

Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion
MEROLD WESTPHAL, EDITOR

KIERKEGAARD AND DEATH

Edited by
PATRICK STOKES *and* ADAM BUBEN

Indiana University Press
BLOOMINGTON AND INDIANAPOLIS

Thinking Death into Every Moment: The Existence-Problem of Dying in Kierkegaard's *Postscript*

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Doing philosophy may be hazardous to your health, resulting in a condition of “absentmindedness” or distraction in which you forget yourself.¹ In such a case, philosophy becomes an activity that positively interferes with the age-old Socratic task of attending to and caring for the self, and may even have the opposite effect of making people “incompetent to act” (CUP, 1:135/SKS 7, 126). If you are the type of person who is drawn to philosophy and perhaps insufficiently aware of its hazards, then what could be more valuable than a book that seeks to alert you to these dangers, and in the process even exhibits for you a manner of doing philosophy that is perfectly compatible with attending to yourself? In my view, Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is just such a book. It is a work of philosophy that has both diagnostic and therapeutic aims, drawing its readers' attention to a condition they may have, or to which they may be prone, while also harking back to Socrates and to a “simpler philosophy” that is “presented by an existing individual for existing individuals” and according to which wisdom falls within the domain of ethics and concerns above all the question of how to live (CUP, 1:121/SKS 7, 116; cf. CUP, 1:309/SKS 7, 282).

My focus here will be on a portion of the therapeutic treatment being offered in the *Postscript*. In particular, I shall examine the book's main discussion of death (CUP, 1:165–70/SKS 7, 153–58).² My paper has two parts. In the first part, I characterize the book's narrator and the type of philosophical reader that is being addressed, while also describing in more general terms the alternative conception of philosophy that is being offered. Against the backdrop of a Hegelian manner of doing philosophy that allegedly marginalizes the task of attending to oneself, I argue that a key aspect of the treatment being offered consists in getting readers of the *Postscript*

to appreciate the need to “restrain oneself” or hold oneself back (*at holde igjen paa sig selv*) (CUP, 1:165/SKS 7, 153). In the second part, I examine the discussion of death in detail, explicating what the existence-problem of dying is and how this relates to the seemingly paradoxical claim that to think about death one must think it “into every moment” of one’s life (CUP, 1:167/SKS 7, 155). I contend that a key aim of the discussion of death is to alert readers of the *Postscript* to the possibility that their understanding of death may be incomplete and rest on a tendency to conceive of death in terms that do not include a cognizance of themselves as particular human beings. I offer an account of what thinking death into every moment might involve, tying this to the task of attending to oneself and to the exercise of self-restraint. If the Socratic dynamic of the *Postscript* is successful, then readers will become aware of the dangers of neglecting themselves while also being introduced to a healthy manner of doing philosophy that is compatible with the task of attending to themselves.

Philosophical Patient and Socratic Doctor

The *Postscript* is narrated by a fictional character, Johannes Climacus, who is one of Kierkegaard’s best-known pseudonyms. I have argued elsewhere that Climacus is best conceived as a Socratic figure.³ In response to a tendency his readers may have to neglect themselves and to be in a hurry to “go further” or to “go beyond” the task of attending to themselves (which they may even imagine they have “finished”), Climacus tries to slow things down, to linger a bit, to be, as he puts it, a “loafer” or idler who has plenty of time to think about matters that may seem to his readers to be too trivial or insignificant to satisfy their philosophical appetites.⁴ By means of his loafing, Climacus seemingly aims at two things: (1) to get his readers to reflect further about the task of attending to themselves and what can make this difficult, and (2) to introduce them to a manner of doing philosophy that is compatible with this task.

In the chapter in the *Postscript* in which he considers death, Climacus’s overall discussion concerns what he takes to be a tendency in his day for people to neglect ethics, neglecting in particular what he calls the task of “becoming subjective” or becoming a proper subject or self. Climacus suggests that what may explain this neglect is people’s having fallen under the influence of a Hegelian concern with world history, leading them, on his view, to attach less importance to being an individual person (see, e.g., CUP, 1:355/SKS 7, 324; CUP, 1:16/SKS 7, 25). While attending to world history may shed light on the development of human culture and the human

race as a whole, Climacus maintains that this requires a philosophical outlook that is fundamentally directed at the past and what is finished or complete. By his lights, such an outlook does not provide individuals with resources for trying to understand themselves in the midst of their unfolding, unfinished lives or help them to determine future actions:

[A] Hegelian cannot possibly understand himself with the aid of his philosophy; he can understand only what is past, is finished, but a person who is still living is not dead and gone (CUP, 1:307/SKS 7, 280).

Climacus maintains that the real danger of repeatedly and habitually adopting the world-historical perspective is that this can lead to a condition of absentmindedness in individuals and in their losing track of themselves as ethical agents.

In response to this tendency to neglect ethics and the self, Climacus Socratically presents himself as someone who can’t help “attending a little” to himself. While everyone else may have the time and the ability to devote themselves to world history, he maintains that he simply is not up to the task:

Whereas all the nice people are promptly all set to attend to the future of world history, I am obliged many a time to sit at home and mourn over myself. Although my father is dead and I no longer attend school, although I have not been turned into the public authorities for correction, I have nevertheless seen the necessity of attending a little to myself [*at passe lidt paa mig selv*], even though I would undeniably prefer to go to Frederiksberg and deal with world history (CUP, 1:161/SKS 7, 149–50; trans. modified).⁵

By playing the part of a loafing Socratic figure who is not in a hurry to move on to world history, Climacus thereby casts himself as someone who often has occasion by regularly attending to himself to notice tasks that he alleges are “sufficient for a whole human life.” While he admits that he feels the need to “grapple alone” with himself and his poor ethical condition, he does add that there is one person who provides a kind of moral support for his solitary endeavors: “The only one who consoles me is Socrates” (CUP, 1:161/SKS 7, 150).

Mourning over oneself and attending “a little” to oneself are clearly things that Climacus thinks his readers may not be in the habit of doing. One of his ultimate goals in fact seems to be to try to convince them that

the task of attending to themselves is actually of greater significance (and difficulty) than they may imagine. Furthermore, given their intellectual inclinations, it also appears to be Climacus's aim to try to convince his readers not only that such a task by its very nature requires a lifelong commitment, but that in the process of carrying it out, "existence-problems" will arise that can also satisfy his readers' intellectual appetites—without, however, leading to the condition of self-forgetfulness and absentmindedness that he alleges results from engaging in modern, Hegelian-style speculative philosophy.⁶ As part of his discussion of death, Climacus identifies "dying" (*det at døe*) as a paradigmatic example of an existence-problem; other examples that he considers include "praying," "being immortal," "thanking God," "marrying," and above all the problem of how an eternal happiness can be built on a historical knowledge, that is, the problem of becoming a Christian (see CUP, 1:352/SKS 7, 322). Existence-problems pertain to ethical and religious matters, and Climacus readily admits that for the person who is in the habit of thinking about the narratives of world history these problems may appear, comparatively speaking, insignificant or overly "simple" in nature (CUP, 1:160/SKS 7, 148). Climacus's aim is to impress upon his readers how these seemingly simple problems become much more difficult once they are conceived of in relation to an individual's own life. Since existence-problems concern ethics and religion, part of what makes them difficult stems from their being inherently practical and action-guiding, consisting of "not only a knowing" but "also a *doing* that is related to a knowing" (CUP, 1:160/SKS 7, 149; italics mine). As Climacus sees it, existence-problems are such that, if they are approached in the right way, then they should occupy and concern an individual at every moment for the whole of life and should, accordingly, provide the thinker with topics to think through that will also be engaging for the whole of life. In the case of thinking about death and dying in particular, Climacus argues that the individual should think death "into every moment" of her or his life (CUP, 1:167/SKS 7, 155). What he means by this claim, however, is far from obvious. Surely he is not suggesting that moment by moment one must have running through one's head the thought, "I am going to die" or something of the kind. That would be to advocate a task that is not only difficult but seemingly impossible. We will examine the nature of this claim in greater detail in the second part of this chapter.

If we are to appreciate fully Climacus's discussion of death and what thinking it into every moment might involve, we need to be clear about the intended audience of the *Postscript*. We need, that is, to establish who exactly the philosophical patient is supposed to be. Let's start by

considering who Climacus is *not* addressing. In a footnote at the end of his discussion of death, Climacus underscores that his reflections about death and dying are not meant for everyone:

Although it has been said frequently, I wish to repeat it again here: What is developed here by no means pertains to the simple [*de Eenfoldige*], whom the god will preserve in their lovable simplicity (although they sense the pressure of life in another way), the simplicity that feels no great need for any other kind of understanding, or, insofar as it is felt, . . . finds comfort in the thought that life's happiness does not consist in being a person of knowledge (CUP, 1:170/SKS 7, 158; trans. modified).

What is key here is the idea that some people may feel "no great need" to seek a deeper understanding of matters that arise in their lives. We might characterize the simple person as someone who has few or no philosophical inclinations, someone who is not naturally driven by the problems of life toward thinking and reflection since she or he "sense[s] the pressure of life in another way." In a later discussion of the existence-problem of what it is to marry, Climacus expands further on the sort of person he has in mind:

[E]veryone who simply and honestly can say that he feels no need for this understanding—he is indeed without blame. Woe to the person who disturbs him . . . woe to the person who risks trying to pull the dangers and horrors of intellectual warfare down upon his blessed security in the enclosure of marriage (CUP, 1:181/SKS 7, 167).

On this view, the simple person doesn't feel a "need" for a deeper understanding and her or his happiness is not thought to depend on obtaining such an understanding. If there are such persons, philosophy not only doesn't occupy them but could actually wind up being a source of unhappiness, where the "blessed security" of the simple might be disrupted by the "intellectual warfare" that sometimes characterizes philosophy.⁷

Yet even though Climacus does not mean to engage simple persons with his writings, he does appeal to what he claims they may more straightforwardly know and understand in order to engage his more philosophically inclined readers. This is part of his strategy of trying to slow his readers down, of trying to get them to dwell a bit more on themselves and the difficulties associated with how to live. He invites his readers to agree that before the wise take up the difficulties of thinking about the

world-historical, they should first make sure that they “understand the same thing that the simple person understands,” though he imagines that his readers may also be inclined to agree with the following: “But of course this is so easy for the wise person to understand (why else is he called wise?) that understanding it is merely a matter of a moment, and at the very same moment he is in full swing with the world-historical” (CUP, 1:159–60/SKS 7, 148). Climacus does not himself endorse this view of the wise. His aim seems to be to get his readers to discover that there is more to what the simple person understands (“the simple”) than they may imagine, and that therefore those who are truly wise will not be those who believe they can dispose of these matters in no time, but rather those who appreciate that the simple can be wholly engaging regardless of one’s intellectual makeup. For despite what his readers may be inclined to think, it is Climacus’s view that these simple matters actually present peculiar difficulties for the wise:

Is it not precisely the simple that is most difficult for the wise person to understand? The simple person understands the simple directly, but when the wise person is to understand it, it becomes infinitely difficult (CUP, 1:160/SKS 7, 148; trans. modified).

After first drawing a contrast between the simple and the wise (the latter of which many of his readers may assume themselves to be or aspire to be), Climacus introduces a second sense of what he means by “simple,” suggesting that it is the simple more than anything that the wise find difficult to understand. While it is not immediately obvious why the simple should be especially difficult for the wise, this claim should serve to check his readers a bit, if only to make them puzzle over the meaning of these words.

In this context, Climacus holds out for his readers the prospect of a relationship to the simple that rests on a certain “equality” between those who have philosophical inclinations and those who do not (see especially CUP, 1:227–28/SKS 7, 207–8). He maintains that what underwrites this equality is the idea that what they understand is the same, even while the manner in which they understand this is different:

The wise person relates himself to the simple in this way. When he enthusiastically honors this as the highest, it honors him in turn, for it is as if it became something else through him, although it still remains the same. The more the wise person thinks about the simple (that there can be any

question of a longer preoccupation with it already shows that it is not so easy after all), the more difficult it becomes for him. Yet he feels gripped by a deep humanness that reconciles him with all of life: that the difference between the wise person and the simplest person is this little evanescent difference *that the simple person knows the essential* and the wise person little by little *comes to know* that he knows it or *comes to know* that he does not know it, but what they know is the same. Little by little—and then also the wise person’s life comes to an end—so when was there time for the world-historical interest? (CUP, 1:160/SKS 7, 149).

Climacus’s suggestion seems to be that both the simple and the wise can lead lives that are related to the same thing, to what he is calling the simple. While he claims that the simple will know the simple in effect nonreflectively, the wise will always be in the process of reflectively discovering what they know (or don’t know) about the very same thing. It is this difference that creates conceptual space for Climacus’s alternative conception of the ideal philosopher, someone who does not set herself or himself apart from the ordinary person in terms of content, but who nevertheless leads a more reflective, intellectual life. In this way, “the simple” represents part of his concept of the proper philosopher. Sometimes he calls this individual the “subjective thinker,” but elsewhere he uses the term “simple wise person” (the latter, incidentally, being a term that both he and Kierkegaard use to designate Socrates).⁸

This distinction between the simple person and the subjective thinker/simple wise person might seem to suggest that Climacus’s intended audience is the committed Hegelian philosopher. There are reasons, however, for thinking that this is not his true target. The speculative philosopher is the frequent butt of numerous jokes in the *Postscript* and is often ridiculed by Climacus. While part of his endeavor is to warn against doing philosophy in this way, it is not obvious that the manner in which he writes about the Hegelian is a very effective way of engaging the Hegelian herself or himself. Would such a person really put up with this sort of treatment over the course of several hundred pages? A better candidate, it seems, is someone who is drawn to philosophy but who has not yet developed a settled philosophical outlook. Such a person remains vulnerable to the condition of absentmindedness but is not yet so set in her or his ways that there is little hope of acquiring a deeper impression of the task of attending to oneself. In the footnote we discussed earlier, where Climacus denies that he is addressing the simple, he says a bit more about his intended audience: “On the other hand, [what has been developed here about death] does pertain

to the person who considers himself to have the ability and the opportunity for deeper inquiry" (CUP, 1:170/SKS 7, 158). I think Climacus's reader therefore is best conceived of as someone who seeks "deeper inquiry," but also as someone who can still be convinced that the task of becoming an existing human being is the highest task and that philosophy need not be incompatible with this task. At one point in his discussion, Climacus describes himself as such a person, someone who feels the "need" for a "deeper understanding," one of those who is "not altogether simple" since he does "feel a need to understand" but who, in comparison to the speculative philosopher, may appear "limited" in that he feels "particularly the need to understand the simple." He says that it is in these terms that he has "tried to understand [himself]" and in the process he also arguably serves as an example for his philosophically inclined readers (CUP, 1:180/SKS 7, 166; CUP, 1:182/SKS 7, 168).

Climacus thus holds out to his readers an alternative to becoming a speculative philosopher. As he examines a number of different existence-problems and tries to motivate the alternative conception of philosophy that he claims is exhibited by the subjective thinker/simple wise person, he also specifies further what he thinks the speculative philosopher lacks, and so, by implication, what he thinks his readers need to cultivate. Since the existence-problem of dying is supposed to make thinking about death more difficult, getting clearer about this lack will bear directly on how the thinking person ought to approach death and what it is to think death into every moment of one's life. To return to the image of the speculative philosopher as one who too readily and too quickly imagines that she or he has finished with the task of attending to herself or himself (whereas Climacus, recall, is a loafer who has plenty of time), what such an individual needs above all, according to Climacus, is *self-restraint*. He claims that "since the temptation is to finish too quickly," the individual's "task is to exercise restraint" over herself or himself (CUP, 1:165/SKS 7, 153). That is, individuals need to keep themselves from prematurely ceasing to attend to themselves, from acting on any inclination to conceive of the task of attending to themselves as something they could have finished, where the faster one can do this the more quickly one can turn to world history. Speed is not an admirable quality here. By way of illustration, Climacus compares the quickness of the speculative philosopher to someone who does not make proper use of her or his time:

Suppose a person is given the task of entertaining himself for one day and by noon is already finished with the entertainment—then his speed would

indeed be of no merit. So it is also when life is the task. To be finished with life before life is finished with one is not to finish the task at all (CUP, 1:164/SKS 7, 152; cf. CUP, 1:405–6/SKS 7, 369).

One way for Climacus to help his readers to appreciate that the speed of the speculative philosopher is not necessarily something to be emulated is by the way he himself slows things down and takes his time. In the process, this may get his readers to rethink what it is to attend to themselves and to consider what role philosophy may play in such a task.

With respect to his own abilities and capacities, Climacus notes that while he would describe himself as "one of those who have power," he admits that his power "is not that of a ruler or a conqueror" but is limited to an ability "to exercise restraint" (CUP, 1:164/SKS 7, 153; trans. modified). Moreover, he also admits that the scope of this power is "not extensive" since he has "power only over [himself]" and "not even that if [he does] not exercise restraint [over himself] every moment" (CUP, 1:165/SKS 7, 153). In this way Climacus's loafing behavior takes on a new significance. If the speculative philosopher is one who has no patience for attending to herself or himself and imagines that she or he has finished this lifelong task "by noon," then Climacus's ability to slow things down, to rethink topics and approach them from new angles, and basically to "keep on as long as need be" is, above all, a mark of his power of self-restraint (CUP, 1:181/SKS 7, 167). This is something that readers can learn to observe in Climacus's own behavior while also learning to detect the lack of self-restraint that is exhibited in some of the examples he sketches for them of how the speculative philosopher falls into self-forgetfulness. But if his readers are truly to acquire the ability to observe the presence or absence of self-restraint in others then they must learn to restrain themselves. Climacus notes, for example, that the ability to determine whether a person is lying is gained through the practice of restraining and attending to oneself. He cites the example of someone who "speaks of death" and who claims "he has been thinking it and has thought, for example, its uncertainty." To detect whether he is lying or not, one need only "let him talk":

Just pay attention to the reduplicated presence of the stated thought in every word, in every parenthetical clause, in the digression, in the unguarded moment of simile and comparison . . . —provided that one [also] scrupulously attends to oneself. For the ability to attend in this way [to others] is gained by restraining oneself (CUP, 1:170/SKS 7, 157; trans. modified; cf. CUP, 1:255/SKS 7, 232; CUP, 1:354/SKS 7, 323).

Here reading well and living well are both tied to cultivating the power of self-restraint; through self-restraint comes the ability to attend to oneself. By taking his time and exhibiting his ability to restrain himself (to “keep on as long as need be”), Climacus does not indulge his readers’ desire to finish quickly but instead provides them with further opportunities for paying greater attention to themselves. In the process, he also tries to get his readers to appreciate “how the simplest problem is changed by restraint [*Paaholdenhed*] into the most difficult” (CUP, 1:165/SKS 7, 153; trans. modified). If they come to see how restraining or holding themselves back can change the character of these problems, making them more gripping and engaging, then they may be able to wean themselves of their impatient desire to “go further,” redirecting their philosophical impulses toward these seemingly simple matters. To get clearer on this, let’s turn now to the existence-problem of dying and consider further how self-restraint constitutes part of the treatment being offered by Climacus.

The Existence-Problem of Dying

Climacus begins his discussion of the existence-problem of dying by claiming to know about this topic “what people generally (*i Almindelighed*) know” (CUP, 1:165/SKS 7, 153; trans. modified). He says he knows some of the things that can cause death (“if I swallow a dose of sulfuric acid I will die, likewise by drowning myself, by breathing in coal fumes while sleeping, etc.”); he knows there are different attitudes about suicide (“Napoleon always carried poison with him,” “Shakespeare’s Juliet took it,” the Stoics think suicide is courageous, others think it cowardly); he knows death sometimes appears comic, other times tragic (“one can die from such a ludicrous trifle that even the most solemn person cannot help laughing at death”; there is “pathos” when “the tragic hero dies in the fifth act” but not “when an alehouse keeper dies”); he knows the different moods with which poets interpret death; and he knows what the clergy usually say about death (including the “stock themes dealt with at funerals”) (CUP, 1:165–66/SKS 7, 153; trans. modified). Between knowing what can cause death, how death can appear to us, and how we often respond to it, Climacus invites his readers to find his knowledge to be pretty comprehensive. If this is so, then for those who find the problem of dying simple in nature and so not worth spending much time on, that will be the end of it. There will be nothing more to bother themselves over with respect to this topic. In mock agreement, Climacus remarks, “If there is no other hindrance to moving on to world history, then I am ready” (CUP, 1:166/SKS 7, 153–54).

Climacus makes clear, however, that he actually thinks that he is far from being ready to move on to world history. In contrast to any comfort that his readers may take in their belief that what they know about death is adequate, he says that even though he knows as much as the next person he still doesn’t consider death to be something that he has understood:

[D]espite this almost extraordinary knowledge or proficiency of knowledge, I can by no means consider death as something that I have understood. So before I move on to world history, . . . it seems to me that I had better think about this, lest existence mock me for having become so erudite that I had forgotten to understand what sometime will happen to me and will happen to every human being—sometime, but what am I saying? Suppose death were so devious as to come tomorrow! (CUP, 1:166/SKS 7, 154; trans. modified).

This passage deals a double blow to his readers’ conviction that their knowledge of death is adequate. First, readers are told by Climacus that despite his possessing the same knowledge that they may have been relying on, he does not consider death to be something he has understood, suggesting that their own understanding may also be incomplete or somehow less certain than they may imagine. If this knowledge isn’t adequate for Climacus then perhaps it isn’t for them either. Furthermore, Climacus raises the prospect that if we aren’t careful we might even “forget” to obtain an understanding of something that pertains to each and every one of us, as though we might live through life in an absentminded haze without ever truly becoming aware of what it is to be a human being. While pausing over this possibility (call it the possibility of absentmindedness), readers are then met with a second shock, which is the reminder that death has as one of its characteristic features the property of being temporally uncertain. Death could come tomorrow, or even at this very moment, and if Climacus can’t affirm that he has understood death despite all that he proclaims to know about it, even as his own death could happen suddenly and without warning, then addressing this problem can suddenly seem much more pressing and urgent. Readers are now faced with trying to grasp why death isn’t something that Climacus, despite his knowledge, is prepared to affirm that he has understood, and with wondering what else a person must possess to be in such a position, all the while remaining aware of how death can come suddenly and unannounced.

Climacus devotes much of his discussion to considering the temporal uncertainty of death. He maintains that trying to come to terms with

just this one aspect of death will present his readers with greater difficulties than they may be accustomed to: "Just this uncertainty, if it is to be understood and held fast by an existing person and consequently be thought into everything precisely because it is uncertainty, . . . gives rise to unbelievable difficulties" (CUP, 1:166/SKS 7, 154; trans. modified). The idea that a proper understanding of the uncertainty of death might somehow involve thinking this uncertainty "into everything," while not immediately clear, holds out the prospect of a task of understanding of a different order, something that is ongoing and perhaps never-ending, one of those "tasks that are sufficient for a whole human life" that Climacus says he has a tendency to "catch sight of" and that might provide his readers with a new kind of challenge (CUP, 1:161/SKS 7, 149).⁹ Perhaps to heighten the idea of such a challenge, Climacus presents his readers with a few cases where people only think they are thinking the uncertainty of death without actually doing so. In the first case, he cites the example of someone giving a speech who "believes that he thinks the uncertainty of death and yet forgets to think this uncertainty into what he is saying" (CUP, 1:166/SKS 7, 154; trans. modified). To add insult to injury, the subject of the speech just so happens to be the uncertainty of death and how in the face of this one should seek "a purpose for the whole of life." Climacus maintains that the speaker in question has "essentially forgotten" the uncertainty of death since he has not connected the topic of his speech to the very uncertainty at issue (CUP, 1:166/SKS 7, 154). In Climacus's terms, properly to connect them would require that the life-purpose being championed by the speaker be "made dialectical in relation to the uncertainty of death" (CUP, 1:166/SKS 7, 154). Since the speaker presents himself as an authority on the uncertainty of death while himself forgetting to "think the uncertainty into what he is saying about uncertainty," this may seem to be an especially egregious instance of forgetfulness. It's also worth keeping in mind, however, Climacus's earlier claim that truly to understand and grasp this uncertainty would require that it "be thought into everything." This means more generally that the speaker would be at fault whatever the particular subject matter of his speech, since what he forgets to do above all is to think the uncertainty of death into something or other; the task is to think it into everything.¹⁰

While Climacus's readers may be struck by the comical nature of the speaker's situation without necessarily finding any basis for thinking that this criticism should be directed at themselves, the second set of examples seems more on target. In this case, Climacus denies that thinking the uncertainty of death is a topic that one can meaningfully claim to have

done once and for all, or that one can adequately address by merely thinking it on occasion:

To think this uncertainty once and for all, or once a year at matins on New Year's morning, is nonsense, of course, and is not to think it at all. If the one who thinks it in this way explains world history, what he says about world history can perhaps be splendid, but what he says about death is stupid (CUP, 1:166/SKS 7, 154; trans. modified).

These two scenarios may come closer to making direct contact with Climacus's readers. Insofar as they have the conviction that death is something they have understood, they may fall into the former category, imagining that they have successfully finished with the task of thinking through its uncertainty. Alternatively, they may be in the habit of thinking about death and its uncertainty now and again, perhaps on those occasions when the transience of life is most salient. Climacus's unsettling claim here is that under neither scenario has a person thought the uncertainty of death "at all." Akin to the speaker who has forgotten to think the uncertainty of death while giving a speech on this very topic, those who imagine that they can successfully think the uncertainty of death once and for all or only on occasion are also thereby marked as individuals who have "essentially forgotten" the uncertainty of death. As Climacus represents things, none of them is successfully thinking death even as they all may imagine that they are.

To this point in his discussion, we might characterize Climacus's aim as a kind of Socratic motivation of the idea that the existence-problem of dying is more pressing than his readers may previously have appreciated. First he presents himself, in good Socratic fashion, as someone who lacks an understanding of a topic that his readers may imagine themselves to understand adequately. Presenting himself in this way has the potential to disarm his readers and thereby to create an environment in which they are willing to be more forthcoming (including with themselves) about what their views and convictions actually are. By raising the prospect of this topic's being more difficult to understand than his readers may have thought, and by highlighting some of the ways a person can fail to think well about these matters, Climacus provides his readers with the opportunity to reflect further about how things stand with themselves. Questions may naturally arise (such as, "What would thinking well about this matter look like?") that may serve to heighten their curiosity, and perhaps even make them feel a bit disoriented, as they come to consider how their own

grasp of death may or may not differ from what Climacus has claimed is inadequate.

Even if these considerations do give his readers pause, Climacus still needs to say more about what is underwriting his claim about not understanding death. What more is there besides the everyday knowledge that he claims to possess? Why isn't this general knowledge about death adequate? Climacus's main thought seems to be that when it comes to understanding death, there is something above and beyond this general knowledge, something that pertains to what dying is for a given individual that we might call inherently first-personal in nature: what my dying is for me, what your dying is for you, etc. Using himself as an example, Climacus maintains that there is an aspect of death that is quite particular in nature for a given person:

[F]or me, *my* dying is by no means something in general; [perhaps] for others my dying is some such thing. Nor am *I* for myself some such thing in general; perhaps for others I am some such thing in general (CUP, 1:167/SKS 7, 155; trans. modified).

By considering the possibility that either his dying or he himself might be "some such thing in general" for other people, Climacus makes clear that he is not denying that part of what dying is can be straightforwardly characterized in general terms and so also understood in general. His claim is that with respect to oneself, grasping what can be grasped in general about death will not suffice for truly coming to grips with the existence-problem of dying. An individual's own dying, on Climacus's view, does not have an "in general" quality for that person; instead, he seems to think that each person's own dying has a particular character that accordingly requires a non-general, first-personal understanding. In my own case, for example, what is crucial is that the dying in question is mine, and that the person in question who will die is me. It's this fact that Climacus suggests we aren't adequately struck by and that points up the limits of our understanding of death.

As he characterizes this personal dimension of understanding death, concerning a given person's relationship to her or his own dying, Climacus also draws his readers' attention to what might explain why their own deaths may not have fully registered with them. He thinks that those who think, for example, that the uncertainty of death can be understood in general (and so be quickly disposed of thereby) may have lost track of themselves and of what it is to be mortal:

If death is always uncertain and I am mortal, then . . . this uncertainty cannot possibly be understood in general unless I am also such a human being in general. But this I am not. That is something only absentminded people are, for example, Soldin, the bookseller (CUP, 1:167/SKS 7, 154; trans. modified).

This passage seeks to make a point through a kind of playful contradictoriness. The idea of an individual person's being "a human being in general" is clearly meant to sound strange or paradoxical.¹¹ Call it a riddle. Question: How can someone be a human being in general? Answer: By being absentminded! Similarly, in the case of Soldin, when Climacus reports that "when he [Soldin] was going to get up in the morning, he was not aware [or did not know (*vidste han ikke af*)] that he was dead," we are surely meant to laugh at the extent of his absentmindedness, as it continues to accompany him even after he has died (CUP, 1:167/SKS 7, 155). The warning for Climacus's readers is that one can become alienated from oneself in this way, distracted or absent from oneself, so that being mortal and all that this involves simply does not register. In such a case, one's understanding of oneself, if it can be called an understanding at all, is in effect as if one conceived of oneself as a nonparticular, "some such thing in general" human being. But this hardly amounts to being human at all, and, according to Climacus, what is "most embarrassing of all" about being on "such bad terms with oneself" is when one remains "ignorant of this condition" (CUP, 1:167/SKS 7, 155; trans. modified). This ignorance is precisely what Climacus is Socratically targeting in his readers. They may imagine that they have an adequate understanding of what death is, and yet there is the real danger that they only relate to themselves in the most general terms and, even worse, that they remain ignorant that they relate to themselves in this way.

This is not to say that Climacus is arguing that there is nothing that we can understand in general. Presumably there are some things (e.g., mathematics) that we can understand in general even though none of us is ever a human being in general. Climacus's point seems to be just that there are other things that, as they pertain to human beings, can only be fully grasped if they are tied more closely to the fact that individual human beings, mortal by nature, are clearly such that they are not human beings "in general" but particular human beings who will one day die, and that coming to appreciate this about ourselves is something each one of us must do individually.¹² We might say that it is Climacus's aim to get his readers to reflect further on what being a particular human being amounts

to and why, in the case of the problem of dying, paying attention to oneself qua a particular human being can make this seemingly simple problem become more difficult, becoming something that by Climacus's lights must be thought into every moment of one's life.

This contrast between being a human being "in general," which Climacus ties to absentmindedness and distraction (where one is not attending to what one is), and being a particular human being can be fruitfully compared to a distinction he draws between "being a so-called subject of sorts" and "being a [proper] subject or becoming one and being what one is by having become that," the latter being something that he champions as "a very praiseworthy task, a *quantum satis* [sufficient amount] for a human life" (CUP, 1:131/SKS 7, 123; CUP, 1:163/SKS 7, 151). While Climacus allows that there may be a sense in which one begins as a subject of sorts or as a human being in general, he also claims that "if the task is to become subjective [i.e., to become a proper subject], then every subject becomes *for himself* exactly the opposite of some such thing in general" (CUP, 1:167/SKS 7, 155). In the case of the problem of dying in particular, Climacus (speaking in the first person) maintains that as this task of becoming a subject is carried out, "the uncertainty [of death] becomes more and more dialectically penetrating in relation to my personality" (CUP, 1:167/SKS 7, 154). What this means with respect to thinking death in a correct manner is as follows: "It becomes more and more important for me to think it [death] into every moment of my life, because, since its uncertainty is at every moment, this uncertainty is vanquished only by my vanquishing it every moment" (CUP, 1:167/SKS 7, 154–55). While thinking death into every moment of one's life is apparently meant to be a description of what successfully thinking death would involve, it still remains unclear what Climacus means by this. As I noted above, it seems implausible to take him to mean that literally, moment by moment, one must have the occurrent thought "I am going to die" or something similar. As Merold Westphal puts it, "[u]nder this impossible, morbid . . . scenario, whenever offered a penny for my thoughts, I could answer, 'I am thinking about my death.'"¹³ Even if we reject, however, the idea that thinking death into every moment means actively having a thought of this sort moment by moment, it is still not easy to say what, exactly, Climacus does mean. This is complicated further by the fact that in the latter half of his discussion of death he actually raises several possible features of death that he suggests a reflective person might spend time thinking through. And while these seem to be straightforward cases of a kind of thinking about death that the philosophically inclined might do, none of

what he describes is an obvious candidate for exemplifying what it is to think death into every moment.

So what's going on here exactly? Having drawn a contrast between those who think only occasionally about death and dying, if that, and those who think death into every moment, Climacus has surely, at a minimum, provided his readers with adequate material for bringing them to a halt, at least temporarily. In checking their impulse to move on to world history, he may get them to question whether they themselves have paid adequate attention to themselves and, in this case, to the fact that they are mortal and that they each will die one day. But given their own philosophical inclinations, they will also presumably want to obtain a better understanding of what is at issue here. Even if they grant that Climacus has provided a number of cases where people have not succeeded in thinking death, they will surely also expect Climacus to deliver on what would count as success. Has he done so? Yes and no. After he motivates the problem and indicates how he thinks some people fall short in their engagement with the problem of dying, he then openly imagines a dialogue between himself and someone drawn to world history:

The exalted devotee of world history can nevertheless not deny me an answer to the question of what it is to die, and the moment he answers, the dialectic begins. Let him give whatever reason he wishes for not dwelling further on such thoughts; it will not help, because the reason will in turn be made dialectical in order to see essentially what it is. Then I would have to ask whether it is at all possible to have an idea of death, whether death can be anticipated and *anticipando* [by being anticipated] be experienced in an idea, or whether it is only when it actually is (CUP, 1:167–68/SKS 7, 155; trans. modified).

After posing this question, Climacus then sketches several possible lines of thought a person might take as she or he thinks this through. If a person denies that we can have an idea of death, this is not the end of the matter since a "negative answer, a no, must be defined dialectically just as fully as a positive answer." Climacus maintains that the "thinking person" will want to have it made "dialectically clear that the answer must be no," and suggests that in the process "this dialectical clarification" will end up relating this "no" to "other existence-problems," leaving the thinker with yet more to think through (CUP, 1:168/SKS 7, 156; trans. modified). This is fine as far as it goes, but these sorts of considerations, things that a thinking person could reflect on, do not seem to be candidates for the still elusive

activity of thinking death into every moment. One possibility is that they aren't meant to be. The issues raised in the imagined dialogue between Climacus and the speculative thinker are highly abstract matters that presumably would not much concern the simple person but that certainly could provide the philosophically inclined person with material to exercise her or his philosophical nature. Yet I take it that the fact of one's death is something that both the simple and the philosophically inclined should be struck by and need to engage moment by moment simply in virtue of being human and taking part in the task of becoming subjective, though it may be that we will want to characterize the manner of this engagement differently in the two cases. That is, while the simple may nonreflectively remain aware of death (sensing it "in another way"), it may only be the philosophically inclined who can properly be characterized as *thinking* death into every moment (CUP, 1:170/SKS 7, 158).

Climacus does provide a partial answer to what thinking death into every moment might be when considering what follows if a person answers "yes" to the question of whether or not we can have an idea of death. He points to further lines of thought to be pursued here as well, noting, for example, that there would be a need to think further about what death is given that it's the sort of thing of which we can obtain an idea, including "what it is for the living person, how the idea of it must change a person's whole life, if he, in order to think its uncertainty, must think it every moment in order thereby to prepare himself for it" (CUP, 1:168/SKS 7, 156). Similarly, there would be a need to think further about what "preparation" for death actually is since there's a difference between one's idea of what is to come and death's actually coming. As Climacus sketches these additional topics of thought, he also offers a clue concerning what thinking death into every moment might at least involve: "[F]or the subject it is an *act* to think his death" (CUP, 1:169/SKS 7, 156; italics mine). This recalls a passage I quoted earlier, where Climacus maintains that because existence-problems pertain to ethical and religious matters, they will be inherently practical and action-guiding, consisting of "not only a knowing" but "also a *doing* that is related to a knowing" (CUP, 1:160/SKS 7, 149; italics mine). To help unpack this idea, Climacus contrasts the one who acts by thinking his death with the absentminded person (such as Soldin the bookseller or the speculative philosopher), someone whose condition might be characterized as that of being a human being "in general." In this latter sort of case, Climacus denies that any attempts to think death in general terms (and by such an absentminded person) will constitute an act: "[I]t is merely a some such thing in general, and basically it is not

easy to say what a some such thing is" (CUP, 1:169/SKS 7, 156). According to Climacus, then, with respect to the ethical task of becoming subjective or a subject, thinking death becomes an act because "the development of subjectivity consists precisely in this, that [the individual], acting, works through himself in his thinking about his own existence, consequently that he actually thinks what is thought by actualizing it" (CUP, 1:169/SKS 7, 156). More particularly, Climacus draws out this point as follows: "[The individual] does not think for a moment: 'Now you must attend every moment'—but . . . he attends every moment" (CUP, 1:169/SKS 7, 156–57; trans. modified). In thinking death into every moment, one should therefore be constantly attending to oneself and one's mortal nature so that one's mortality remains forever before one's eyes.

But what exactly is the nature of this attending to or watching of oneself? If it isn't thinking the sorts of things that only the philosophically inclined have the capacity and the desire to think, what else could it be? I am not sure that Climacus provides a satisfactory answer to this question, or if he does, I haven't yet developed a full account of his view. That will have to wait for another occasion. I want to conclude, however, by indicating one way in which Climacus's view might be understood, with the caveat that further work needs to be done to flesh this out. To begin with, it may be worth recalling Climacus's claim that what the philosophically inclined (such as himself) gain as a reward for doing the kind of thinking that they do is that "foolish little difference between the simple person's and the wise person's knowledge of the simple thing—that the simple person knows it, and the wise person knows that he knows it or knows that he does not know it" (CUP, 1:181/SKS 7, 167). While the thinking person may have a more reflective relationship to the simple, in either case the manner in which one lives ought to involve a cognizance of oneself and, in the case of death and dying, of one's mortal nature. One possibility is that Climacus is trying to characterize a kind of mindfulness or a mode of living and acting that consists in attending to oneself every moment, where the very act of attending will give one's life a certain character and shape. At the very end of his discussion of death, he suggests that this outlook or stance with respect to death is constituted by relating dying to "the subject's *whole* life," just as earlier he had drawn attention to how the idea of death "must change a person's whole life" if she or he is to think death into every moment (CUP, 1:170/SKS 7, 157; CUP, 1:168/SKS 7, 156; italics mine). This involves proceeding in such a way that one does not fall into distraction or absentmindedness and, as we've seen, Climacus holds that to avoid this condition the subject requires self-restraint. It may be that

what it is to give one's life the requisite wholeness at issue just is to lead a life of self-restraint; for, as Climacus maintains, "the ability to attend in this way [to oneself] is gained by restraining oneself" (CUP, 1:170/SKS 7, 157). This is something that both the simple and the more reflective can do. The question will still remain, however, in what respect, if any, this activity of attending to the self should be called thinking. Whatever we ultimately decide, in the most general terms we need to be able to characterize this activity so that we can make sense of its being done nonreflectively as well as reflectively, since both the simple and the simple wise will attend to themselves as they carry out the task of becoming a self, and since, in the case of the existence-problem of dying, for both the simple and the simple wise the fact of their own respective deaths will remain a salient, ever-present feature of how they experience themselves and the lives they lead. If Climacus's readers allow his therapeutic remarks to work on them and to help them to check the impulse to go further, then they might avoid some of the dangers of doing philosophy—without, however, needing to deny their own philosophical natures. Through self-restraint, they will be able to think about death even as they continue to think it into every moment of their lives.¹⁴

NOTES

1. See, e.g., CUP, 1:145–46/SKS 7, 135–36; CUP, 1:159/SKS 7, 148.
2. See also CUP, 1:82–89/SKS 7, 82–88. While scholars have taken great interest in Kierkegaard's views on death, this portion of the *Postscript* has not received much attention. For helpful exceptions, see Ralph Henry Johnson, *The Concept of Existence in the "Concluding Unscientific Postscript"* (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), pp. 80–86; Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1996), pp. 109–11.
3. See "The Socratic Method of Kierkegaard's Pseudonym Johannes Climacus," in *Kierkegaard and the Word(s)*, ed. Poul Houe and Gordon Marino, pp. 139–50 (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 2003); "Understanding Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus in the *Postscript*," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2007*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Hermann Deuser, and K. Brian Söderquist, pp. 424–40 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007).
4. On the urge to "go further" or to imagine oneself "finished" with tasks that properly speaking ought to occupy a person for an entire lifetime, see, e.g., CUP, 1:606/SKS 7, 550; CUP, 1:466/SKS 7, 423; CUP, 1:276/SKS 7, 251. On Climacus's characterization of himself as a "loafer," see PF, 5/SKS 4, 215; CUP, 1:185/SKS 7, 171 (cf. CUP, 1:83/SKS 7, 82). See also Muench, "Understanding Kierkegaard's Johannes Climacus in the *Postscript*," pp. 429–31.

5. Climacus employs the verb phrase "at passe paa" a number of times in his discussion of death. This can mean "pay attention to," "watch out for," "take care of," and "look after." In the imperative form, "Pas på!" means "Watch out!" or "Look out!"

6. See, e.g., CUP, 1:168/SKS 7, 156; CUP, 1:304/SKS 7, 276–77; CUP, 1:349–52/SKS 7, 320–22; CUP, 1:386/SKS 7, 351; CUP, 1:556/SKS 7, 505.

7. Thanks to Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Bruce Kirmmse for pressing me to define more precisely how Climacus conceives of the simple person.

8. Climacus equates the two terms at CUP, 1:353/SKS 7, 323. On the term "subjective thinker," see CUP, 1:72–93/SKS 7, 73–92; CUP, 1:349–60/SKS 7, 320–28. On the term "simple wise person," see CUP, 1:227–28/SKS 7, 207–8. Earlier, Climacus refers to the simple wise person as "the wise person." See CUP, 1:159–60/SKS 7, 148–49; CUP, 1:181–82/SKS 7, 167–68. Climacus refers to Socrates as "that simple wise person" at PF, 19/SKS 4, 228.

9. Throughout his discussion of death, Climacus uses the formulation "thinking death" or "thinking the uncertainty of death" as opposed to thinking "about" either of these. This usage may be one way of trying to mark for his readers a manner of engaging with death that is distinct from how death is typically approached by the absentminded and distracted.

10. Thanks to Patrick Stokes for helping me to get clear on this point.

11. Thanks to K. Brian Söderquist for helping me to appreciate this.

12. It is this particularity, "the purely personal life," that Kierkegaard maintains does not have a place within the systematic treatises of Hegel and his followers. See CI, 166/SKS 1, 215.

13. Westphal, *Becoming a Self*, p. 110.

14. Thanks to the Søren Kierkegaard Research Center and the Department of Philosophy at the University of Copenhagen for providing me with two opportunities to present earlier versions of this chapter, and to both audiences for their helpful questions and comments. Thanks also to David Berger, Adam Buben, Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Bridget Clarke, Róbert Haraldsson, Ulrich Knappe, Poul Lübcke, David Possen, Richard Purkarthofer, K. Brian Söderquist, Jon Stewart, and Patrick Stokes for their helpful feedback and stimulating conversations.