

Kierkegaard and Socrates
A Study in Philosophy and Faith

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Introduction

During an idle moment in my office at the university, now well over ten years ago, I selected from my bookcase a thin blue hardcover volume that I had never before opened. The book was *Philosophical Fragments* by Johannes Climacus, translated into English by David F. Swenson, and published in 1944 for the American-Scandinavian Foundation by Princeton University Press. Of Climacus, I knew only that he was one of a handful of authorial personae under whose names Søren Kierkegaard published such pseudonymous works as *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Stages on Life's Way*. Of Kierkegaard, I knew only what little I could remember from a brief encounter in an undergraduate survey course. But Climacus obviously had something to say to me. He talked about the absolute importance of the truth in human life, and he wasted no words in doing so. His insights into the essential nature of Socratic teaching and learning were especially striking. His understanding of Socrates, I thought, was rivaled only by Plato and Xenophon, two authors who had long stood at the center of my philosophical interests. Yet as far as I could tell, the real subject of his book was not Socrates, and not even philosophy. It was religious faith.

There was brilliance in Climacus's writing, and there was ardor. Above all there was mystery. His book was a literary gem as well as a philosophical *tour de force*. It was then and there that I conceived a passion for Kierkegaard's thought, and it was out of this passion that the present study was born.

The book you hold in your hands is about the relationship between philosophy and faith in the thought of Johannes Climacus, and primarily

in *Philosophical Fragments*. It does not presuppose that you are a specialist in Kierkegaard or Plato, or even that you have more than a general knowledge of the vocabulary of philosophy. Vast learning, as C. Stephen Evans has noted, is not needed in order to understand Kierkegaard's works.¹ More important is a capacity for wonder. For this book springs from wonder, primarily at the fact that Kierkegaard, a nineteenth-century Danish author who devoted his literary career to promoting the Christian faith, felt himself to be the soulmate of a pagan Athenian who lived and died for philosophy. "I for my part tranquilly adhere to Socrates," Kierkegaard wrote in a reflection on his life and work that was published by his brother a few years after his death. "It is true, he was not a Christian; that I know, and yet I am thoroughly convinced that he has become one."²

Kierkegaard, a Christian Socrates – what could this mean? Aren't philosophy and faith opposites? Doesn't philosophy rest on the assumption that reason is by itself sufficient for the achievement of wisdom, while faith, acknowledging the depredations of sin and the weakness of human understanding, humbly embraces divine revelation? If so, how could Socrates – by all appearances a partisan of reason and independent thought – become a Christian? And even if the notion of a Christian Socrates makes sense, would such a person have anything to say to non-Christians?

One cannot attempt to answer these questions directly without presupposing that one already knows what philosophy and faith are. This presupposition is repeatedly challenged in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works. *Fear and Trembling*, a meditation on the exemplary faith manifested by Abraham when he prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, asks whether *anyone* can understand Abraham's devotion to God (14). And *Philosophical Fragments* suggests that even Socrates did not fully understand the love of wisdom for which he lived and died.

On the most basic level, Climacus's book is a philosophical archaeology of the concepts of "philosophy" and "faith." In *Fragments*, Climacus tries to cut through centuries of "chatter" in order to uncover the original

¹ Evans 1983, 2. "It would be tragic," Evans adds, "if he [Kierkegaard] became the special property of a band of scholars." The present study falls under the heading of what Evans calls the "literary-philosophical" approach to Kierkegaard, which aims at "an encounter with the text which will be philosophical in what might be termed a Socratic sense" (Evans 1992, 3). It is perhaps worth noting that Poole 1998, which contrasts "blunt readings" of Kierkegaard with those that follow "the deconstructive turn," leaves no room for literary-philosophical readings. Cf. Evans 2004, 63–7.

² *Point of View*, 41.

phenomena of philosophy and faith in what he regards as their purest and truest forms – the one exemplified in the speeches and deeds of Socrates, the other both solicited by, and manifested in, the incarnation of God in the person of Christ.³ Climacus's motivation is easy to discern. In his view, the most important questions we can ask ourselves as human beings – questions about who we are, what we can know, and how we should live – become clear only when we first grasp what is at stake in the alternative of philosophy and faith.

Fragments begins by presenting the guiding presuppositions of philosophy and faith in such a way as to emphasize their mutual exclusivity. According to Climacus, philosophy is founded on the Socratic assumption that knowledge is recollection, or that “the ignorant person merely needs to be reminded in order, by himself, to call to mind what he knows” (9) – a principle that evidently leaves no room for faith. Because Climacus identifies Socrates with this principle, scholarly consensus holds that he is, in the somewhat extreme formulation of Merold Westphal, the “villain” of *Fragments*.⁴ But this identification is only the first move in a book full of unexpected twists and turns. Climacus introduces philosophy and faith as competing hypotheses about learning the truth. Yet he also makes it clear that neither philosophy nor faith is reducible to a hypothesis, because neither can be understood without reference to the individual who embraces it as a path to the truth. One therefore cannot answer the question “What is philosophy?” without first asking the ontologically prior question “Who is the philosopher?” To fail to recognize this priority is to obscure the passion that is essential to Socratic philosophizing and the existential transformation that is central to faith. Because Climacus is well aware of this problem, neither philosophy nor faith is what it first appears to be in *Fragments*. This becomes obvious as the inquiry unfolds. While philosophy is supposed to rest on the assumption that knowledge is already latent in our souls, Climacus will make much of Socrates' frank admission that he does not even know himself (Plato, *Phaedrus* 229e–30a).

³ One would not be mistaken to detect here an anticipation of the attempts of Heidegger, who never fully acknowledges his debt to Kierkegaard, to dig beneath the sediment of philosophical tradition and to penetrate the veil of idle talk in order to uncover original phenomena.

⁴ Westphal 1996, 121. Westphal adds that *Fragments* identifies Socrates with “the speculative collapsing of the difference between the divine and the human,” whereas *Postscript* presents him as the “hero” who challenges Hegelian, speculative philosophy. This, too, expresses the scholarly consensus; cf. most recently Rubenstein 2001. A closer reading, however, suggests that Socrates is already an antispeculative hero in *Fragments*. Cf. Allison 1967/2002, 3.13.

And while Climacus introduces faith as a “happy passion,” it turns out to involve terror and struggle.

Although the opposition between philosophy and faith is never entirely overcome in *Fragments*, it nonetheless begins to break down almost as soon as it is formulated. This is in large part because Climacus chooses to convey what is meant by philosophy not merely by examining its fundamental presuppositions, but also by attending to the figure of Socrates as he is depicted in the dialogues of Plato. This procedure gives rise to a certain interpretative tension, because Socrates’ philosophical practice is in important respects at odds with the hypothesis of philosophy with which the book begins. Climacus makes it clear, however, that philosophy is a way of life, from which it follows that it cannot be evaluated in abstraction from the speeches and deeds of the philosopher.⁵

In sum, *Fragments* develops dialectically, which is to say that the careful reader is obliged continually to rethink earlier assumptions and expectations in the light of later developments. Climacus initially leads us to anticipate that he will attack philosophy in the name of faith, but he goes on to show that genuine or Socratic philosophy and faith are siblings whose family resemblance rests on certain fundamental analogies. In this important respect, *Fragments* echoes the intellectual tradition initiated by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*, in which faith is seen not as the negation but as the perfection of reason.

Yet Climacus is otherwise no Thomist. While Thomas’s thought reflects the philosophical sobriety of Aristotle, Climacus gives voice to the divine erotic madness of Plato. He identifies passion as the central element of both philosophy and faith, and he sees both as distinct expressions of what we might as a preliminary approximation call love. According to Climacus, faith is a passion analogous to the erotic or romantic love between a man and a woman. This is an insight advanced also by Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*; as we shall see, *Fragments* develops the analogy between faith and love in a way that complements Silentio’s thought. At the same time, Climacus embraces Socrates’ claim, as set forth in the Platonic dialogues, that philosophy is rooted in eros. But

⁵ Socrates is thus more than “an ideal type or metaphor” in *Fragments* (Perkins 1994, 1). Nor is he “transformed into a promulgator of a philosophy, that by a stereotypical exaggeration is presented as encapsulating the entire tradition of Greek humanities,” a role in which he supposedly “provides the negative counterpart to the Christian embodiment of God” (Petersen 2004, 46–7). It is more precise to say that “‘the Socratic’ way of thinking” or philosophical *hypothesis* “includes the whole of the (Platonic) idealist tradition, up to Hegel and his successors” (Rudd 2000/2002, 2.257).

what exactly is eros, a phenomenon that manifests itself in ways ranging from sexual longing to the love of wisdom? Although Socrates wrestles at length with this question, Climacus claims that he is never fully able to answer it. Eros is difficult to grasp because it is fundamentally ambiguous. It is simultaneously human and divine, “objective” as well as “subjective”: it comes from without just as much as it springs from within, and pulls the soul upward no less than it drives it forward.

According to Climacus, Socrates follows his passion for wisdom to the point where he is forced to acknowledge the intractable mystery of the divinity to which eros opens him up – a divine other without which he is less than whole. The experience of eros thus leads Socrates implicitly to admit the failure of his philosophical quest for wisdom and self-knowledge. For this very reason, however, Climacus sees Socrates as the proper judge of his own attempt in *Fragments* to “go beyond” philosophy by developing the hypothesis of faith (111). What is more, it is precisely Socrates’ knowledge of eros – knowledge just as ambiguous as his celebrated knowledge of ignorance – that qualifies him to judge Climacus’s accomplishment. If philosophical eros opens up a path to faith, faith also reflects the structure of eros. For in striving to hold together elements that seem to be poles apart – the self and that which transcends it, the finite and the infinite, one’s life in time and eternity – the work of faith is essentially erotic in the Socratic sense of the term.

Although Socrates’ philosophical eros stands at the center of Climacus’s consideration of the relationship between philosophy and faith, scholars have paid little attention to its role in *Fragments*.⁶ This is all the more surprising because Socrates’ erotic nature is reflected in Climacus’s own passions and convictions.⁷ In particular, the exemplary openness Climacus displays in *Fragments* to the claims of both philosophy and faith is itself rooted in a Socratic love of thinking and longing for wisdom. The literary critic Bakhtin remarks that, in his novels, Dostoyevsky strove to express “fidelity to the authoritative image of a human being.”⁸ This phrase nicely describes what is at stake in *Fragments* as well, which is itself a kind of philosophical novel in that its author – who writes, among

⁶ Even Daise 1999, which reads *Fragments* and *Postscript* as Socratic exercises in indirect communication, does not examine the significance of the figure of Socrates *within* these texts.

⁷ Cf. Muench 2003: “in his two books . . . [Climacus] giv[es] 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” (140).

⁸ Quoted by Richard Pevear in his Forward to Dostoyevsky 1994, xix.

other things, about himself – is Kierkegaard’s literary creation. Climacus offers us a profound reflection on two such authoritative images, those of Socrates and Christ, while presenting in his own paradoxical person a unique attempt to live one’s life in fidelity to *both* of them. By Climacus’s own admission, he ultimately falls short of his goal.⁹ But this does not diminish our ability to learn from his example. To think with Climacus about what it means to be human is an undertaking that must appeal to all those – regardless of their particular philosophical or faith commitments – in whom the human condition arouses wonder.

No less important, *Fragments* is noteworthy as a corrective to the critical interpretation of Socratic philosophizing initiated by Friedrich Nietzsche and developed by twentieth-century European philosophers. In the *Birth of Tragedy*, which appeared almost thirty years after the publication of *Fragments*, Nietzsche presents Socrates as the originator of a great and consequential error – “the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it.”¹⁰ It is this misplaced optimism, the ultimate fruits of which can be seen in the seemingly unlimited ambition of natural science and technology, that in Nietzsche’s view cuts us off from rejuvenating and healing contact with the life-giving yet fundamentally unintelligible core of reality he called “the Dionysian.” Nietzsche’s critical appraisal of Socrates and Plato (or more precisely, of Socratism and Platonism), as well as his attention to pre-Socratic poetry and philosophy, are echoed and extended in the work of Martin Heidegger.¹¹ These themes lie at the root of the thought of the Frankfurt School philosophers Horkheimer and Adorno, who argue that the Socratic quest for knowledge (which they trace back to Homer’s Odysseus) is inseparable from the “totalitarian” attempt to dominate the

⁹ If he “does not make out that he is a Christian,” Climacus writes in *Postscript*, this is only because “he is, to be sure, completely preoccupied with how difficult it must be to become one” (617). But perhaps such claims should not be taken at face value. See Lippitt 2000 with ch. 10 below, 205–08.

¹⁰ Nietzsche 1967, 95, emphasis in original.

¹¹ See in this connection David Farrell Krell’s Introduction to Heidegger 1975, 10: “In his *Introduction to Metaphysics* . . . focusing on the question of the meaning of *to on* [being], Heidegger describes his own task as one of ‘bringing Nietzsche’s accomplishment to a full unfolding.’ That means following Nietzsche’s turn toward early Greek thinking in such a way as to bring the possibilities concealed in *eon* [the form of *on* in the dialects of the pre-Socratic philosophers Heraclitus and Parmenides] to a radical questioning.”

objects of knowledge, including ourselves as well as nature.¹² And they are most recently reflected in the deconstructionist interpretation of Plato exemplified in the work of Jacques Derrida, who presents Socrates as a purveyor of intellectual snake-oil – one who vainly promises to make intelligible that which is intrinsically resistant to the charms of philosophical reason.¹³

Because Climacus is also engaged in an exploration of the limits of Socratic philosophizing, one might have expected him to criticize Socrates along the lines laid out by Nietzsche and followed by his philosophical heirs. Far from condemning Socrates in *Fragments* as an arrogant partisan of reason, however, Climacus discerns in his speeches and deeds the capacity of philosophy to know its own limits, and therewith to acknowledge the impenetrable mysteriousness of ourselves as well as the world we inhabit. And far from associating Socrates with totalizing ambition, Climacus presents himself, in what turns out to be an essentially Socratic gesture, as a thinker who offers merely a fragment or scrap of philosophy at a time when the loudest voice in the fields of philosophy and theology was that of Hegelians claiming to be able to embrace all of thought and being in a single system.

In *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, I have attempted to make the nature of Climacus's project and its implications clear enough to be understood by educated amateurs while also saying something important to scholars of philosophy and religion. Students of the Platonic dialogues may hope to understand Socrates better after reading this book, because Climacus's reflection on what he calls the "paradoxical passion" of philosophical eros sheds new light on the erotic core of Socratic philosophizing. Students of Kierkegaard may hope to gain an appreciation of the seminal importance of Socrates to his thought. And anyone who seeks greater clarity about either philosophy or faith will learn much from Climacus's remarkable understanding of their relationship.

The plan of the present study is straightforward. The **first chapter** introduces Climacus by examining the way in which Kierkegaard himself intended to introduce him in his unfinished intellectual biography of the author, *Johannes Climacus*. Subsequent chapters take the reader step by step through *Philosophical Fragments*, with attention to its literary and

¹² Horkheimer and Adorno 1991. The original title of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* was *Philosophische Fragmente*.

¹³ Derrida 1981.

retorical dimensions (including poetic analogy, humor, and irony) as well as its philosophical ideas and arguments. There is a pause early on to explore Socrates' relationship to the inscrutable divinity he calls "the god" and the nature of his philosophical eros as these are presented in some of Plato's major dialogues. The book concludes with a chapter on Climacus's presentation of Socrates in his sequel to *Fragments*, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, and with a brief epilogue.

There were many different literary representations of Socrates in antiquity, primarily including those of Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon, and readers may wonder which Socrates they will encounter in this book. It is important to note in this connection that Climacus views Socrates through the lens of the Platonic dialogues. He does not ask whether the character of Socrates in the dialogues is an accurate representation of the historical Socrates, nor is this a question with which we need be concerned here.¹⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, any mention of "Socrates" in the following pages should accordingly be understood to refer to the protagonist of the Platonic dialogues.¹⁵

The reader should also bear in mind the peculiar interpretive challenges posed by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings. These writings leave the clear impression that one must work to earn whatever wisdom they might contain. Reading the pseudonymous works is in this respect like reading a Platonic dialogue or talking to Socrates. Not coincidentally, both Plato and Socrates tend to keep others guessing when it comes to their own opinions. Kierkegaard accomplishes the same thing by writing pseudonymously, and he has a good pedagogical reason for doing so: the

¹⁴ In contrast, Kierkegaard makes much of this question. He begins his dissertation by stating that "it is necessary to make sure that I have a reliable and authentic view of Socrates' historical-actual, phenomenological existence with respect to the question of its possible relation to the transformed view that was his fate through enthusiastic or envious contemporaries" (*Concept of Irony*, 9).

¹⁵ The question remains whether it is possible to distinguish between the philosophy of Plato and that of the character of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues. As we shall see, Climacus criticizes Plato's understanding of Socrates in *Fragments* and makes the distinction between them explicit in *Postscript* (n. on 206–7). Yet insofar as Climacus bothers to offer a textual basis for his picture of Socrates, he moves freely between dialogues that Kierkegaard, following Schleiermacher, regards as belonging to both the "early" stage of Plato's "development" (e.g., the *Apology*) and the "later" stage of "authentic Platonism" (e.g., the *Theaetetus*; cf. *Concept of Irony*, 123 with *Fragments*, 10–11). Following Climacus, I have ignored the putative authorial chronology of the dialogues in attempting to flesh out the nature of Socratic philosophizing. Howland 1991 offers a scholarly justification of this practice; cf. Cooper 1997, xii–xv.

mere fact that he himself holds a certain opinion should be of no interest to his readers, whose primary task is think for themselves.¹⁶

At the very end of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, there appears “A First and Last Explanation” signed by “S. Kierkegaard.” In this explanation, Kierkegaard admits that he is the author of the pseudonymous works. Yet he observes that his relationship to the likes of Johannes Climacus “is even more remote than that of a poet, who *poetizes* characters and yet in preference is *himself* the *author*.” This is because he has “poetically produced the *authors*, whose *prefaces* in turn are their productions, as their *names* are also.” Thus in the pseudonymous books, he declares, “there is not a single word by me.”¹⁷ In accordance with this declaration, and out of respect for Kierkegaard’s “wish” and “prayer” that “if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books . . . he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author’s name, not mine,”¹⁸ I have treated Climacus, and not Kierkegaard, as the author of *Fragments* and *Postscript*. This has not prevented me from attributing to Kierkegaard those writings to which he has not attached a pseudonym.¹⁹

A final word on pronominal usage. As neither Plato nor Kierkegaard employed gender-neutral pronouns, it would be potentially misleading and, to my ear, disruptive for me to switch between “he” and “she.” With some misgivings, I have therefore chosen to employ the traditional pronoun “he” even in contexts where “he or she” is to be understood, as for example in speaking without qualification of the philosophical learner or the faithful follower.

¹⁶ Alastair Hannay notes that “pseudonymity ‘scrambles’ the author-reader link in a way that allows the writings to enjoy a genuinely independent existence, letting them become considerations in the mind of the reader, to do there whatever they have it *in themselves* to do” (Hannay 2001, 175–6, emphasis in original). Niels Thulstrup observes that *Fragments* resembles both “a Platonic dialogue” and “a classical drama in five acts” with “two main actors, Socrates and Christ” (Kierkegaard 1962, lxvii–lxviii). Cf. the discussion of “Socratic midwifery” in the pseudonymous authorship at Taylor 1975, 51–62.

¹⁷ *Postscript*, 625–6, emphases in original. Compare Plato’s assertion that “there is no writing of Plato, nor will there be, but the things now said to be his are of a Socrates grown beautiful and young” (*Second Letter*, 314c).

¹⁸ *Postscript*, 627.

¹⁹ See ch. 1 and *Epilogue*. Nor have I refrained from occasionally noting connections between Climacus’s thought and that of Johannes de Silentio – something Climacus himself does in *Postscript* (see, e.g., 261–2, 264–8).

Johannes Climacus, Socratic Philosopher

The relationship between philosophy and religious faith is the central theme of two of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous volumes. *Philosophical Fragments, or A Fragment of Philosophy*, by Johannes Climacus, edited by S. Kierkegaard, was published in 1844. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments: A Mimical-Pathetical-Dialectical Compilation, An Existential Contribution*, also by Johannes Climacus, edited by S. Kierkegaard, appeared two years later, in 1846. These are the only works by Climacus in the Kierkegaardian corpus.¹

Kierkegaard first mentions the name of Climacus in connection with the speculative philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), whose followers, including theologians as well as philosophers, played a leading role in the Danish intellectual scene of the day.² In a journal entry dated January 20, 1839, he writes: “Hegel is a Johannes Climacus who does not storm the heavens as do the giants – by setting mountain upon mountain – but climbs up to them by means of his syllogisms.”³ Hegel ascends to the “heaven” of absolute knowledge stepwise, on the basis of a series of philosophical arguments. This occurs in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which

¹ The Hongs claim that *Johannes Climacus*, which Kierkegaard did not finish, is also by Climacus (*Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, xv–xvi). The book has no stated author, however, and so “inhabits, as it were, a limbo of anonymity” (Dunning 1994, 209).

² On the Hegelians J. L. Heiberg and H. L. Martensen and their influence in Denmark, see Stewart 2003, 50–69. Stewart argues against the assumption that the Danish academy was dominated by Hegelians. He notes there were a number of “anti-Hegelians” in Denmark, that only Heiberg was a “full-fledged” Hegelian, and that the Danish Hegelians “never formed an organized or coherent school” (69).

³ JP 1575, 2.209–210 (II A 335).

he envisions as furnishing the natural or prephilosophic consciousness with a “ladder” to the “absolute” beginning of his philosophical system – the standpoint of absolute spirit and absolute knowing.⁴ Kierkegaard’s allusion to the rebellious giants of Greek myth who made war on Zeus after the defeat of the Titans hints that, in his view, Hegel’s philosophical ascent is both hybristic and illegitimate – a point to which we shall return in due course.

But who is Johannes Climacus, or John of the Ladder (from the Greek *klimax*)? This was the name given to the late sixth- and early seventh-century author of one of the most well-known books of Eastern Christendom, *Scala paradisi* (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*).⁵ Climacus was a hermit monk who became Abbot of the central monastery at Mt. Sinai and was later made a saint of the Eastern Church. *The Ladder* was written for his fellow monks, and it describes thirty steps – corresponding to Jesus’ age at the time of his baptism – by which one living the ascetic life may ascend to union with God. *The Ladder* thus makes use of an image with an already long history. Jacob dreams that he sees angels ascending and descending a ladder that stretches from earth to heaven (Genesis 28:12). In the New Testament, Jesus explicitly identifies himself as the ladder of Jacob’s dream (John 1:51). And in *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, the great guide to monastic life that predates the writings of St. John Climacus by perhaps half a century, Benedict explains to his fellow monks that the ladder of Jacob’s dream is nothing other than “our life in the world, which, if the heart be humbled, is lifted up by the Lord to heaven.” On the ladder thus construed, going up is actually going down, in that “we descend [from God] by exaltation and ascend [to God] by humility.” Benedict also emphasizes that the goal of monastic discipline is to become a whole human being, in whom action and thought are in harmony. “The sides of the same ladder,” he writes, “we understand to be body and soul, in which the call of God has placed various degrees of humility or discipline, which we must ascend.”⁶

The union with God that St. John Climacus envisions is philosophical, insofar as it involves the fulfillment of our longing for understanding. *The Ladder* describes an intellectual encounter with God who is the Word that is reminiscent of a memorable moment in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine – the moment when Augustine and his mother Monica for

⁴ Hegel 1977 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text, by paragraph), §26 and §808.

⁵ Climacus 1982, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

⁶ Delatte 1950, 101.

one fleeting instant touch eternal wisdom (9.10). Like Augustine's experience, the encounter of which Climacus speaks is one in which "what God has said is mysteriously clarified" (288). This is the first point one should keep in mind in thinking about the resemblance between *The Ladder's* author and the author of *Fragments* and *Postscript*. The second is that St. John Climacus's ladder begins and ends in love. Just as the love of God and the longing to come into God's presence motivates the ascent (74, 81), the ladder ends with the experience of God as love. Climacus furthermore introduces and concludes the thirtieth and final step of the ladder by quoting 1 Corinthians 13:13: "Remaining now are faith, hope, and love, these three. But the greatest of these is love." Love is greatest because it "never falls, never halts on its way, never gives respite to the man wounded by its blessed rapture." And he adds that "Love, by its nature, is a resemblance to God, insofar as this is humanly possible. In its activity it is inebriation of the soul. Its distinctive character is to be a fountain of faith, an abyss of patience, a sea of humility" (286).

Kierkegaard's Climacus is a philosopher, which implies that *his* ladder is thought, not religious faith. Yet he resembles the saint whose name he shares in that he, too, is a faithful lover of the kind of truth that promises to make us whole. He presupposes that human beings can ascend to knowledge of this truth, and that passion is essential to doing so. What is at issue, then, is not *whether* the truth is accessible, but *how*: what is the nature of the ladder by which we are to make our ascent? In *Fragments*, in which the Hegelians' systematic assault on the truth provides a foil for his own inquiry, Climacus asks whether it is philosophy or religious faith that furnishes this ladder. This question is really twofold. Is the passion that makes the truth attainable the love of wisdom – the passion Socrates called eros? Or is it the passion of faith – a passion that is itself made possible by the love of God for man? And what *is* the truth? Is it God, the living Word, or is it the nonliving being of which the philosophers speak?

Even this brief statement of Climacus's inquiry in *Fragments* suggests that he is a philosopher who is unusually self-conscious about the possible limits of philosophy and open to the competing claims of religious faith. Kierkegaard himself confirms this suggestion in a surprising way, for Climacus is unique among the pseudonymous authors in that we possess an intellectual biography of him. Kierkegaard wrote *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum est: A Narrative* about the time *Either/Or* was in press (i.e., around 1842–3), but left it unfinished and unpublished.⁷

⁷ Hannay 2001, 198.

The portrait he draws in *Johannes Climacus* is nevertheless essential for our understanding of the author of *Fragments* and *Postscript*.⁸

TRUTHFUL PHILOSOPHY: THE HARMONY
OF SPEECH AND DEED

In his unpublished papers, Kierkegaard makes it clear that *Johannes Climacus* was to be a polemic against modern philosophy.

The plan of this narrative was as follows. . . . by means of the profound earnestness involved in a young man's being sufficiently honest and earnest enough to do quietly and unostentatiously what philosophers say (and he thereby becomes unhappy) – I would strike a blow at [modern speculative] philosophy. Johannes does what we are told to do – he actually doubts everything. . . . When he has gone as far in that direction as he can go and wants to come back, he cannot do so.⁹

Kierkegaard's polemical aim is never fully realized in *Johannes Climacus*, for the narrative breaks off shortly after Climacus begins to doubt without the aid of traditional philosophical theses. As his reference to Climacus's "honest and earnest" character suggests, however, there is more to *Johannes Climacus* than polemic. The young Climacus runs into trouble because he takes the philosophers at their word. This may be naïve, but it should not distract us from the fact that his philosophical disposition is in important respects exemplary. While *Johannes Climacus* does not produce positive "results" in the form of philosophical theses, the contrast between Climacus and those who are reputed to be philosophers allows Kierkegaard to underscore certain essential characteristics of the true philosopher.

⁸ Evans cautions against taking *Johannes Climacus* as an intellectual biography of the author of *Fragments*. He notes that: 1) *Johannes Climacus* was left unfinished and unpublished; 2) it gives us "only the third-person testimony of Kierkegaard about Climacus"; 3) we have no "real basis" for assuming that its subject is identical with the author Climacus; and 4) it provides a picture of Climacus as "a young innocent who seems far removed from the mature, self-confident, if somewhat enigmatic, author of *Philosophical Fragments*" (Evans 1992, 9). Although 1) reminds us that *Johannes Climacus* may offer only a provisional treatment of its subject, this is not directly relevant to the question at hand. Point 2) seems to miss the mark: Kierkegaard is in fact the omniscient narrator of *Johannes Climacus*, and as such, his testimony is presumably unimpeachable. As for 3), the fact that the subject of *Johannes Climacus* and the author of *Fragments* share the same name at the very least invites us to reflect on their possible similarities. When we do so, I suggest, we shall find that the resemblance between the two is so strong as to leave little doubt that, in spite of the differences of age and maturity Evans notes in point 4), they are one and the same.

⁹ *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, 234 (*Pap.* IV B 16). The bracketed words are the Hongs' addition.

Johannes Climacus is introduced by two epigrams. Appropriately, one is from a philosophical treatise and the other is from scripture. Both, however, anticipate a theme that will be developed in the text itself, that of the harmony of speech and deed, or, more broadly, the integrity of life and thought.

The first epigram, from Spinoza's *On the Emendation of the Understanding*, distinguishes "real doubt" from "such doubt as we see exemplified when a man says that he doubts, though his mind does not really hesitate" (115). Spinoza here calls attention to the common difference between what men say and what they do with regard to the matter of doubt. As we shall see directly, Climacus – whose life, as much as is possible for a human being, *is* thinking – takes it for granted that a philosopher's words will match his thoughts.

The second epigram is from 1 Timothy 4:12: "Let no one despise your youth." The rest of 4:12 reads as follows: "... but be an example of the believers in speech, in conduct, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." Although Kierkegaard omits the latter words, they are crucial for understanding the epigram. In this passage, Paul advises Timothy that he can overcome the common prejudice against youth by exemplifying Christian belief in the integrity of his words, actions, thoughts, and feelings. If, as seems likely, Kierkegaard presents Johannes Climacus as an example of the harmony of speech and deed that Socrates calls for, what does it mean that he compares him with "the believers" or "the faithful" (*tōn pistōn*) to whom Paul refers? Climacus, one surmises, is in Kierkegaard's eyes the philosophical counterpart of the faithful Christian. He is "faithful" in the sense that his conduct displays his fidelity to a philosophical ideal of integrity or inner harmony – a harmony of thought and existence, or, in Kierkegaardian terms, of "ideality" and "actuality," that is apparently no longer to be found among philosophers.

That current philosophy is distinguished by the dissonance of speech and deed is made clear in the note to the reader that constitutes the immediate sequel to the epigrams. In this note, Kierkegaard observes that the narrative form of *Johannes Climacus* will scandalize those who suppose "that philosophy has never in all the world been so close as it is now to fulfilling the task of explaining all mysteries." Such readers will deplore Kierkegaard's choice to provide a narrative rather than "hand[ing] up a stone to culminate the system." But those who agree that "philosophy has never been so eccentric as now, never so confused despite all its definitions," will applaud his attempt to "counteract the detestable untruth that characterizes recent philosophy, which differs from older philosophy by

having discovered that it is ludicrous to do what a person himself said he would do or had done" (117).

Kierkegaard takes aim here, if not at Hegel himself, then at least at some of his followers.¹⁰ The philosophical validity of Hegelianism as a systematic articulation of reality that explains "all mysteries" (including those of religion) lies in its completeness, yet the system is still incomplete. The system is furthermore supposed to reflect the self-development of Reason, which is conceived as Spirit (*Geist*) – an independently existing, living "subject" rather than an inert "substance" (Hegel 1977, §23, §25). Yet Kierkegaard likens the system to a structure of stone. As such, it is a dead letter – a speech that stands apart from life as it is actually lived. Philosophical ideality thus conflicts with actuality: what the Hegelians say is at odds with what they do. It is this situation that Kierkegaard characterizes as "the detestable untruth" of recent philosophy. The truth of a philosophy, he implies, cannot be estimated independently of the conduct of the philosopher who espouses it. If speculative philosophy is "untrue" it is not because it is objectively inaccurate as a representation of reality (a claim Kierkegaard does not make in *Johannes Climacus*), but because its practitioners act "falsely" in that their deeds do not accord with their words. Conversely, it would seem that a philosophy is true only if one is true to *it*. To be a true philosopher is not merely to espouse philosophical doctrines, but to live a philosophical life. To be true in this sense, Kierkegaard notes, is the mark of "older philosophy."¹¹

While it is not immediately evident what "older philosophy" Kierkegaard is thinking of, its practitioners certainly include Plato's Socrates, whose commitment to living up to his own words was evidenced by his willingness to die rather than to cease philosophizing (cf. Plato, *Apology* 37e–38a). In his 1841 dissertation, Kierkegaard notes that "theory and practice in him [Socrates] were in harmony" – a claim he bases on the nature of love as embodied in the character of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*.¹² In a journal entry from 1849, Kierkegaard observes

¹⁰ Stewart 2003, 238–81 takes pains to distinguish Hegel's thought from that of Martensen and his students, whom he sees as the real target of Kierkegaard's polemic in *Johannes Climacus*.

¹¹ For further discussion of this Kierkegaardian understanding of truth, see Rudd 1993, 54–67. Rudd notes that "truth is a relatedness to reality, an openness to it, which enables reality to become manifest, to find expression" (65). Viewed in this light, " 'truth' can be attributed not only to ideas, but to attitudes: not only to beliefs but to the spirit in which they are held; not only to propositions, but to human lives" (56).

¹² *Concept of Irony*, 51.

that Socrates “had no doctrine, no system and the like, but had one in action.”¹³ And in an entry from 1854, the year before his death, he writes: “[H]ow true and how Socratic was this Socratic principle: to understand, truly to understand, is to be. For us more ordinary men this divides and becomes twofold: it is one thing to understand and another to be. Socrates is so elevated that he does away with this distinction . . .”¹⁴

The Socratic theme of the philosopher’s truth or integrity is memorably articulated in Plato’s dialogue *Laches*, with which Kierkegaard was familiar.¹⁵ In this dialogue, Socrates discusses the nature of courage with two Athenian generals, Laches and Nicias. Although inexperienced in philosophical conversation, Laches is willing to speak with Socrates because he has had a chance to observe his courage on the battlefield. Laches explains his view of the harmony of *logos* (speech) and *ergon* (deed) as follows:

I might seem to someone to be a lover of speech and, in turn, a hater of speech [*misologos*]. Whenever I hear a man discussing virtue or some wisdom who is truly a man and worthy of the speeches that he is uttering, I rejoice extraordinarily upon seeing that the speaker and the things said are suitable and harmonious with each other. . . . When such a one gives voice, therefore, he makes me rejoice and seem to anyone to be a lover of speech . . . but he who does the contrary of this man pains me, all the more the better he seems to me to speak, and makes me seem to be a hater of speech.¹⁶

Laches’ notion of being worthy of the speeches that one utters is precisely the criterion that Kierkegaard employs in judging the philosophical fashions of his day. Kierkegaard’s choice of the narrative form in writing *Johannes Climacus* makes perfect sense in this light. For narrative is the form proper to biography, and Kierkegaard’s attention to the life of Climacus is motivated in large part by his desire to defend “truthful” philosophy.

YOUNG CLIMACUS

The Introduction to *Johannes Climacus* describes Climacus’s nature and upbringing. Virtually the first thing we learn about him is that he was “ardently in love . . . with thinking.” His soul was moved by a kind of love

¹³ JP 4275, 4.212 (X.2 A 229).

¹⁴ JP 4301, 4.222 (XI.1 A 430).

¹⁵ Cf. *Concept of Irony*, 54.

¹⁶ *Laches* 188c–e. I have used the translation of James H. Nichols, Jr., in Pangle 1987, 240–68.

that others might easily have mistaken for the erotic love (*Elskov*) young men feel when they are captivated by a woman's beauty. "It was his delight to begin with a single thought," Kierkegaard writes, "and then, by way of coherent thinking, to climb step by step to a higher one, because to him coherent thinking was a *scala paradisi*." In ascending and then descending the ladder of thought, "his blessedness seemed to him even more glorious than the angels" (118–19).

This description of Climacus is in several ways strongly reminiscent of Socrates. Climacus is moved by a passion for thought that is akin to erotic love. In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates regularly identifies philosophy with erotic love. In the *Republic*, he introduces the philosopher as a lover of wisdom whose longing for the sight of truth resembles the passion of men who love boys in the bloom of youth (474c–75a). In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates presents philosophy as a divine erotic madness that is initially nourished by the sight of physical beauty and that ultimately carries the soul up to the beings above the roof of the cosmos (245b ff.). And in the *Symposium*, Socrates puts in the mouth of the priestess Diotima the teaching that eros, an intermediate divinity (*daimōn*) that links the human and divine spheres and binds together the realm of becoming with that of being, is itself a lover of wisdom (*philosophon*: 204b). Socrates also on more than one occasion uses the image of a ladder, or something like it, to describe the movement of philosophy. In the *Republic*, he employs an image that is structurally equivalent to a ladder – that of the Divided Line – to represent both the levels of reality the soul traverses in its ascent to knowledge of the Ideas and the Good and the powers of the soul that cognize reality (509d–11e). Socrates' account of the erotic, dialectical movement of thought up and down the Line (511b–c) is echoed in Kierkegaard's remark that Climacus found "unparalleled joy" in "the up-and-down and down-and-up of thought" (119). And in the *Symposium*, Diotima compares the philosophical and erotic ascent of the soul from beautiful things to the Beautiful itself to the manner in which one climbs "rising stairs" (211c).

Another link with Socrates is forged by Kierkegaard's description of Climacus's relationship with his father. When he was a boy, his father would play games with him in which he fashioned whole worlds in speech by means of his "omnipotent imagination." These games taught him to relish the "ambrosia" of imaginative discourse. In school, the rules of Greek and Latin grammar also captured Climacus's imagination and opened up new intellectual spaces. But it was in listening to his father, who, like Socrates, was an expert in dialectical debate, that he developed

a sense for “the sudden” and “the surprising” in argument. His father would allow his opponent to state his case fully, and then would strike like a shark: “in an instant, everything was turned upside down; the explicable was made inexplicable, the certain doubtful, the opposite was made obvious.” This is also a common experience of Socrates’ interlocutors, some of whom as a result become dissatisfied with philosophical dialogue.¹⁷ Climacus, however, is affected by his father in the opposite way, for he comes to appreciate more fully the importance of attending to “the step-by-step process of thought” (120–4).

Climacus’s life had “a rare continuity,” in that “the repose of intuition and the interchange of dialectic . . . delighted the child, became the boy’s play, the young man’s desire” (123). His “whole life was thinking,” yet this “by no means weakened his belief and trust in actuality”; “the ideality by which he was nourished was so close to him, everything took place so naturally, that this ideality became his actuality, and in turn he was bound to expect to find ideality in the actuality all around him” (124). Oddly, this expectation was not undermined by his father’s depression and excessively low self-estimation. Climacus’s “trust in actuality,” which had not yet been diminished by much experience of the world, was, if anything, strengthened by the fact that his father did not make his knowledge seem like something glorious, but “knew how to render it as unimportant and valueless as possible” (125). Climacus’s inwardness, however, meant that he “was and remained a stranger in the world” (119) – much like Socrates, whose philosophical intensity gave him an air of “strangeness” (*atopia*) that is often remarked upon in the dialogues of Plato.¹⁸ Kierkegaard repeats this phrase almost verbatim a few pages later: Climacus entered the university, took his qualifying exams, turned twenty, “and yet no change took place in him – he was and remained a stranger to the world.” He furthermore “never betrayed” his views to others, because “the erotic in him was too deep for that” (123). This suggests that the fidelity and depth of his love of wisdom kept him a stranger to others in that it prevented him from forming worldly attachments that might compromise this love. In this, too, Climacus resembles Socrates, whose unvarying arguments were meant to please his unchanging beloved, philosophy, and who preferred that “the great majority of human beings disagree with me and contradict me than that I, although I am only one

¹⁷ Plato, *Euthyphro* 11b, *Meno* 79e–80b.

¹⁸ *Theaetetus* 149a (cited by Climacus in *Fragments*, 10), *Alcibiades I* 106a, *Symposium* 207e; cf. *Phaedrus* 230c.

person, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict myself” (Plato, *Gorgias* 482a–c).

In sum, Climacus’s nature and upbringing combine to form a character that is in certain respects perfectly suited for philosophical reflection. He is a lover of intellectual exercise with a keen sense of logic and dialectical argument, and he is confident about the power of thought to reveal the higher mysteries of life. It is not surprising that *Fragments* and *Postscript* present the protagonist of the Platonic dialogues as the unsurpassable model of philosophical excellence, for the very qualities that make Climacus an eager and adept thinker also establish his close kinship with Socrates.

EVERYTHING MUST BE DOUBTED

Johannes Climacus narrates Climacus’s attempt to enter into philosophy, about which he initially makes the most charitable possible assumptions. Climacus regards philosophy as a well-established discipline populated by great minds, but two obstacles impede his entry into this discipline. First, Climacus’s exalts the great thinkers of his time to such an extent that he does not dare to read their books: he was “fearful that the major thinkers would smile at him if they heard that he, too, wanted to think, just as fine ladies smile at the lowly maiden if she has the audacity of also wanting to know the bliss of erotic love.” Second, his “whole orientation of mind” in any case “made him feel uncomfortable about reading.” When he did chance to read a “recent philosophical work,” he felt “disappointed and discouraged” because the investigation was invariably incomplete and insufficiently rigorous. When tempted by a title, “he would go to the book gladly and expectantly, but, lo and behold, it would discuss many other things, least of all that which one would have expected.” Perhaps not coincidentally, Socrates has a similar experience when he eagerly takes up Anaxagoras’s books in the expectation that he will learn how Mind arranges all things for the best, only to discover that the author explains things in purely physical or material terms. In any case, the effect is the same: Climacus, like Socrates, responds to his disappointment by taking counsel with himself and trying to think things through on his own (cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 97b–100a). Climacus’s disposition insures that the ideas of others do not imprint themselves upon his soul in the form of an accepted teaching, but rather serve merely as occasions for his own active reflection. Yet he is still charmingly ignorant of the value of this Socratic turn of mind. Although he was all the more happy “the less others had

assisted in his thinking,” he “truly considered it a great thing to be able, as were the others, to toss about in the multiple thoughts of multiple thinkers” (129–31).

The explicit subject of Climacus’s reflections in *Johannes Climacus* is the question of how philosophy begins. This question, which thematizes what Climacus is doing as he himself tries to begin to philosophize, is one upon which he stumbles by “fate.” He picks up from the conversations of others “one thesis that came up again and again, was passed from mouth to mouth, was always praised, always venerated” – a thesis that was also usually connected with becoming a philosopher. That thesis, we later learn, is *De omnibus dubitandum est* (Everything must be doubted), an assertion that articulates Descartes’ central methodological imperative but that is also propounded by Hegel.¹⁹ That everything must be doubted became “a task” for Climacus’s thinking – a task that he would not let go until he had thought it through, “even though it were to cost him his life” (131).

Part One of *Johannes Climacus*, in which Climacus “begins to philosophize with the aid of traditional ideas” (127), narrates his largely unsuccessful attempt to understand three common philosophical theses: “(1) philosophy begins with doubt; (2) in order to philosophize, one must have doubted; (3) modern philosophy begins with doubt” (132). Climacus examines these theses in order to “shed some light on the connection between *de omnibus dubitandum est* and philosophy and thereby more or less brighten his prospects of entering into philosophy” (144). Part Two, which describes Climacus’s attempt to think on his own the proposition that everything must be doubted, breaks off after only a few pages. For this reason, and because Climacus’s development as an independent thinker is essentially completed by the end of Part One, the second part of *Johannes Climacus* will not concern us in what follows.

In general, Climacus’s attempts to approach philosophy by way of doubt establish the imprecise and therefore thoughtless character of the theses propounded by the philosophers. Climacus first wonders, for example, whether the apparently merely historical and contingent claim that modern philosophy begins with doubt (the third thesis) is actually an essential or “eternal” claim about philosophy as such. If beginning with

¹⁹ Cf. Hegel 1974, 1.406 (quoted by the Hongs in *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, 311 n. 45): “Philosophy must, generally speaking, begin with a puzzle in order to bring about reflection; everything must be doubted, all presuppositions given up, to reach the truth as created through the Notion [*Begriff*].”

doubt is crucial for philosophy as such, the third thesis collapses into the first, namely, that philosophy itself, and not just *modern* philosophy, begins with doubt. In that case, the obvious implication of the third thesis – that what came before modern philosophy is also philosophy – is misleading (134). The first thesis, on the other hand, seems essential but turns out on closer examination to be historical. For if philosophy begins with doubt, there must be something within philosophy that it doubts, which implies a polemic against an antecedent philosophical principle (144–5). The philosophers, in sum, “confused historical and eternal categories in such a way that when they seemed to be saying something historical they were saying something eternal,” and vice versa (134).

Climacus’s reflections about the beginning of the quest for wisdom anticipate the inquiry he will undertake in *Fragments*, wherein he supposes that this beginning is provided either by Socratic recollection or by divine revelation. In the former case, the beginning is eternal in that it is in principle accessible to all human beings at all times; in the latter, it is paradoxically both historical (because revelation is a historical event) and eternal (because what is revealed is the truth that stands outside of time). The philosophers’ confusion of historical and eternal categories accordingly puts Climacus in mind of Christianity, whose “claim that it had come into the world by a beginning that was simultaneously historical and eternal had caused philosophy much difficulty” (134–5).

As interesting as the foregoing insights may be, only part of what *Johannes Climacus* has to teach us about philosophy is contained in Climacus’s reflections. To borrow Laches’ terminology, the *ergon* of the book – its action, or *how* Climacus goes about philosophizing – is at least as significant as its *logos* or argument. As we have seen, the book exhibits a harmony of action and argument in that its explicit theme, how philosophy begins, is dramatically exhibited in Climacus’s own attempt to begin philosophizing. And just as the opening pages of the book counsel us to evaluate the speeches of philosophers in the light of their deeds, *Johannes Climacus* invites us to view its own *logos* in the light of its *ergon*. For it is especially in the action of its protagonist that *Johannes Climacus* sheds light on the beginnings of philosophy.

CLIMACUS COMES OF AGE

We are already familiar with the beginnings of philosophy in Climacus’s soul. Climacus at one point remembers that “the Greeks taught that philosophy begins with wonder” (145). This turns us in the right direction: it

would be more true to say that Climacus begins with wonder than with doubt, for he starts to philosophize by wondering about the meaning of certain philosophical theses pertaining to the role of doubt in philosophizing. But Climacus is capable of philosophical wonder only because he approaches the mysteries of thought with reverence, and his soul is open to these mysteries only because he is already familiar with the rigorous pleasures of thinking. To advance these sorts of considerations is to call attention to the “subjective” beginnings of philosophy, and in particular to raise the question of the character one needs in order to philosophize. This is a question about which Socrates was deeply concerned, as is clear, for example, from his extensive discussion of the philosophic nature in the fifth and sixth books of Plato’s *Republic* (474c–504a). It is one that Kierkegaard raises indirectly when he notes Climacus’s growing frustration with the philosophers, who “only needed to outline . . . vaguely” matters that were “so hard for him to think” (139). Finally, it is also a question that Climacus himself ultimately confronts explicitly.

At one point, it occurs to Climacus to ask about the relationship of “the single individual” to the thesis that philosophy begins with doubt. His soul “pregnantly ponder[s]” this matter through a kind of internal dialogue (147). The image of psychic pregnancy is Platonic: as Climacus notes in *Fragments* (10–11), Socrates represents himself as a midwife who helps to relieve the souls of young men of their labor pains and to examine the quality of their offspring (*Theaetetus* 148e–51d). The image underscores Kierkegaard’s Socratic sense that philosophizing is an active process of deeply personal significance, for those who have given birth have the most intimate attachment to the offspring they bring forth by their intense labor. That Climacus is pregnant also suggests that the problem of how a philosophical thesis can come to have meaning for the individual is a particularly fruitful one. Climacus hears a philosopher who claims that anyone who wishes to give himself to philosophy must embrace the thesis that philosophy begins with doubt, but who says “not a single word concerning how one is to go about doing this [i.e., doubting]” (148). How can the individual actually make use of this thesis?

Climacus next hears that philosophy has three beginnings, “absolute,” “objective,” and “subjective.” The reference is to the Hegelian system. As we have seen, Hegel attempts to provide the subjective beginning of philosophy – defined as “the work of consciousness, by which this elevates itself to thinking or to positing the abstraction” (149) – in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is supposed to furnish the individual with a ladder to the absolute beginning. Only once he has ascended this ladder

is the reader in a position to enter the system proper, starting with the objective beginning of “absolutely indeterminate being” in the *Logic*.

Climacus recognizes that the beginning with which he must concern himself is the subjective one: whereas only those who had already become philosophers are in a position to reflect about absolute and objective beginnings, the subjective beginning was “certainly the one with which the individual started from not having been a philosopher to become a philosopher” (149). But this overview of the three beginnings of speculative philosophy raises the additional question of whether “to elevate oneself” and “to doubt” are supposed to be identical. To doubt is to call into question an antecedent philosophical principle, whereas to elevate oneself implies no such negative historical relationship (150). Does philosophy then have three beginnings, or four?

Still more important, Climacus asks himself whether the thesis that philosophy begins with doubt is like a metaphysical or mathematical thesis, to the truth of which the “personality” of the speaker does not matter, or like a religious or ethical thesis. For Climacus, the question concerns what authorizes one to enunciate a thesis. For a mathematical thesis to retain its essential truth, it is necessary only that the person who is supposed to enunciate it have mathematical talent – the proof of which is his ability to enunciate the thesis correctly. Thus, “if a two-year-old child could be taught a mathematical thesis, it would be essentially just as true in the child’s mouth as in the mouth of Protagoras.” The situation is otherwise with respect to religious and ethical theses:

If we taught a two-year-old child to say these words, ‘I believe that there is a God,’ or ‘Know yourself,’ then no one would reflect on these words. Is talent itself, then, not the adequate authority? Do not religious and ethical truths require something else, or another kind of authority, or, rather, what do we actually call authority, for we do, after all, make a distinction between talent and authority? If someone has enough talent to perceive all the implications in such a thesis, enough talent to enunciate it, it does not follow that he himself believes it or that he himself does it, and insofar as this is not the case, he then changes the thesis from a religious to a historical thesis, or from an ethical to a metaphysical thesis. (152–3)

The foregoing insight will prove decisive in Climacus’s approach to philosophy and religion in *Fragments* and *Postscript*. Metaphysical theses, including the doctrines of speculative philosophy, are like mathematical theses in that their adequacy is to be judged in objective terms alone. What matters is only what the thesis itself says. Like bearer bonds, they are indifferent to the character of the individual who holds them, and

are just as sound in the hands of “a rich man or a poor man . . . a thief or the legitimate owner” (152). The adequacy of a religious or ethical thesis, however, derives not simply from *what* it says, but also from *who* says it. Religious and ethical theses must also be considered subjectively, or from the point of view of *ergon* as well as *logos*: such theses become genuinely religious or ethical depending on whether the actions of the speaker are in harmony with his words or at odds with them. One who writes a life of Jesus but does not believe that Jesus is Lord and does not act in accordance with this belief, writes historically but not religiously. One who writes a treatise on the nature of the good but whose beliefs and actions express personal indifference to what he has written, writes metaphysically but not ethically. In each case, the writer may have talent, and may even have adequately articulated the truth from an objective standpoint, but nonetheless lacks the active and passionate commitment that is required to confer religious or ethical authority on what he says.

Climacus observes that the thesis “philosophy begins with doubt” cannot belong to the absolute or objective philosophy, but must rather belong to the subjective beginning of philosophy. It therefore cannot be a metaphysical thesis and cannot make claims to philosophical necessity, “as any thesis in the absolute and objective philosophy does.” Climacus concludes that its nature must be that of religious and ethical theses: “the person who was supposed to enunciate it . . . had to have authority” (153). The person who tells another that philosophy begins with doubt is worth listening to only insofar as he has himself begun with doubt. Furthermore, although Climacus does not make the point, that philosophy begins with doubt *must* be an ethical thesis in the mouth of a philosopher: he has chosen philosophy over other pursuits, and cannot consistently regard it as a matter of indifference whether one philosophizes or not.

Climacus is nevertheless ultimately forced to conclude that doubt cannot be the way into philosophy, because that would destroy the continuity of philosophy itself. One who receives from a teacher the thesis that philosophy begins with doubt is thereby obliged to doubt his teacher’s teaching. In this way, “he would not have the slightest benefit from his predecessors but would have either the prospect of becoming the absolute monarch in philosophy . . . or the prospect of ending up the same way as his great predecessors” (155). Beginning with doubt either excludes one from the tradition of philosophy or annihilates that tradition; in either case, “this beginning was a beginning that kept one outside of philosophy” (156). Climacus has now encountered for himself what Kierkegaard

earlier called “the detestable untruth” of the philosophers, who enunciate a thesis that they themselves fail to act upon.

Having established that doubt lies outside of philosophy (contrary to the first and third theses), Climacus turns finally to the second thesis, namely, that “in order to philosophize, one must have doubted.” Perhaps, he reflects, doubt prepares one to begin philosophizing. Up to this point, Climacus had sought to attach himself as a follower to a philosophical teacher, and it occurs to him that this preparation might be just the sort of initiation that a master might demand of a novice. Yet he is now disturbed by the thought that “he who doubts elevates himself above the person from whom he learns” (158). This thought forces him to rethink his initial assumptions about teaching and learning:

When the master positively orders the follower to do something, it certainly is easier for the follower, because then the teacher assumes the responsibility. The follower, however, thereby becomes a less perfect being, one who has his life in another person. But by imposing something negative, the teacher emancipates the follower from himself, makes him just as important as himself. The relation of teacher and follower is indeed cancelled. (158–9)

Climacus regards the emancipation of the follower as “something elevated and noble,” and therefore something highly desirable (158). He is now prepared to “do everything” on his own responsibility, “even though I could have wished to remain a minor for yet a while longer, even though I could have wished that there would be someone to give me orders” (159). To do everything on one’s own responsibility, however, is to approach philosophy in just the way that Socrates, who claimed not to be a teacher but merely a midwife of others’ thoughts, insisted one ought to. Climacus has truly come of age as a Socratic philosopher.

Johannes Climacus poses the question of how philosophy begins. It never explicitly answers this question, because Climacus never succeeds in arriving at an adequate understanding of the various theses he entertains about the beginning of philosophy. I have suggested, however, that the book at least *shows* Climacus beginning to philosophize, even if it does not explain exactly how it is possible for him to do so. There is nevertheless one potential problem with this claim: while it presupposes that Climacus is at some point actually engaging in philosophy, Climacus himself begins by distinguishing between his own thinking and philosophy proper. And although the insincere and contradictory pronouncements of those who are reputed to be philosophers ultimately lead him to bid them “farewell

forever" (165), he persists in viewing philosophy as an exalted discipline into which he hopes someday to be worthy of initiation. *Johannes Climacus* thus leaves unanswered the question of how we are to understand philosophy. If Hegelian, speculative thought is not philosophy, what is?

The specification and exploration of the nature of philosophy are tasks that Climacus himself will take up in *Fragments*. As we have seen, however, *Johannes Climacus* encourages us to think about philosophy in the most concrete terms. Like the dialogues of Plato, *Johannes Climacus* focuses our attention on what it means for an individual to live a philosophical life. The framework in which Kierkegaard reflects upon philosophy – a framework embraced by Climacus himself, as will be amply evident in his comparison of philosophy and faith in *Fragments* – is a Socratic one, in which the fundamental issue is what constitutes the life most worth living for a human being (cf. *Apology* 38a).

Keeping in mind its essentially Socratic character, it is clear that *Johannes Climacus* is not merely polemical. In a positive vein, it helps us to understand the beginning of philosophy in the specific sense of what is required for genuinely philosophical thinking. Indeed, this is a major unspoken theme of the book. Our reading has brought to light a number of insights in this connection.

First of all, Climacus is moved by an erotic love for thinking that is akin to Socratic eros. Kierkegaard's emphasis on this dimension of Climacus's character suggests that passion is essential for philosophy. Climacus will explicitly insist on this point in *Fragments*. It remains to be seen what relationship this passion, as Climacus understands it, bears to eros as it is presented by Socrates in the Platonic dialogues.

Second, and closely related to the importance of eros, is the notion of philosophical fidelity or "truth" that Kierkegaard develops in *Johannes Climacus*. True philosophy is a harmony of speech and deed that is rooted in passion. To be a philosopher is to live a philosophical life, which entails that, whatever else a philosophy is, it must be livable. A logos that cannot be actualized as ergon in the life of an existing individual is not philosophical at all. So, too, one who loves philosophy so little that his actions are unfaithful to his best understanding does not deserve the name "philosopher."

Finally, *Johannes Climacus* teaches that the adequacy or "essential truth" of certain philosophical theses – specifically, religious and ethical ones – depends upon the "authority" of the person who enunciates them. It is still unclear, however, whether authority in Climacus's sense, involving

as it does passionate conviction, moral sincerity, and integrity, is a sufficient condition for philosophical truth or only a necessary one. Does the philosophical disclosure of truth depend only on the intellect and character of the philosopher, or is something more required – perhaps including divine assistance? This is a matter with which Socrates, no less than Climacus, was essentially concerned, and it is one to which we shall return in the following pages.