as the core premises of all modern philosophy, from Descartes through the present day.²³ When Climacus issues a rejoinder to the view that philosophy must begin “without presuppositions” (CUP 44), it should go without saying that his argument bears upon any thinker who endorses this idea. If there ever comes to be a “Danish philosophy” in its own right, Kierkegaard states, it will not make the mistake of claiming to begin from nothing (PAP v A 46; KJN 2, JJ:239).

By the same token, Hume infamously separates the life of the backgammon-playing philosopher from his thoughts, but this too is typical

“as present in a normal constitution.” On how the “subjective conditions of thought” can deliver reliable knowledge, see also Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A89/B122, p. 145.

²¹ Cf. Kierkegaard’s “Gilleleje” journal (KJN 1, AA:12; PAP 1 A 75). The phrase “Cartesian anxiety” is from Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 18. On why objective thinking is a kind of suicide, see Marino, *Kierkegaard in the Present Age*, 17–19.

²² As Jon Stewart has quite rightly observed: see *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, 650–651. We differ only with respect to the implications of Kierkegaard’s broad critique, which begins at least as early as “The Conflict between the Old and the New Soap-Cellar,” a farcical drama in which devotees of both Descartes and Hegel get plenty of scorn: see KJN 1, DD:208 and KW 1: 105–124.

²³ Grimsley, “Kierkegaard and Descartes,” 31–32. See also H. L. Martensen’s review of J. L. Heiberg’s *Introductory Lecture to the Logic Course*, in Stewart (ed.), *Texts from Golden Age Denmark*, vol. III, 77–80.

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of modern philosophy, according to Johannes Climacus (CUP 483). The ideal of “pure thought” is dubious, because it has nothing to do with existence (CUP 277–278). Spinoza may claim that we should see things under the aspect of eternity, but he is not the only modern philosopher who encourages us to adopt a view from nowhere in our contemplations; therefore, a critique of this idea has more general relevance (CUP 69, 332). And the “pure” standpoint of the epistemological subject who begins without presupposing anything is related to the idea of a timeless “God’s-eye” view, an Archimedean perspective located wholly outside the world. Both of these are manifestations of a prevalent but faulty way of thinking, which gives the impression that “there is no one who thinks” (CUP 278). As Climacus explains, a thinker who abstracts “from his being there” may be active as a pure mind, but as a particular living person he “has ceased to exist” (CUP 265, 291). Insofar as the modern epistemologists *intend* to inquire into the conditions of distinctively *human* knowledge, rather than conducting abstract thought-experiments for their own sake, their failure to deliver on this promise is an indictment of their entire program.²⁴ Leaving aside for the time being the question of whether the criticism is fair with respect to specific thinkers, we can easily see what conception of philosophy is being rejected. In different ways, each of the leading modern philosophers provides a fit target for the campaign against “speculation, which is indifferent to existence” (CUP 211).

Even when a speculative author tries “to forget that he is existing,” he still continues to exist, and the question then becomes what one “must be content with” in the realm of meaningful truths that could provide guidance for a person’s life in the world (CUP 102–103). With this claim, Climacus issues a generic rebuke that is meant to unseat a false conception of philosophy, and to reorient the whole philosophical conversation about the nature of knowledge. It would be absurd, he suggests, to pursue rigorous standards of proof in one’s inquiries while making no effort to explore the kind of truth that matters most to us. This, to paraphrase Nietzsche, would leave us with knowledge that is no more pertinent to human existence than knowledge of water’s chemical composition would be to a sailor at risk of shipwreck.²⁵ The “difficulty with existence” simply never shows up in “the language of abstract thought,” which “disregards the concrete, the

²⁴ In light of Hegel’s belief that his philosophy should be not “esoteric” but “accessible to everyone,” his mode of expression and his contempt for “the edifying” are rather unfortunate. See Kierkegaard, PAP III A 6 and KJN 2, JJ:265. Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §§ 9, 13. I am grateful to Karin Nisenbaum for her guidance regarding these Hegelian citations.

²⁵ See *Human, All Too Human*, § 9, pp. 15–16.

temporal,” and “the predicament of the existing individual” (CUP 252). For a living human being, however, urgent issues remain, even after one has abandoned the task of philosophy in favor of thinking that is irrelevant to existence.

The “suspect nature” of such abstract thought is that it requires the reliable knower to be pure, neutral, and disinterested (CUP 253, 284). And it does seem that the Cartesian *ego* is a disembodied, ahistorical subject who has no interest other than in finding out whatever can be known with certainty.²⁶ Insofar as he is a thinking being, Descartes claims, he is independent of parenting, culture, and experience. His thought processes ostensibly presume nothing and float free of all empirical influences. This, if possible, would enable one to arrive at results that are universally valid, untainted by anything that is local or particular to the knowing subject. The “scholarly investigator” is thus depicted as a pure, neutral observer who can arrive at “objective, disinterested” truth (CUP 20) – not an embodied being who lives in a certain place and time, and whose outlook on the world is shaped by contingent factors such as one’s personality and conceptual framework. All of these are viewed as potential obstacles to attaining truth, which could taint the inquiring mind with biases, delusions, and other distortions imposed by one’s own subjective disposition. In all likelihood, the desire to find a timeless, absolute perspective arises from a dissatisfaction with our finite condition.²⁷ Our point of view has been shaped by so many random and accidental features of our situation that we wish we could exchange it for a transparent, non-distorting lens.

But since there *is* no such thing as a rational being of no particular biological and cultural formation, and none who exists outside of history and is uninfluenced by idiosyncratic and biographical factors, we must be mistaken in thinking of ourselves exclusively or primarily as pure knowers. If we try to “bracket” certain features of our embodied and situated perspective, for the sake of inquiries in which this is appropriate, we do this for reasons that make sense in terms of our entire life in the world. The wish to be liberated from any trace of upbringing and circumstance, on the other hand, is nothing other than a wish to transcend the human condition: understandable, perhaps, but problematic nonetheless. As Kierkegaard writes in an 1840 fragment, the mere fact that one’s language is a medium that pure thought has “not provided for itself” indicates the falsehood involved in

²⁶ See Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 79–81. Cf. Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, 46–47.

²⁷ Cf. Richardson, *Existential Epistemology*, 166–169. On the “Cartesian assumption of the complete transparency of thought to itself,” see Tiles, *Bachelard*, 39–40.

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postulating that philosophy must begin “without presuppositions.”²⁸ Just as the Cartesian concept of God bears *some* relation to the religious tradition in which Descartes was educated – which is why Climacus claims that he has only “proven” what he presupposed (CUP 280) – the claim that one has transcended all prejudices could itself be a prejudice of the worst kind, since it dishonestly refuses to acknowledge the finite and historical sources of one’s own consciousness.²⁹ The “objective tendency” that leads us to think of ourselves as neutral observers renders our philosophical thought inconsequential, or indifferent to human existence (CUP 110). Turning away from the context in which genuine perplexities occur to us in the first place, it focuses on theoretical issues that appear to be quite remote from human concerns, even congratulating itself for doing so. But if we ourselves are part of the reality that we seek to comprehend, then this is a crucial omission; so a serious point lies underneath all the jesting references throughout the *Postscript* to scholarly philosophers who forget that they are human beings. When the speculating “Herr Professor” offers an account of all reality that disregards his own existence (CUP 121), he has left an essential factor out of the equation. This represents a moral failing on the part of the philosopher – and it is not the sort of failing that is extraneous to philosophy, and that could be attacked only by an *ad hominem* argument. Rather, it is a human shortcoming that entails a defective philosophical method.³⁰ Thinkers who are so intoxicated with the allure of systematic abstraction that they leave human existence out of account thereby corrupt both their epistemology and their self-understanding, by leaving the investigator out of the investigation.

It is therefore a dubious virtue for the philosophy of knowledge to overlook “the fact that the knower is someone existing” (CUP 174). This makes it impossible to explain “what it means to be *situated* in existence” (CUP 179) – a worthy issue for philosophers to grapple with, and one for which speculative thought is reproached for not even attempting to grasp. Of course, it is all too easy for philosophy to lose sight of its own human relevance, so that philosophers are no longer moved by questions that pertain to life as we know it. This is what happens, as Kierkegaard laments, when we lose ourselves in “objective thought” and “indifferent talk”: we end up understanding nothing about being (JP 4: 4536). Yet

²⁸ PAP III A II, trans. Alastair Hannay in *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, 130.

²⁹ On the “tyranny of hidden prejudices,” see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 272–278.

³⁰ Here, we see how a philosophical failure can be “a failure of our humanity,” as Cavell points out: see *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 47. On how we ourselves are part of the being that we seek to understand, see also Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 39–41 (§ 9).

if, as Heidegger claims, we always have a background understanding of what it means to exist,³¹ then our alternatives are either to reflect critically upon that background understanding, constantly striving to render it more adequate, or to avoid thinking about it altogether. We can plainly see which path Johannes Climacus would advise us to follow: a thinker can either “do his best to forget that he is existing,” or else “turn all his attention” to existence, endeavoring to understand “what it is to be a human being” (CUP 102). It is when philosophers “abandon existence,” imagining that “abstract thinking is supreme,” that all of us are left “to face the worst” (CUP 252), coping with the difficulties of human existence as best we can in the absence of any reflective discipline that might help us to know what we are doing.

If we keep in mind that “philosophizing is not a matter of talking fantastically to fantastic beings,” but that it is an activity of finite beings who wish to come to terms with their condition (CUP 103), it should be evident that what we need is a mode of thinking which pertains to existence. This is the ideal in the name of which Climacus records his litany of protests against what he variously describes as speculation, pure or systematic thought, objective thinking that forgets the thinker, or abstract thought that loses sight of the concrete reality from which it has abstracted (CUP 263). These related terms are meant to denote a set of beliefs that are commonly taken for granted in modern philosophy. Together, these assumptions characterize the philosophical approach that Climacus is opposing:

- (a) knowledge claims ought to attain *certainly*
- (b) knowledge must be *impersonal*; i.e., the knower is no one in particular
- (c) philosophy must begin *with doubt* or *without presuppositions*
- (d) knowledge ought to be *dispassionate* or *disinterested*
- (e) the knower is *ahistorical* and located nowhere
- (f) knowledge ought to be primarily *theoretical*.

Descartes is perhaps the only major modern philosopher who could be convicted of accepting all six assumptions:³² it would be hard to accuse Kant, Hume, Spinoza, Leibniz, or Hegel of holding more than four or five of the above beliefs. Does this mean that the *Postscript's* critique of modern

³¹ *Being and Time*, 67–68 (§ 16). Cf. Wrathall, “Philosophy, Thinkers, and Heidegger’s Place in the History of Being,” 16.

³² Very briefly, here is where some of the others diverge. Kant rejects (f) by asserting the primacy of practical over theoretical reason; Hume could be interpreted as rejecting (d), since he refuses to place reason above the passions. Spinoza rejects (c) by stipulating his axioms at the outset; Leibniz may not accept (b) owing to his conception of the soul; and Hegel intends to reject (e), since he does not deny that consciousness has a historical context. Other than the early modern rationalists, few thinkers accept (a), at least in its strongest form.

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philosophy is aimed at a “straw man” or a mere caricature? Not at all. If each of the leading modern philosophers agrees either tacitly or explicitly with a majority of these beliefs, then the *Postscript* does have a real and obvious target at which to direct its polemical arrows. There *is*, in other words, a cluster of assumptions which bear a family resemblance to each other and which *do* more or less define the modern epistemological tradition. Although few modern philosophers fit the whole profile, Climacus is vastly different from his contemporaries in rejecting all six of the assumptions on the above list. His critique is therefore applicable to the prevailing model of philosophy, and it remains in force even after all hyperbolic embellishments have been stripped away.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING SUBJECTIVE

We have now been introduced to the main principles on which Kierkegaard’s Socratic author stakes his philosophical reputation. He maintains that, in offering its different accounts of reality, the philosophical tradition has too often relied upon the same inadequate conception of being. Whether idealist or materialist, rationalist or empiricist, many thinkers have misconceived both the knower and the known, because they have been “wholly indifferent to subjectivity” (CUP 64). In this sense, they are alike: governed by the assumption that we must transcend our particular standpoint in order to find the truth, they attempt to describe reality in such a way as to eliminate the human perspective. The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* bases its quarrel with modern philosophy on this criticism above all – in a word, it is too *objective*, or it relies on an untenable concept of objectivity. Since objective thought is taken to be overly impersonal, disinterested, theoretical, pure, and so on, this critique encapsulates many if not all of the main complaints made against Descartes and the Hegelians.

Anticipating Husserl’s critique of “objective-scientific ways of thinking” as well as Merleau-Ponty’s complaint that “objective thought” is “unaware of the subject,” Kierkegaard repeatedly inveighs against “objective thinking” which is “not the least bit concerned about the thinker” (KJN 2, JJ:344).³³ He is echoed, as it were, by Climacus, who claims repeatedly that “subjectivity is truth” (CUP 171). Regardless of which philosophical conception of knowledge and reality we are considering, Climacus states, we must take “great care” in noticing “what is meant by ‘being,’ [so that]

³³ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 129; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 240. On page 82, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges Kierkegaard as a critic of “objective thought.”

the knowing human spirit is not tricked into losing itself in the indeterminate,” turning into an impersonal subject who is located nowhere, which no one either is or can be (CUP 159). If too “pure” or “abstract” a notion of existence is assumed, then the individual will fail to get clear about “what it means for him to be there”; hence, “the question of truth” will still remain unanswered (CUP 159–160). For the philosopher who is concerned with “edifying truth” that can inform a life of wisdom, the “truth for you” is the only kind worthy of the name (CUP 215; cf. KW 4: 324). This kind of truth does not carry the self-contained validity of a mathematical proof: rather, it requires the interest and commitment of the human being to whose life it pertains.

There *are*, however, certain areas of knowledge in which the knowing subject can effectively drop out of the picture. We can “quite rightly” reduce the subject to a mere vanishing point if we are taking the “path of objective reflection,” which leads “to mathematics” and to various other kinds of knowledge (CUP 162–163). When we take this path, and pursue this type of knowledge, we try to extinguish anything that is peculiarly subjective or individual. If a logical, mathematical, or scientific thinker suspends any interest in “what it means to be an existing human being,” then so much the better (CUP 264): in these intellectual domains, the truth of a proposition has nothing to do with the character of the person who asserts it (see KW 7: 153). We can comprehend the equations of differential calculus without taking an independent interest in the personalities of those who discovered them, just as we can learn many other things by adopting the neutral stance of the theoretical observer. And what we can thereby learn would be concealed from us if we were to be subjectively involved in the wrong way, influenced by anything other than what Husserl calls “the passionate interest of the natural scientist” – for instance, by neglecting the evidence in favor of seeing only what we wanted to see.³⁴ When the *Postscript* makes a plea for subjectivity, it is not undermining the legitimacy of mathematical and scientific truth. Unlike the narrator of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, who feels that he must reject mathematical truth because it is somehow hostile to life, Kierkegaard is quite clear that the absolute certainty of mathematics is valid within its sphere.³⁵ He has no

³⁴ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences*, 43. Any point of view is “selectively attentive,” including the stance of a scientific investigator, as Calhoun reminds us: “Subjectivity and Emotion,” 109. On the neutral mood of theoretical observation, see also Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 130 (§ 29).

³⁵ *Notes from Underground*, 13–14, 31–34. See, e.g., Kierkegaard, PAP IV c 100; *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, 178. On the error of treating all subjects “as if they were branches of science,” see also Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, 127.

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interest in showing that scientific truth is merely a social construction, because he does not believe that it is.

Instead, his goal is to remind us of what sort of truth can and cannot be properly understood as “objective” in the sense that it is somehow independent of subjectivity, or purified of any element that is unique to the human perspective. The progress of modern epistemology leading up to Kierkegaard’s time had led to an increasing recognition “that *what* we know . . . is conditioned by *how* we know.”³⁶ So if our thoughts are limited only by the pure intuition of spatiality, or only by the requirement to abide by the rule of noncontradiction, then we can expect to attain a high degree of certainty. This is why Kant says in the Preface to the Second Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that logic is able to follow “the secure path of a science” by virtue of its abstract and hypothetical character, whereas other areas of inquiry cannot be so precise and scientific.³⁷ As he adds in the Transcendental Doctrine of Method, there is no place for subjective convictions in mathematics: “here one must know, or refrain from all judgment.”³⁸ What is inappropriate, Kierkegaard would say, is to insist on employing the same mode of reason when we are engaged in a more impure kind of reflection, one in which the passionate standpoint of the individual moral agent should not be dismissed as a hindrance to knowledge. In this respect, the *Postscript* can be seen as a long commentary on Kant’s insight into the relevance of subjective conviction in areas where scientific certainty is unattainable.

Within the most abstract realms of inquiry, the veracity and certitude of our conclusions is unquestionable *because* they do not pertain to existence, and they do not qualify as “essential truth” for this reason (CUP 171–172). The problem with the statement “two plus two equals four” is not that it is untrue, but that it asserts an *impersonal* proposition – and is, therefore, existentially irrelevant. Logical thinking abstracts away from the human situation: nothing related to life itself falls into its orbit (CUP 94, 257). Although some thinkers may prefer the purity and security of abstract knowledge to the ambiguous difficulties of concrete existence, Climacus argues that it would be absurd to presume that pure mathematical

³⁶ Beiser, “The Enlightenment and Idealism,” 20. Green touches only briefly on this “epistemological link” in *Kierkegaard and Kant*, 83.

³⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bix, p. 16. Cf. Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, 13: only phenomena “so poor in intuition” can be “so rich in certainty.”

³⁸ *Critique of Pure Reason* A823/B851, p. 749. Kant is alluding to Aristotle, who says that we should not expect a merely persuasive account from a mathematician, or absolute proof from a dialectician: see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b–1095a. Cf. Kierkegaard, JP 2: 2296.

knowledge can guide us with respect to ethical questions.³⁹ Once again, the philosopher who prides himself on rising above these personal and subjective issues still pays his debt to existence by existing nevertheless (CUP 160). If he occupies himself “solely with logic,” he must live “in other categories”; and if “he finds that this is not worth thinking about, then so be it” (CUP 79, 483). Furthermore, we might add: so much the worse for his thoughts, which cannot possibly qualify as wisdom, and for his life, which is not informed by his most arduous reflective efforts.

If scientific precision cannot be found with respect to ethical and religious questions, then it is simply dishonest to state that one’s beliefs in these areas are objectively certain and indubitable.⁴⁰ Indeed, the zealot who is “absolutely secure” in his or her spiritual convictions, and willing to take all kinds of pious oaths, has demonstrated a lack of understanding – precisely through this “impudent assurance” (CUP 381, 416). The all-or-nothing principle of Cartesian thinking, which demands that we believe *nothing* about matters that are even *somewhat* uncertain,⁴¹ is more appropriate in some domains of inquiry than in others. Like Kant, Kierkegaard sees that it would be unreasonable to maintain such a rigid and inflexible standard when one is thinking about human existence. As Climacus observes, final conclusions are not available in relation to “the uncertainty of earthly life,” where everything is unsure (CUP 73). Logical reason can aspire to exact finality, but life as we know it “is just the opposite” of this (CUP 100). We should resist the temptation to regard existential reflection as an unworthy endeavor because it is unscientific compared to “the system, astrology or veterinary science” (CUP 389): “unscientific,” in a Kierkegaardian context, does not imply “more facile” and “less difficult.” In an 1846 journal entry, he notes that “the difficulty with speculating” actually increases to the extent that we are speculating about something that relates to our existence (KJN 2, JJ:488). Here, he repeats that modern philosophers – “both Hegel and all the others” – basically “exist in categories other than those in which they speculate.” To “abstract from existence,” in other words, “is to

³⁹ For Aristotle, ethical reflection requires “a kind of judgment altogether different from that of mathematics.” MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, 59. This represents a departure from certain Platonic assumptions.

⁴⁰ As Descartes does in Meditation Three: see *Discourse and Meditations*, 77. Spinoza declares that he knows the truth of his philosophy with mathematical certainty, “in the same way as you know that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles.” See *Correspondence*, in *Works*, vol. II, 416 (letter of late 1675 to Albert Burgh).

⁴¹ Descartes articulates this principle in Part Four of the *Discourse on Method* and states it again in the First Meditation: see *Discourse and Meditations*, 18, 59. The Cartesian demand for absolute truth or nothing at all, as Peter Hylton points out, is made by later philosophers who are drawn to the model of mathematical accuracy: see *Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy*, 10–12.

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remove the difficulty” of understanding oneself in the midst of life – yet this, as Climacus affirms, is what matters to us as knowing subjects (CUP 294–297).

When a concern for certainty is allowed to determine one’s epistemic criteria, then one’s investigations are bound to produce very little knowledge that pertains to existence. Yet this is essentially skepticism, as Kierkegaard emphasizes,⁴² because it leaves us empty-handed regarding issues that are so practically urgent that we cannot avoid thinking about them as long as we exist. And he is echoed by Johannes Climacus, who asserts that “pure thought,” as represented by the Cartesian *ego*, is the “most dangerous” kind of skepticism, since it gives the deceptive appearance of offering solid conclusions (CUP 259, 264–265, 275). It is dangerous to get “the misapprehension” that one is arriving at philosophical knowledge by virtue of this deception, because it is not “as if existing consisted in getting to know something about this or that” (CUP 209, 280–281). If, for instance, we are wondering about life and its meaning, and this is a topic about which precise knowledge is unavailable, then we will not bring our inquiry any nearer to resolution by deciding to be precise about something else instead. After all, I get no closer to knowing whether I can entrust a person with a secret by learning such measurable facts as her blood type or her shoe size. Yet the promise of definite knowledge has a compelling appeal, and “when one has something so infinitely great before one’s eyes as the objective truth,” it is easy to forget about one’s little “crumb of subjectivity and what, as a subject, one has to do” (CUP 193). This is why we can find ourselves straying from the questions that ought to interest us most.

Rather than allowing our search for knowledge to be motivated by a demand for indisputable certainty, and thus confining ourselves to thinking about pure logical relations, what if we were to start anew by raising the question: what sort of thing do we have an interest in knowing? This would return us to the starting point of the modern epistemological tradition, but with a different sense of how we ought to proceed. Kierkegaard would approve of this renewal of “modern philosophy,” which has so far been only “an introduction to making philosophizing possible.”⁴³ As he notes, “objective doubt” is a misnomer: just as there is no such thing as an objective subject, doubt arises only when someone has an interest in knowing (see KW 7: 170–171). In other words, the pursuit of knowledge always begins with a particular subject with a “definite something” – a

⁴² See PAP VI B 54:16–19 and PAP VII¹ A 182, 200. Heidegger discusses the philosophical care about certitude in *Introduction to Phenomenological Research*, 91–92, 171–172.

⁴³ Unpublished note from 1840. See PAP III A 3; *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, 128.

specific issue or topic – that he or she wants to understand (CUP 279). The “indifference of objective knowledge,” Climacus insists, is a poor substitute for the sort of consciousness that is animated by our “passionate interest” in understanding existence (CUP 48). And this is something that each existing individual *must* be personally concerned about: “the difficulty with existence is what interests one who exists,” and it is impossible “to think about existence,” while existing, “without becoming passionate” (CUP 253, 293). As living human beings, we cannot help but care about philosophical questions that pertain to the way we live, and that affect how we actually experience and interpret the world.

For this, what we need is not “contemplative astonishment” but “ethical circumspection” (CUP 118). Citing Aristotle in support of his argument, Climacus points out that practical reasoning is distinguished by its focus on the aims and goals that orient a person, and he adds that our “supreme interest” in existing is served only by a mode of reflection that is fitting for teleologically directed moral agents (CUP 262).⁴⁴ What mode of reflection, then, would it be appropriate for us to employ in the search for “essential knowing” which “concerns existence” (CUP 166)? Here also we might want to follow Aristotle’s lead. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he claims that we must find a degree of precision that is suitable for the matter at hand: a mathematical standard of accuracy is apt for mathematics, but not for ethics. It is obvious, he adds, that *phronêsis* – wisdom related to human life – is not the same as *epistême*, or scientific knowledge.⁴⁵ That is because scientific knowledge deals only with necessary truths, and yet – as he says in the *Posterior Analytics* – much that is true, and many aspects of reality, cannot be known scientifically.⁴⁶ Since everything is uncertain with respect to the temporal, contingent realm in which we exist (CUP 38, 73–74), any essential knowing that pertains to existence would necessarily take a different form. Deliberating about what to do – “practical reasoning” in the most narrow sense of the term – is only part of what is included under the heading of “subjective thought,” since this category ought to encompass all reflective thinking that is somehow relevant to life.

Of course, even a logic instructor can use concrete examples to illustrate a conceptual point about exclusive disjunction or deductive inference. If Kierkegaard’s appeal for thinking which pertains to existence were a straightforward call for applied philosophy, there would be no need to

⁴⁴ He quotes from *De Anima* 433a; see also *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139b, where Aristotle lists five terms for different types of truth-functional experience.

⁴⁵ See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b, 1142a. Cf. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 290–291.

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 87b–88b. See also Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 139–141.

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reorient or transform our whole approach: we would merely need to utter factual statements in contexts where their significance is clear, rather than declaring that “the earth is round” when this has no immediate pertinence (CUP 164). Just as scientific inquiry requires a certain kind of subjective attunement in order to proceed, a true opinion such as “the earth is round” can be stated with or without a subjective awareness of why this matters at the moment.⁴⁷ However, when Kierkegaard speaks in an 1846 journal entry of how an “existential problem” must be viewed in light of “its meaning for me,” he is pointing out the need for *subjective thinking* in a more pronounced sense, which includes more than this minimal relevance (KJN 2, JJ:441). And that is what Climacus has in mind when he claims that philosophers need to engage in something other than disinterested reflection in order to address questions that pertain to each of us as human beings (CUP 268–270). Regarding the issue of *how* to think about these existential questions, he warns that some philosophical methods will not provide us with a way of confronting the kind of difficulty that they represent (CUP 110–111, 257–260). Both philosophers and ordinary mortals are drawn to objective reflection not because it is more difficult but because it is *easier* – at least, it avoids one kind of difficulty, substituting the challenges of abstract reasoning for the challenge of trying to understand oneself in existence. To illustrate this difference, Kierkegaard invites us to compare the difficulty of scientific research with the difficulty of “the question whether I shall be a scientist” (KJN 2, JJ:442). The former is indisputably challenging, but the latter is difficult in a way that might prompt us to “make the problem a little more objective” and thus escape from the “pain and crisis” that we must face in thinking about it (CUP 107). When it comes to the decisive problems of human life, it is important for the philosophical author to be able to stimulate what the *Postscript* describes as “subjective thinking.”

For Kierkegaard no less than for Kant, then, there are questions that trouble the human mind, and that we “cannot dismiss” even though abstract reason cannot settle them one way or another.⁴⁸ Kant names a future life, free will, and God’s existence as the chief topics about which we must make room for faith in the absence of definite knowledge; in the *Postscript*,

⁴⁷ In addition to the famous “madman” passage in the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard also says that a person is “mad” who “states a correct opinion” that has “no significance for him” in *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, KW 10: 99–100.

⁴⁸ Cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Avii, p. 5. See also Bxxx, p. 31, on having to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith. Regarding what follows, see *Critique of Pure Reason* A828–829/B856–857, pp. 752–753; and A753/B781, pp. 697–698.

Climacus provides a comparable list of matters that concern us and that call for subjective thinking. Whereas the first *Critique* focuses on immortality, Climacus talks about what it means to die and what death might bring (CUP 138–148). While Kant speaks about the being of God *per se*, Climacus turns to the religious question of what it means to be grateful for whatever good one is given in life (CUP 148–150). And where Kant inquires into whether human beings are metaphysically free to make moral choices, the *Postscript* reflects on the specific moral question of whether to get married, and on what it means to make this decision (CUP 150–152). Each of these questions has inspired a long legacy of philosophical thought, and each is a claimant for the mode of thinking that the *Postscript* calls for, in which a heightened stress is laid on the personal relevance of the issue at hand. If there is a “methodology of the anti-system” in Kierkegaard’s work,⁴⁹ then it can be glimpsed in the way that his pseudonymous author reframes the famous Kantian questions, and in what he says about how questions of this kind ought to be approached.

THE LIMITS OF EPISTEMOLOGY

Existential questions involve matters of “objective uncertainty” that concern every individual human being *as such*: about these issues, if a person does not find the truth while existing then he or she “will never get hold of it” (CUP 176; trans. modified). Philosophical reflection about any such question, as it pertains to us, entails weighing our values, motives, and convictions; it is qualitatively different from the process of verifying a matter of fact or solving a crossword puzzle. This is why we cannot abstract from the personal *I* and allow our own particularity to become a “small speck” that hovers over everything finite when thinking, for instance, about death (CUP 456, 140): for “abstract thinking” only “kill[s] me off as a particular existing individual” (CUP 253), providing the dubious reassurance that *something* in me will never perish. If what survives my death is not recognizably *me*, then its survival is not mine – that is, its persistence cannot be equated with my survival, regardless of whether it is the intellectual soul or the material elements of my body that may endure after my personal death. As Climacus explains, “this immortality is not at all the one inquired about” when our philosophical topic is the death of the distinct individual and what it means (CUP 143). It is a “ludicrous contradiction” to inquire into such matters “in general” (CUP 146), leaving out any palpable concern

⁴⁹ As Ricoeur suggests, in *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, 207.

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for the specific person whose mortality is being considered. All men are mortal, and I am a man, so it follows that I must be mortal: yet I can entertain the truth of this conclusion without feeling an awareness of how acutely it pertains to me, and this amounts to not really *knowing* it in the way that Climacus is talking about.

To bring home the point, Climacus lists many objective truths that *he* “knows” about death, ranging from its chemical causes to how it has been interpreted by different cultures, and then he adds that even with all this knowledge, he can “in no way consider death something that I have understood” (CUP 138–139). He is not convinced that he has succeeded at thinking about death in such a way that his meditations are permeated with an appreciation of how his own life is colored by the fact of his finitude. To think this through as a meaningful or significant fact that interests or concerns him personally, he would need to become passionate,⁵⁰ and to engage in the kind of subjective thinking that is infinitely difficult and never finished. There is no need “to proceed to astronomy or veterinary science” in order to find an intellectual challenge, since the tasks of subjective thinking are intricate enough to occupy us for the rest of life (CUP 152). Anticipating those who will scoff at the idea that thinking about existence is truly difficult, compared with the less edifying and more disinterested tasks of systematic philosophy, Climacus invites them to put their analytical prowess on display by undertaking to explain “just one of the simplest existence-problems” (CUP 295). Until they do this, he implies, we should assume that they have turned away from the greater difficulty.

This is a shame, since the matters that call for subjective thinking are the “highest tasks” of existence: with respect to these issues, any “delay means mortal danger” (CUP 169), because we must form views and make resolutions about such issues in order to live and act, rather than being paralyzed by doubt. This is why “subjective knowledge” is also called “essential knowing” (CUP 166–169): not only are we quite intimately involved in these questions, but the meaning of our existence is at stake in the way that we answer them. This is quite different from “knowledge of railroads, machines, and kaleidoscopes,” or knowledge of “world history” as contemplated “from God’s point of view” (CUP 181, 332). Understandably enough, we feel “a constant urge to have something finished,” but this “must be renounced” if we are dealing with existential questions (CUP 73).

⁵⁰ When it comes to existential problems, Climacus says that to conceive of them in a dispassionate manner “is not to think of them at all” (CUP 294). On the intentionality of passion/emotion, and its relation to value and interest, see Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript*, 69–70; and Stokes, *Kierkegaard’s Mirrors*, 48–52.

The problems that call for subjective thought share several characteristics. First of all, they have to do with matters that are not value-neutral. Secondly, they are subject-involving, in the sense that they concern each of us personally. And finally, they involve some degree of objective uncertainty. Now, one could reject all claims about axiological valence, as some ancient thinkers did – yet, as Climacus contends, they still did so “within existence,” for the sake of attaining peace of mind *as* existing subjects (CUP 266).⁵¹ This is different from forgetting one’s existence as it relates to precisely the question one is asking, which amounts to ignoring the issue of subjective relevance. But if we grant that there are significant problems and realize that they concern us directly, then we will inevitably be engaged in passionate thinking as we strive to work out a view of life. As for the last item in the above list, a denial that some uncertainty attaches to all “existence-problems” could arise only from a false confidence or an outright self-deception. We do not *know* what death will bring, yet instead of seeking conclusive proofs we should “seek to become a little subjective” with regard to mortality, trying to clarify our deepest beliefs about death in the way that Socrates does (CUP 146, 169–170).⁵² Likewise, our cognitive outlook in matters of love is not susceptible of becoming “absolutely certain” (CUP 382) – we cannot really *know* that we are loved – but even so, we can hardly refrain from having *some* attitude, and holding *some* views, on this topic.

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard notes that one’s entire “conception of life,” as well as one’s understanding “of oneself,” is implicated in making an ethical resolution (KW 10: 52). There is no way to preclude second-guessing oneself later on: whatever decision we make, we will be vulnerable to regret (see KW 3: 38–39). Our conception of existence and our self-understanding will always be works in progress, containing an element of uncertainty that cannot be eliminated. With respect to the most important issues in human life, we cannot know *for sure* what we are doing; as Kierkegaard notes in an 1843 journal entry, life is lived forward and understood in retrospect, and temporal existence therefore cannot be known fully by anyone who exists in time (KJN 2, JJ:167). However, this in itself does not need to be regarded as an embarrassment for philosophy. We may be able

⁵¹ On the Skeptical ideal of a “higher” view above all “false” values, see Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 112–113. Alluding again to the Skeptics, Climacus adds that a philosopher of this school “needed passion even with regard to his ataraxy” (CUP 297).

⁵² See Plato, *Phaedo*, 91a, 107a–b, 114d. Cf. Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, 201. Kierkegaard admits to having misgivings about how abstractly the soul is defined in this dialogue: see *The Concept of Irony*, KW 2: 71. About why it is that “every finite certainty is simply a deception,” see JP 1: 632.

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to think constructively about issues that are too ambiguous to be known with certainty, as long as we do not render constructive thought impossible by employing a mode of reason that is inappropriate for the task. What is scandalous is not that philosophers have failed to establish the reality of the objective world, but that they have been too exclusively or one-sidedly preoccupied with scientific objectivity as the criterion of truth, maligning our subjective comportment toward the world as a necessary evil, even after having discovered that *what* we know is conditioned by *how* we know (see CUP 293, 270).⁵³ As a corrective against this overemphasis, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* presents the subjectivity of the existing individual as not an obfuscation but a condition of attaining knowledge. Rather than a negligible entity, the knowing subject is now understood as a concrete person who is interested, situated, and living in a world. Objective reality, then, is redefined by Kierkegaard as that which “takes shape in a corresponding subjectivity,” so that the very concept of objectivity does not exclude but incorporates a reference to our subjective interest and concern (JP 6: 6360). What we know is influenced and affected by how we are subjectively disposed, to such a degree that the “how” of one’s inward disposition is a decisive factor in determining the truth – even though the world that is revealed through our mental processing is discovered and not made (CUP 167–168, 516–517). Because we need to focus more on the subjective aspect of knowledge, philosophers after Kierkegaard must think in terms of attunement and interpretation rather than sheer objectivity.

In a sense, then, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* marks the beginning of a transition *within* the history of philosophy. We are still figuring out how to deal with the “strenuous difficulties” of existence (CUP 72–73), but we cannot leave them aside entirely, as if the difficulties of pure thought are somehow more deserving of our attention than the difficulties of concrete reality (CUP 264).⁵⁴ And if Kierkegaard himself struggles with the question of how philosophy could possibly live up to its own image of itself as the love of wisdom, we should not be surprised that Johannes Climacus has more to say about how *not* to address real perplexities than about how to do so. The *Postscript* points beyond itself, provoking its readers to embark on a project that remains unfinished. Its polemical flourishes

⁵³ On the “scandal” of philosophy, see Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, vxl, p. 36. Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 190 (§ 43). See also Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, 11–17.

⁵⁴ For all the attention paid to Climacus’ realization that his “philosophical endeavor” is to “create difficulties,” even in this passage he says that so many forces conspire to “make things easy” that people are liable to “miss the difficulty” (CUP 156–157). Making things difficult, then, is a matter of making people aware of real difficulties that they might otherwise miss.

have less in common with the stone-kicking of Samuel Johnson, who is exasperated with philosophy altogether, and more with the statement that was made by Diogenes the Cynic when he walked around to demonstrate the irrelevance of his fellow philosophers' arguments:⁵⁵ it summons us back to actual existence, which is the realm of being that concerns us. In order to provide a forum for a mode of thinking better suited to its own questions, philosophy may need to become literature, or to acknowledge religion, in a way that it has not done. After all, Johannes Climacus is not the most literary or the most religious of Kierkegaard's authors. Yet his rejection of certain trends in modern philosophy should not be mistaken for an anti-philosophical gesture; on the contrary, the *Postscript* opens up a space for philosophy as it might be.

⁵⁵ As reported by Diogenes Laertius in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* vi.39. Climacus notes that the Eleatic denial of motion is a phantom of abstract thought that vanishes in the face of real life (CUP 315–316): it “does not relate to existing but to speculation” (CUP 319). See *Repetition*, KW 6: 131. In an 1847 letter to his sister-in-law (KW 25: 215), Kierkegaard writes: “If anyone denies that motion exists, I do as Diogenes did, I walk.” For the Eleatics, this only shows that the realm of temporality and becoming is illusory. But Kierkegaard counters: so much the worse for a philosophy that cannot tell us anything about this realm.