

Søren Kierkegaard and the Word(s)

Essays
on Hermeneutics and Communication

Edited by Poul Houe and Gordon D. Marino

C.A. REITZEL
COPENHAGEN 2003

The Socratic Method of Kierkegaard's Pseudonym Johannes Climacus: Indirect Communication and the Art of »Taking Away«¹

Paul Muench
University of Pittsburgh

Now, just as in Socrates' time, only even more so, it is necessary that people be starved just a little Socratically....It is said that the world needs a republic, and it is said to need a new social order and a new religion: but it occurs to no one that what this world really needs, confused as it is by too much knowledge, is a Socrates.

-Anti-Climacus²

I want to defend the view that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus is a thoroughly Socratic figure, someone whose way of comporting himself and of doing philosophy is in close accord with the many things he has to teach us about Socrates and about Socratic method. Of course, it might further be argued that Kierkegaard himself is a thoroughly Socratic figure. I think there is something right about this thought; at the same time, I think a closer study of Climacus and what I'm calling his Socratic method is a good place with which to begin any more general treatment of Kierkegaard's overall Socratic methodology. Climacus represents Kierkegaard's idealization of the Socratic within the context of nineteenth century Danish Christendom.³

There are two important respects in which Climacus can fruitfully be compared to Socrates. First, like Socrates, his principal target is a certain kind of blameworthy *ignorance* (where one thinks one knows something one does not) of which he seeks to make his interlocutors *aware*;⁴ or, to use imagery from Plato's theory of recollection (as is Climacus' wont), he seeks to *remind* his interlocutors of something they have *forgotten*. Second, Climacus' own activity is akin to that of a gadfly who awakens his interlocutors or, to use his preferred image, a Socratic *midwife* whose maieutic techniques help his interlocutors to gain a greater self-awareness.⁵ A full defense of this reading of Climacus would include a close, critical look at him in action,

at those points in his two books where he is, as it were, on the stage in full costume, giving what I contend is one of the most compelling performances we have of a Socratic philosopher at work since Plato put Socrates himself on stage.⁶ In this essay, however, I want to focus not on those places where Climacus is actively engaging an interlocutor, but instead on those places where he steps back a bit and offers more general remarks about his diagnosis of what has gone wrong in nineteenth century Copenhagen and about how he has tried to respond to this situation.⁷

My essay has three parts. First, I examine some passages in the *Postscript* where Climacus develops his diagnosis of what plagues nineteenth century Copenhagen—that people have *forgotten* important dimensions of ethical and religious life—and where he claims that a proper response to this condition must take an *indirect*, non-straightforward approach. Second, I turn to a specific example of Climacus' maieutic activity, his use in *Fragments* of what he terms the art of »taking away.«⁸ I contend that this art of taking away provides us with an exemplary instance of what Kierkegaard calls indirect communication. Third, I close with an examination of a lengthy footnote in the *Postscript* where Climacus critically responds to Andreas Frederik Beck's anonymous review of *Fragments*.⁹ I argue that Climacus' critique of Beck underscores how important it is to attend to the Socratic elements in *Fragments* by pointing up the serious misunderstandings that may ensue from their neglect.

I The Ethical and Religious Forgetfulness of the Age

In the *Postscript* Climacus emerges as the one pseudonym in Kierkegaard's corpus whose aspirations as an author nearly rival Kierkegaard's own. Like Kierkegaard, he becomes convinced that all is not well in present day Copenhagen. His basic diagnosis is as follows: »Because of much knowledge people have entirely *forgotten* what it means to exist and what inwardness is.«¹⁰ That is, the knowledge-gathering and knowledge-utilizing activities they engage in—their habits of reading, writing, thinking, and living—have led them to forget about important ethical and religious dimensions of human life. Upon diagnosing what he takes to be the problem, Climacus then, in turn, resolves to attack this problem at its roots through the use of *indirect* writings:

When I had comprehended this, it also became clear to me that if I wanted to communicate anything about this, the main point must be that my presentation would be made in an *indirect* form.¹¹

Two things are worth noticing here. First, Climacus thinks he will only be able to address an audience who suffers from this condition of forgetfulness by using non-straightforward methods of writing; there seems to be something about their condition that precludes simply and directly informing them of what they've forgotten. Second, it's a pseudonym who is stressing the importance of using indirect ways of writing to reach his audience (so while we might want to call Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms itself an indirect device, we should expect that there are other elements of indirectness, many of which his pseudonyms themselves may use).

In a long appendix in the middle of the *Postscript*, Climacus comically reports about how he then tries to go about fulfilling his resolution to help people remember what they have forgotten.¹² He has big plans and good intentions, but, according to him, every time he starts to write a book, lo and behold, one of the other pseudonyms beats him to it and publishes something on that very topic. This section makes for very entertaining reading, but it also provides an illuminating overview of all of the works in Kierkegaard's corpus that precede Climacus' own books. Whatever you make of his discussion of these individual works, one thing that does not vary throughout this discussion is his basic diagnosis: (1) people in his age suffer from a peculiar kind of forgetfulness (a forgetfulness concerning ethical and religious existence and inwardness); (2) this condition of forgetfulness is tied to an excess of knowledge of some sort, tied to what he calls a person's knowing »too much.«¹³

Climacus' commitment to the use of indirect communication follows from his desire to address an audience that suffers from such a condition of forgetfulness. On his view, the main difference between direct and indirect communication concerns the aim of the communication and the condition of the one for whom the communication is made. Direct communication can serve one of two generic aims: (1) to present something to a knowledgeable person for her to judge and assess; or (2) to present something to an unknowledgeable person for her to learn.¹⁴ In both cases, the basic assumption is that the communication itself should be as straightforward (or direct) as possible, in

order best to facilitate either of these aims. Climacus denies, however, that his first book *Fragments* is written for either of these two kinds of readers; instead, he claims that he addresses someone who is knowledgeable but whose knowledge has become a *liability*:

The book is so far from being written for those who are unknowledgeable, who might want something to know, that *the one I speak with* in the book is someone who is always knowledgeable, which seems to indicate that the book is written for those who are knowledgeable—whose trouble is that they know too much.¹⁵

Note Climacus' qualification that the type of reader he is addressing is someone who knows *too much*; here a person's knowledge seems to be interfering with her ability to live well. We might call her an *unhealthy* knower in order to distinguish her from the knowledgeable person who is expected, in the case of direct communication, to make a proper use of what she knows in order to judge what has been communicated.

Climacus argues that this excess of knowledge has made people prone to the experience of feeling that they are »finished« comprehending Christianity and what makes it difficult:

When an age in systematic, rote fashion has *finished* with understanding Christianity and with understanding *all the difficulties* and it jubilantly proclaims how *easy* it is to understand the difficulty, then, of course, one must harbor a suspicion....since a difficulty is indeed recognizable by its being difficult to understand.¹⁶

If it is Climacus' desire to target the sort of reader who has in effect forgotten what it means to exist as a Christian and who, at the same time, *thinks* she has finished with understanding Christianity and all its »difficulties,« then it becomes clearer why he might think that indirect communication is necessary. On this account, it is *Fragments'* aim to engage its reader in such a way that she can become *aware* of her condition of forgetfulness, so that hopefully she may even set about trying to remember what she has forgotten. Or, if we remove the recollection imagery, we might say that it is *Fragments'* principal aim to help its reader become aware of her blameworthy ignorance. But to do this effectively, Climacus has to communicate with her in

such a way that her *conviction* that she *has* understood Christianity can be undercut: for she thinks she knows all about the difficulties of Christianity, and so lacks a correct self-understanding; that is, she suffers from a species of the ignorance that Socrates targets and, accordingly, stands in need of someone who can address her in proper Socratic fashion.

II Climacus' Socratic Art of »Taking Away«

According, then, to Climacus' account in the *Postscript*, if he is to help his reader to become aware of her state of forgetfulness, he will like Socrates have to facilitate the removal of her conviction that she is finished with understanding Christianity; and to do this he makes use of a strategy of writing that he calls the art of taking away:

When this is the case, being able to communicate eventually becomes *the art of being able to take away or to trick something away*. This seems strange and very ironic, and yet I believe I have succeeded in expressing exactly what I mean. When a man has filled his mouth so full of food that for this reason he cannot eat, and it will end with his dying of hunger, does giving food to him consist in stuffing his mouth even more or, instead, in taking a little away so that he can eat? Similarly, when a man is very knowledgeable, though *his knowledge has little or no significance for him*,¹⁷ does sensible communication consist in giving him more to know, even if he loudly proclaims that this is what he needs, or does it consist, instead, in taking something away from him?¹⁸

The image of a person having too much food in her mouth, to the point where she is almost choking on her food and so unable to obtain any nourishment, helps to bring out what Climacus thinks a forgetfulness based on knowing too much is like. To engage such a person he uses a strategy of writing whereby he takes some of what she knows about Christianity and *disguises* these things so that she will not immediately recognize them in the form in which she encounters them in *Fragments*:

When a communicator takes a part of what the very knowledgeable man knows and communicates this to him in a form that *makes it strange* to him, the communicator is, as it were, *taking away from him his*

knowledge, at least until the knowledgeable man manages to assimilate it by overcoming the resistance of the form.¹⁹

Climacus' use of the various literary devices he employs (irony, parody, satire), as well as the fact that he casts his writing in the form of a kind of philosophical thought experiment where he investigates a hypothesis—together all these elements contribute to a situation where his reader will find herself repeatedly wrestling with *the unusual forms* she encounters in the text. In the process she will, in effect, find herself being brought back again and again to topics that she may have been *neglecting* simply because she thought she had already achieved a thorough understanding of them and the role they should play in a person's life:

The difficulty is clothed in a new form in which it really is difficult. This is communication to the person who already has found the difficulty so very easy to explain. If it so happens...that a reader can scarcely *recognize* in the presented material that with which he was *finished* long ago, the communication will *bring him to a halt*.²⁰

Climacus, then, argues here that *Fragments* is a book that is especially designed to *bring his reader to a halt* and to occasion her subsequent struggles to overcome the strange forms she encounters in the book, with his ultimate aim being that she become *aware* of the fact that she has forgotten what it is to exist as a Christian together with the difficulties associated with such an existence. He is not, therefore, teaching her something new or presenting something for her to assess. He is not using direct communication, but instead offers us in the form of his art of taking away an example of indirect communication and invites us to return to *Fragments* to study more closely just how this communication unfolds and what exactly it achieves with its readers.

III Critique of Beck's Review of *Fragments*

But the need for such an indirect approach, as well as an appreciation for the specific Socratic elements involved in this kind of communication, is precisely what, according to Climacus, Beck's review of *Fragments* neglects. In particular, Climacus singles out the following features of *Fragments*, noting that »the reader finds no hint« of any of these in the review:

- (i) the *contrast of form*
- (ii) the teasing resistance of *the experiment to the content*
- (iii) the *inventive impudence* (which even invents Christianity)...
- (iv) the indefatigable activity of the *irony*
- (v) the design's complete *parody* of speculative thought
- (vi) the *satire* in making efforts as if something altogether extraordinary, that is, *new* were to come of them, while what continually emerges is *old-fashioned* orthodoxy in its rightful severity²¹

There is next to no mention of any of these features of *Fragments* in Beck's review, and Climacus takes this to be evidence that he has simply failed to grasp that *Fragments* has a maieutic aim as opposed to a more straightforward speculative aim. Further, Climacus contends that the didactic way in which Beck has composed his review is bound—despite its dialectical accuracy—to give the reader an incorrect impression of the sort of book *Fragments* is:

His account is *accurate* and on the whole *dialectically reliable*, but now comes the hitch: although the account is *correct*, anyone who reads only that will receive an *utterly incorrect impression* of the book....The account is *didactic*, purely and simply didactic; consequently the reader will receive the impression that the pamphlet [*Fragments*] is also didactic. As I see it, this is as *incorrect* an impression as one can receive of it.²²

The one place that Beck does indicate his awareness that irony and other literary devices may be at work in *Fragments* is at the very end of his review: »We leave it to each person to consider whether he wants to look for earnestness or possibly for irony in this apologetical dialectic.«²³ Beck may even be trying to live up to what he takes to be some sort of Kierkegaardian ideal of leaving certain things to the judgment of the individual reader. Climacus, however, objects to this gesture, calling it »misleading.«²⁴ He seems to object to this for two reasons. First, he thinks that this remark casts doubt upon whether the irony and the other devices of indirectness he has accused Beck of neglecting are really there to be discovered in the text. He compares this to the case of someone who was present at one of Socrates' ironic conversations and who then later »gives an account of it to someone else but leaves out the irony and says: God knows whether talk

like that is irony or earnestness.«²⁵ In such a case, according to Climacus, the one giving such a review is »satirizing himself.« Note the explicit parallel drawn here between *Fragments* (reported on by Beck) and a Socratic conversation (reported on by someone who is *blind* to Socrates' irony). Climacus also objects to Beck's apparent invitation to look *either* for earnestness *or* for irony, suggesting that Beck may think they are mutually exclusive: »But because irony is present, it doesn't follow that earnestness is excluded. Only assistant professors assume that.«²⁶

When Climacus says that Beck's review is likely to give readers an incorrect impression of *Fragments*, he primarily means, then, that they will receive the impression that none of these literary features and devices are present in his book, or that they are not essential to understanding his Socratic method of proceeding. But this is expressly what he denies:

My distinctive procedure, if there is to be any mention of it..., consists in the *contrastive form* of the communication and *not at all* in the perhaps new dialectical combinations by which the issues become clearer.²⁷

Beck seems to focus exactly on what Climacus seems to consider secondary. By drawing our attention to the clarity with which he claims *Fragments* presents a certain content, Beck emphasizes what Climacus here is calling »the perhaps new dialectical combinations.« Climacus, on the other hand, contends that what is distinctive about his book is the presence of these various literary devices that enable him to develop what he is calling the *contrast* between the form that his writing takes and any content contained therein. Only through his use of such contrastive elements will Climacus be able to take away from his reader some of what she knows (or thinks she knows) about Christianity and, in this way, get her to attend more closely to certain ethical and religious matters she may otherwise have been neglecting. In effect, Climacus seeks like Socrates to undercut his interlocutor's conviction that she already has a thorough grasp of Christianity and the difficulties involved with living an authentic Christian life; he seeks to remind her of these very matters in the hope that, in turn, she may approach her life with a renewed sense of urgency and commitment.

Over the course of this essay, Climacus has emerged as a Socratic figure, as someone who targets a blameworthy ignorance in his interlocutors and who is himself a kind of midwife. We saw that Climacus' general diagnosis of what ails nineteenth century Copenhagen is a condition of ethical and religious forgetfulness. I argued that his art of taking away is a Socratic response to this condition and that it provides us with an exemplary instance of Kierkegaard's notion of indirect communication. Finally, we saw that Beck's neglect of these Socratic elements can lead—despite the dialectical accuracy of his account—to significant distortions of the overall aim of a book like *Fragments*. In other words, according to Climacus, you have not even begun to understand the point of his book or the nature of his philosophical activity unless you have grasped the fact that he is a thoroughly Socratic figure with a Socratic method distinctively his own.²⁸

Notes

1. All references to Climacus' *Philosophical Fragments* [PF] and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [CUP] are to the Hongs' English translations (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985 and 1992), followed by the new scholarly edition of Kierkegaard's writings, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* [SKS], ed. Cappelørn and others (Copenhagen: Gad, 1997 and 2002), Volumes 4 and 7. For later works of Kierkegaard or one of his pseudonyms, I cite the Hong edition followed by *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker* [SVI], ed. Drachmann and others (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1901-1906).
2. *Sickness Unto Death* [SUD], tran. Hong and Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), SUD 90, 92 / SVI XI 201, 203; translation modified.
3. Kierkegaard frequently invites us to compare his undertaking in Copenhagen to Socrates' endeavor in Athens. In the last manuscript he prepared for publication just prior to his death in 1855, he put a firm Socratic stamp on his entire effort: »The only analogy I have before me is Socrates; my task is a Socratic task« (*The Moment* [M], tran. Hong and Hong [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998], M 341 / SVI XIV 352). He also, however, repeatedly singles out Climacus' activity when characterizing the proper Socratic approach to a person who is under the illusion that she lives her life as an authentic Christian: »If it is an illusion that all are Christians, and if something is to be done, it must be done indirectly, not by someone who loudly declares himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by someone who, better informed, even declares himself not to be a Christian.« In a footnote to this passage Kierkegaard remarks, »One recalls *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, whose author, Johannes Climacus, directly declares that he himself is not a Christian« (*The Point of View* [PV], tran. Hong and Hong [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998], PV 43 / SVI XIII 532; see also PV 8 / SVI XIII 497).
4. See, e.g., *Plato's Apology* 29a-b; PF 93 / SKS 4: 291; PV 50 / SVI XIII 538.
5. See *Apology* 30e-31a; *Theaetetus* 149a-151d. Climacus contends that the midwife relationship upheld by Socrates is »the highest relationship a human being can have with another« and argues that this is so even within a Christian community of believers: »Faith itself is a wonder....But within this wonder everything is again structured Socratically, ... for the relationship between one contemporary [follower of Christ] and another...is altogether Socratic«

- (PF 10, 65 / SKS 4: 219, 267, italics mine; both translations modified).
6. By Climacus' being in »full costume« or fully in character I am thinking primarily of the stances he experimentally adopts in his two books: (1) in *Fragments*, the stance of the ignorant person who has forgotten about Christianity (see PF 9, 109 / SKS 4: 218, 305); (2) in the *Postscript*, the stance of the individual, J.C., who declares himself not to be a Christian and who asks in the first person about how to become one (see CUP 15, 26, 617-618 / SKS 7: 25, 26, 560).
 7. We can draw a distinction, then, between moments where Climacus appears to the reader fully in character and those where he steps out of character to a certain extent and speaks more directly about how he himself understands what he is doing. See, e.g., PF 109 / SKS 4: 305; CUP 185-188, 234-242, 617-623 / SKS 7: 170-173, 213-220, 560-566.
 8. CUP 275 / SKS 7: 251.
 9. Climacus' footnote occurs at CUP 274-277 / SKS 7: 249-253. Jim Conant first drew my attention to this footnote and impressed upon me its significance. I am indebted to him more generally for teaching me to pay attention to the Socratic themes in Kierkegaard's writings. For Conant's discussion of Climacus' footnote about Beck, see his »Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense« [KWN], in *Pursuits of Reason*, ed. Cohen, Guyer and Putnam (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 1993), 195-224, pp. 204-207; »Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors,« in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious* *Belief*, ed. Tassin and von der Ruhr (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 248-331, pp. 288-289; »Must We Show What We Cannot Say?,« in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Fleming and Payne (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 242-283, p. 280 (footnotes 35 and 38).
 10. CUP 242 / SKS 7: 220, italics mine. Cf. Johnson, *The Concept of Existence in The Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), esp. chapter 6, »The Art of Reminding,« 173-209; see also Conant, KWN 203-204.
 11. CUP 242 / SKS 7: 220.
 12. Entitled »A Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature,« Climacus' reflections on the authorship are appended to the second chapter of Part Two, Section Two (CUP 251-300 / SKS 7: 228-273). In the *Point of View* Kierkegaard draws our attention to this appendix, calling it »a section with which [he] would ask the reader to become familiar« (PV 31 / SVI XIII 523).
 13. Climacus appeals to this diagnosis at least once during his discussion of each of the pseudonymous works. Concerning a person's knowing »too much,« consider the following passage by Anti-Climacus: »The law for the [proper] development of the self...is that an increase of knowledge corresponds to an increase of self-knowledge ... If this does not happen, the more that knowledge increases, the more it becomes a kind of *inhuman knowledge*, in the obtaining of which a person's self is *squandered*, much the way people were squandered on building pyramids« (SUD

- 31 / SVI XI 145, italics mine; translation modified).
14. See CUP 277 / SKS 7: 250-251.
 15. CUP 275 / SKS 7: 250, italics mine; translation modified; cf. CUP 274 / SKS 7: 249. The person Climacus describes here is the imagined interlocutor who makes several appearances in *Fragments* (usually at the end of a given chapter), and who repeatedly charges Climacus with plagiarism. Cf. Mulhall's »God's Plagiarist: The Philosophical Fragments of Johannes Climacus,« *Philosophical Investigations* 22:1 (January 1999), 1-34; reprinted, slightly revised, in his *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 323-353.
 16. CUP 276 / SKS 7: 251-252, italics mine; translation modified.
 17. Climacus characterizes knowledge that has »little or no significance« for a person as something she knows »by rote« (CUP 255-256 / SKS 7: 231-232).
 18. CUP 275 / SKS 7: 250-251, italics mine; translation modified. Cf. the following claim made by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*: »People have often before now got into such a state with me as to be literally ready to bite when I take away some nonsense or other from them« (tran. Levett, rev. Burnyeat in *Plato's Complete Works*, ed. Cooper [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997], 151c, italics mine). See also PF 20-21 / SKS 4: 229.
 19. CUP 275 / SKS 7: 251, italics mine; translation modified.
 20. CUP 276 / SKS 7: 252, italics mine; translation modified. Cf. CUP 264 / SKS 7: 240.
 21. CUP 275 / SKS 7: 250, italics mine; translation modified. Cf. *Journals and Papers*, tran. Hong and Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 5: 5827 / SKS 18: JJ 362.
 22. CUP 274-275 / SKS 7: 250, italics mine; translation modified.
 23. Quoted in CUP 276 / SKS 7: 252.
 24. CUP 276 / SKS 7: 253.
 25. CUP 277 / SKS 7: 253; translation modified.
 26. CUP 277 / SKS 7: 253; translation modified.
 27. CUP 276 / SKS 7: 252, italics mine; translation modified.
 28. I want to thank Bridget Clarke, Robert Haraldsson and Brian Söderquist for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Thanks also to those who attended talks I gave at the University of Chicago Continental Philosophy Workshop (May 2001), the Fourth International Kierkegaard Conference (held at St. Olaf College, June 2001) and the Søren Kierkegaard Research Center at Copenhagen University (October 2001), and to Rebecca Jiggins for the response she gave to my paper at St. Olaf.