

THE  
PARADOXICAL  
RATIONALITY  
OF  
SØREN  
KIERKEGAARD

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## ONE

# A Pretense of Irrationalism

Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks you a reason for the hope that is in you. (1 Peter 3:15)

The noble lie [is] useful to human beings as a sort of remedy. (*Republic* 414c, 389b)

What I have wanted has been to contribute . . . to bringing, if possible, into these incomplete lives as we lead them a little more truth. (pV, 17)

The truth must never become an object of pity; serve it as long as you can, to the best of your ability with unconditioned recklessness; squander everything in its service. (pV, 211)

Temporarily suppressing something precisely in order that the true can become more true . . . is a plain duty to the truth and is part and parcel of a person's responsibility to God for the reflection [thinking capacity, reason] granted to him. (pV, 89)

[Sometimes the wise teacher] thinks it most appropriate to say that he does not understand something that he really does understand. (pV, 49)

One can deceive a person out of what is true, and—to recall old Socrates—one can deceive a person into what is true. (pV, 53)

This was sometime a paradox, but now the time gives it proof. (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*)

Søren Kierkegaard often seems to reject reason, but in fact he affirms it.<sup>1</sup> There are two principal causes of his appearance of irrationalism. First, his conception and use of reason, which he calls *subjectivity*, is so different from conventional versions of rationality that it often seems irrational, especially at first sight.<sup>2</sup> Second, and more importantly, Kierkegaard does not attempt to correct his misleading appearance of irrationalism, but instead deliberately cultivates it, precisely because he thinks that he needs such deception in order to assist his readers to become more rational. Thus it might be said that Kierkegaard pretends to be irrational in order to communicate rationality.<sup>3</sup> In his own colorful words, he is a *spy* “in the service of the truth” with the *absurd* or irrational as his *incognito* (CUP, 467; PV, 72; FT, 34; CUP, 500).

Kierkegaard’s strategy of feigning irrationality in the service of reason has both divine and human models and is grounded in both faith and reason. The divine prototype is the incarnation of God in the man Jesus Christ. As God humbled himself to become an individual human being so that individual human beings might become divine, so Kierkegaard humbles himself to appear irrational so that his readers might become (more) rational. Whereas the incarnation is the “absolute paradox,” because it transcends reason and therefore cannot be explained, comprehended, or demonstrated, Kierkegaard’s serving reason by seeming unreasonable is only a “relative paradox,” because it initially seems absurd, but can be explained, understood, and justified.<sup>4</sup>

The human model for Kierkegaard’s *incognito* of irrationalism is Socrates. If Socrates ironically feigned ignorance in the service of knowledge, Kierkegaard “goes further” and ironically feigns irrationality in the service of reason. Rarely has any thinker conceded so much with an *argumentum ex concessis*.

Just as Kierkegaard’s pretense of irrationalism is derived in part from Socrates’ profession of ignorance, so, more generally, his *indirect* mode of *communication* is derived in part from Socratic *midwifery*. Even more generally, Kierkegaard’s whole conception and use of reason—which includes his “indirect communication”—is modeled on Socratic rationality.

Like Kierkegaardian communication, Kierkegaardian rationality is paradoxical. What I am calling *paradoxical rationality*, Kierkegaard himself calls *subjectivity*. Subjectivity is paradoxical in that it strategically expresses itself in ways that make it seem irrational, at least ini-

tially, and in that it is an imitation by the finite, temporal, particular, and conditioned human being of an infinite, eternal, universal, and absolute ideal. Subjectivity is rational in that it uses the human mind to discover these opposites within human nature and strives to live and act consistently with this discovery. Thus subjectivity, like all rationality, is consistency. But, unlike some versions of rationality, it is a consistency not just of thought with thought, but of the whole person. More fully, it is an “existence-attempt” at “infinite self-consistency,” an uncompromising striving to integrate in one project all the elements of the self, including *thinking, feeling, willing, acting, and communicating* (CUP, 318; SUD, 107).

Insofar as subjectivity is an attempt to apply one’s convictions to life and action, it bears a strong resemblance to what is often called “practical reason.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Climacus strongly implies that he sees subjectivity as “*usus instrumentalis* of reason,” an instrumental use of reason (CUP, 377). Nevertheless, insofar as subjectivity does not narrowly focus on action, but endeavors to embrace and do justice to the whole human person, it is more accurate to call it *holistic* or *humane rationality*.

Most great thinkers who value reason desire to seem reasonable, and more or less effortlessly succeed in fulfilling this desire. Moreover, if they have a message to communicate that they know will initially seem unreasonable, they explain that the rationality of their message will become apparent if only their readers will bear with them for a while. Therefore, the fact that Kierkegaard neither seems reasonable to most people nor explains that he aims to be reasonable is an indication of how much Kierkegaard’s conception and use of reason differs from those of other thinkers and of how much most people stand to learn from him about rationality and communication—if, that is, he is correct about these things. This present book represents an attempt to learn from Kierkegaard important and essential truths about the character and communication of rationality.

If Kierkegaard’s method of communicating rationality by pretending to be irrational were entirely correct, it would be meddling foolishness to expose and explain it. Conversely, if Kierkegaard’s feigning of irrationality were wholly misguided, then studying it would scarcely be worth the effort. But in fact, as I will argue, his pretense of irrationality is rational enough to be instructive and mistaken enough to need correction. Alternatively, Kierkegaard’s strategy of feigning irrationality is a

good idea in principle and is often so in practice, but it has succeeded so well—in that many readers who sincerely try to be open and receptive to Kierkegaard’s writings never (adequately) discover his rationality—that it needs to be explained. Hence I will dare to explicate the method in Kierkegaard’s mad stratagem of pretending to be irrational in order to communicate rationality.

### Prospectus

In this first chapter, I argue that Kierkegaard is committed to reason and that he often pretends to be irrational in order to communicate rationality. In the second chapter, I follow up this argument by explaining not only Kierkegaard’s conception and use of reason, but also why he thinks feigning unreasonableness is required for the communication of rationality. Each of the remaining chapters explicates a paradox that is a part of the paradox that Kierkegaard feigns irrationalism in the service of reason, or derived from this paradox, or analogous to it. In chapter 3, we will investigate why Kierkegaard thinks that the best way to reveal the goal of paradoxical reason is artfully preserving silence about it. In chapter 4, we will look into Kierkegaard’s claim that the most psychologically subtle and the most powerful means to the goal of paradoxical reason is simply to try as hard as one can to attain it. Chapter 5 evaluates Kierkegaard’s claim that the simple means of paradoxical reason must be communicated with bewildering complexity and indirection. In chapter 6, we will investigate why Kierkegaard thinks that the most artfully drawn limits to human reason form a ladder to transcendence. Chapter 7 explicates the Kierkegaardian assertion that the downfall of reason is its perfection. And, finally, chapter 8 examines and defends Kierkegaard’s claim that the most cogent demonstration of ethics, religion, and Christianity is not a philosophical argument, but a life.

### The Relation of Kierkegaard and Johannes Climacus

This present book is about the paradoxical rationality, not just of Kierkegaard, but also of Johannes Climacus, the persona created by Kierkegaard to be the pseudonymous author of *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Climacus’s concep-

tion and use of reason are similar to Kierkegaard's, but with an important difference: Climacus's rationality is more philosophical than his creator's is. Kierkegaard creates Climacus specifically to address and appeal to philosophical readers, or, as Kierkegaard might say, in order to *find* such readers "where they are" so as then to *lead* them to subjectivity (PV, 45).

Since Climacus is more philosophical than Kierkegaard, he is also less rational—at least in Kierkegaard's estimation. For Kierkegaard believes that philosophy tends to be abstract, incomplete, and inconsistent, or that philosophers overemphasize thinking to the neglect of enacting or applying what they think. Climacus himself is very concerned about putting thought to the trial of action. That is to say, he writes a lot about it and heartily recommends it. But, as a self-professed *humorist*, Climacus fails to put into practice the highest things that he understands and admires and is consequently inconsistent and irrational by his own standards (CUP, 451). Therefore, in addressing his readers through the persona of the (partially) irrational Climacus, Kierkegaard in a way pretends to be irrational—since readers naturally tend to suppose that Climacus speaks for Kierkegaard.

It would be cumbersome always to be explicitly marking the agreements and disagreements of Kierkegaard either with Climacus or with his other pseudonymous authors by writing "Kierkegaard and Climacus agree about this or that," or "Climacus thinks this, but Kierkegaard disagrees and thinks this other thing." Therefore, I propose the following convention. The reader is to assume that I think Kierkegaard agrees with his pseudonymous authors, unless the context makes it clear that he disagrees with them, or unless I explicitly call attention to their disagreement. Sometimes, when I think that it is uncontroversial that Kierkegaard agrees with a pseudonym, I will even go so far as to attribute opinions quoted from a book he wrote pseudonymously to Kierkegaard himself. The previous paragraph should make it clear that I do not adopt this policy in the opinion that the distinction between Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors is unimportant.

### Evidence That Kierkegaard Is an Irrationalist

There is no denying that Kierkegaard often presents a quite convincing appearance of irrationalism. Consequently, the first step in the argument

for the thesis *that in order to communicate rationality Kierkegaard pretends to be irrational* is to describe Kierkegaard's irrational appearance.

Kierkegaard often appears to deny the power of reason or of the human mind to know things that he thinks are immensely important. For instance, in *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus denies the power of reason to *demonstrate* the "existence of God" (PF, 39–44). Similarly, another pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard, Anti-Climacus, claims that "one cannot *know* anything at all about *Christ*" (PC, 25; cf. 23, 35).

Sometimes Kierkegaard appears to deny the value or relevance of rational arguments or of knowledge, or even to assert that seeking rational evidence is foolish, perverse, or evil. For example, Anti-Climacus dubs the person who first practiced apologetics, which is the attempt to *defend* Christianity with *reasons*, "Judas No. 2" (SUD, 87, 102–103).

Kierkegaard sometimes appears to go farther than denying the power and value of rational evidence, by suggesting that human excellence consists in believing or acting contrary to reason. For example, Climacus, who regards Christian faith as an attractive possibility, claims that if a person is to become a Christian, his *understanding*, that is, his reason, must "will its own downfall," step *aside*, be *discharged*, be *surrendered*, or even *crucify* itself (PF, 37–39, 59, 54; CUP, 559). Moreover, he claims that one *believes* in Christ "against the understanding," or "in direct opposition to all human understanding" (CUP, 568, 211). He even calls the Christian claim that God was made man in the person of Jesus Christ a *contradiction*, thereby giving the impression that it is a logical contradiction (PF, 87). Obviously, if the doctrine of the incarnation is logically self-contradictory, then faith in Christ involves a violation of the most basic principle of reason. It is not surprising, therefore, that another pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio, frequently claims that one has "faith by virtue of the absurd" (FT, 35).

Kierkegaard's elevation of the "single individual," or of the *particular*, above the *universal* also seems to constitute a rejection or demotion of reason, since reason typically if not always emphasizes the universal over the particular. Similarly, the *Postscript's* polemic against *objectivity* and *objective truth* often looks like a denial of rational norms and goals, while its panegyric of *subjectivity* and *subjective truth* frequently appears to be subjectivism, individualism, or relativism.



## Evidence That Kierkegaard Is Rational

Lessing, a thinker whom Kierkegaard greatly admired, trenchantly criticized the apologetics of a certain Pastor Goeze of Hamburg in the following words: “Herr Pastor! Herr Pastor! Does the whole *rationality* of the Christian religion consist only in not being *irrational*? Does your theological heart feel no shame at writing such a thing?”<sup>6</sup> It seems to me that Lessing is right: A defense of the rationality of anything or of anyone that argues only that it or he is not irrational is not yet a sufficient defense of their rationality. Therefore I will argue not only that Kierkegaard is not an irrationalist, but that he is a robustly rational thinker, even though he is not a rationalist in any ordinary sense of the word, and maybe not even a philosopher.<sup>7</sup> Though I will begin arguing for the robust rationality of Kierkegaard here in this chapter, the argument will not be complete until the end of the next chapter.

While it is easy to find evidence that Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors are irrationalists or skeptics, the evidence they that affirm reason and knowledge is unspectacular, inconspicuous, and sometimes even hidden—which is exactly what we should expect, if Kierkegaard often pretends to be irrational.

Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors occasionally affirm *reason* (JFY, 91, 96; CUP, 41, 145, 161, 377) and *knowledge* by name, but more often than not, they affirm them by way of euphemisms: *dialectic*, *reflection*, or *thinking*, for reason; and *understanding*, *awareness*, *consciousness*, or *clear conception* for knowledge. Moreover, these affirmations of reason and knowledge tend to be hidden away in the less exciting, and therefore less read, portions of Kierkegaard’s authorship, that is, either in the books to which he signed his own name—what I call *alethonymous* books—or in the two books by the pseudonymous author named Anti-Climacus. Finally, these affirmations are often only implicit and consequently in need of explication. Our present task therefore is to uncover and unfold the evidence that Kierkegaard and (many of) his pseudonymous authors affirm both reason and knowledge.

Kierkegaard values knowledge very highly, as the following passage indicates:

Believe me, it is very important for a person that his language be precise and true, because that means his thinking is that also. Furthermore, even though understanding and speaking correctly are not everything, since acting correctly is indeed also required, yet understanding in relation to acting is like the springboard from which the diver makes his leap—the clearer, the more precise, the more passionate (in the good sense) the understanding is, the more it rises to action. (PC, 158)

In this passage, Anti-Climacus asserts that *understanding*, or knowledge, is “very important”—not, however, for its own sake, but insofar as it supports and informs *action*. In other words, Kierkegaard values practical understanding, or practical knowledge.

Kierkegaard similarly affirms practical knowledge and rational thinking in the service of practice when he writes that “the condition for having had benefit [of a practical sort] is always first and foremost to become aware,” and “no earnest person . . . wearies of tracking down illusions, because . . . he fears most to be in error” (WL, 85, 124).

Kierkegaard values practical understanding in part because he thinks human dignity requires that a person be responsible both for his or her actions and for being the sort of person one has made of oneself, and because he thinks responsibility in turn requires knowing what one ought to do and the *freedom* to do or not to do it (SUD, 21, 29). Thus he conceives of freedom, not as individualistic and arbitrary self-creation, but as the capacity to strive or not to strive to conform to a known *criterion*, or to an “unconditioned requirement,” or to an *ideal*, or, in short, to the dictates of *conscience* (SUD, 79; PC, 67, 90; FSE, 21, 40; JFY, 91, 166–167). This conception of freedom comes to light in Anti-Climacus’s definition of *sin* as to *understand* or to know “what is right,” and nonetheless either to “refrain from doing” it or else to do “what is wrong” (SUD, 95).

Given the fact that Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors think that ethical and religious action requires knowledge, we should expect to find them affirming knowledge of ethical and religious norms or ideals. We are not disappointed in this expectation. For example, Anti-Climacus speaks of his *knowledge* of what is “humanly the true good” and of his “awareness of the holy” (PC, 139). More specifically, Kierkegaard claims that “every human being knows the ethical,” and, more generally, he claims that “basically we all understand the highest”

(JP 1:649, 11; WL, 78). Ethical knowledge, moreover, is according to Climacus knowledge to a very high degree, since he claims that “the ethical” is “co-knowledge with God” (CUP, 155; cf. PV, 75). Presumably one knows something rather well when one knows it “with God.” Thus the ethical is “secure knowledge” and *certainty* (CUP, 152).

Knowledge of ideals is not only knowledge to a high degree, it is also knowledge of high things. For when one becomes *aware* of ethical and religious ideals, one becomes aware of them as *infinite*, *eternal*, and *absolute* (CUP, 143; SUD, 30; PF, 64; FT, 70). Anti-Climacus even claims that one can “become aware of God,” the infinite and eternal source of ideals, and the highest of all beings (SUD, 41).

Since ethical and religious striving demand that one *examine* oneself in order to assess one’s character and actions in the light of the ideal, it is not surprising that Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors affirm both the value and the possibility of *self-knowledge*, whose object is both human nature in general and oneself as a particular individual (SUD, 31; JP, 1:649, 5; PF, 37; and all of FSE and JFY). This emphasis on self-knowledge is also apparent in the fact that Kierkegaard constantly stresses the importance of *honesty*, especially with oneself. For honesty is possible only to the degree that one can become aware of the truth about one’s feelings, actions, and convictions.

One of the more remarkable aspects of the human capacity for self-knowledge is, according to Climacus, that all people can know the limits of their actual knowledge: “Every human being, the wisest and the simplest, can just as essentially . . . draw the distinction qualitatively between what he understands and what he does not understand” (CUP, 558; cf. CA, 3). This knowledge of one’s limits is valuable because it helps one to be *humble* and receptive to God and truth, and because it helps to prevent one from getting lost in vain *speculation*. Although self-knowledge is vitally important, not many seek it, at least according to Kierkegaard, who knows “only all too well . . . how true it is that the world wants to be deceived” (JFY, 91).

Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors often seem to deny the value and possibility of knowledge in relation to Christ and Christianity: “one cannot *know* anything at all about Christ”; there “is nothing at all that can be ‘known’ about him”; and “no one *knows*” “who Christ is” (PC, 25, 23, 36). Nevertheless, they end up affirming knowledge of

Christianity and of Christ in many ways: They claim that they “know what Christianity is,” that they “know what it means to be a Christian,” and that they are “more aware of what Christianity is, [and] know how to describe it better” than their contemporaries (PV, 15, 138; FSE, 21). Kierkegaard has a very high estimation of his knowledge of Christianity: “My activity . . . is to nail down the Christian qualifications in such a way that no doubt . . . shall be able to get hold of them” (JP, 1:522). It is hard to see how Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms could know what Christianity is, or what it means to be an imitator of Christ, without their also knowing something about Christ too. For in order to know how to imitate Christ as an ethical and religious exemplar one must have some understanding of who he is and of the principles of his actions. Therefore, not surprisingly, Anti-Climacus speaks of the “knowledge of Christ” as both desirable and possible (SUD, 113).

Although Kierkegaard often seems to think that he alone of his contemporaries knows what Christianity is, nonetheless he does not claim that such knowledge requires exceptional intelligence or a special, divine dispensation. Anti-Climacus writes that whereas in the “modern age” people do “not even know what the issue is” about Christ and Christianity, in the “first period of Christendom” people in general knew this (PC, 123; cf. CUP, 31, 24). And even now, according to Climacus, “one can know what Christianity is without being a Christian” merely by making a sincere and honest effort to discover these things (CUP, 372; cf. 373–375).

Among the more surprising suggestions of knowledge in Kierkegaard’s authorship are Anti-Climacus’s repeated claims that this or that does or does not belong *essentially* to Christ, thus implying that he thinks he knows the essence of Christ, at least in part (PC, 24–25, 34–35, 40, 153). Most surprisingly of all, Anti-Climacus asserts several times that God *cannot* do this or *must* do that (PC, 136–137, 142–143; cf. 131–132, 134–135, 184–185). Since Anti-Climacus presumes to assert that which limits or binds God, he must be fairly confident in his knowledge of the divine essence and its capacity.

The long list of things that Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors claim that they know, or that all people know or could know, might be expanded even more. For example, Kierkegaard claims that “every human being can come to know everything about love, just as every

human being can come to know that he, just like every human being, is loved by God” (WL, 364). But I will bring the list of Kierkegaardian intelligibles to a close with some things that he and his pseudonyms say about their writing. Anti-Climacus claims that he “knows very well what he is doing” as an author (PC, 40, 52). By this assertion he seems to mean that he knows the “dialectical presuppositions” of indirect *communication*, and why these presuppositions require an oblique manner of writing (JP, 1:645; CUP, 72). Kierkegaard also claims that he knows the *dialectical* “problems . . . involved” in using “direct communication to make” people “aware of indirect communication,” that is, to explain indirect communication directly (JP, 1:656). And, most generally, he claims that Christianity needs a “new science [or systematic knowledge] of arms” and implies that he himself has developed that science, at least in part (PV, 52; cf. PC, 138–139, 178, 183; CUP, 381).

Kierkegaard’s affirmation of reason is less obvious than his affirmation of knowledge—though whenever he claims to know something without recourse to revelation he also implicitly affirms the human mind or human reason as the organ of that knowledge. He and his pseudonymous authors sometimes use the word *reason* and its cognates as terms of approval, but not very often (TA, 5; JFY, 91, 96; CUP, 41, 145, 161, 377). Similarly, they sometimes complain about the *irrationality* of the *times* (TA, 21). However, they often speak approvingly of reason by way of euphemisms for it like *thinking*, *dialectic*, and *reflection*. For instance, according to Climacus, “every human being is by nature designed to become a thinker,” because “God . . . created man in his image” (CUP, 47). Thus Climacus claims that the principal basis of human dignity, namely, likeness to God, consists at least in part in the fact that human beings are *thinkers*, that is, rational beings.

Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors often affirm *dialectic* and claim to be *dialecticians* (PV, 132; PF, 108). A *dialectician* is someone who is “capable of pushing a point to its logical conclusion,” someone who uses logic to make “absolute distinctions” (CUP, 40; PF, 108). Dialectic is not just an artificial logical game played with linguistic tokens, but a means of discerning the structure and essence of reality. For “everything has its dialectic,” structure, or essence, which dialecticians use their reason to discover (CUP, 525; PC, 27–29). Thus Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors often use dialectic to argue that their oppo-

nents have not respected “qualitative” or essential differences between things, or that their opponents have made an unfounded, illicit “change of genus” in their thinking (PC, 27, 29; PF, 73; JP, 6:6780; CUP, 113; SUD, 97). Among the things whose dialectic Kierkegaard claims to discover and articulate are the incarnate *God, Christianity, faith, communication*, the “single individual,” the *stages or spheres of human existence, contemptibleness*, “the relationship of prayer,” and *power* (PC, 132; PF and FT in general; CUP, 72–93; PV, 123; CUP, 387–586; COR, 160; CUP, 162; JP, 2:1251).

There are many surprisingly argumentative passages in Kierkegaard’s books. The “Interlude” in *Philosophical Fragments* contains an impressive dialectical or logical analysis of *possibility, necessity, time, eternity, freedom*, and the inter-relations of all these things (PF, 72–88). It might almost be said that this section evinces as much confidence in metaphysical reason as any text of Aristotle or of Thomas Aquinas. Similarly, in the *Postscript*, Climacus does not just dismiss Hegelian objectivity in a fit of subjective passion, he subjects it to a lengthy logical critique (CUP, 301–343). Again, he uses dialectic to criticize various views and defenses of Christianity (CUP, 23–57; PC, 26–35). Finally, Climacus gives an example of how a “subjective thinker” uses dialectic in an effort to explore and answer several existential questions in a personal manner (CUP, 165–181).

Another sign that Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors respect logic and reason is that they constantly criticize their opponents for being *confused*. Similarly, but less often, they berate an opponent for being *thoughtless, stupid*, an *idiot*, or a *fool* (CUP, 91; PF, 82; CUP, 306; CUP, 280). And since it is logic or reason that discovers confusions and other stupidities, Kierkegaard’s sanguine mockery of confused thought implies much confidence in reason.

Although Kierkegaard affirms reason and logic in many ways, it must be admitted that his commitment to them is called seriously into question by the fact that he sometimes appears to deny the principle of contradiction. For instance, Climacus calls the incarnation a *self-contradiction*, but does not regard its self-contradictoriness as a decisive objection to it, and even seems to see its contradictory character as constituting a bracing test of faith (PF, 87). Moreover, Silentio and other pseudonymous authors refer to the incarnation as *absurd* and seem to

recommend having “faith by virtue of the absurd” as an attractive possibility. Therefore, to establish Kierkegaard’s commitment to reason, it is necessary to show that his endorsements of contradictions and of the absurd are not, as they seem to be, rejections of reason.

Although Climacus sometimes indicates that he regards “the paradox,” or the incarnation, as a contradiction, he also argues that it is precisely because the “single individual’s relation to the god contains no self-contradiction” that “thought can become preoccupied with it as with the strangest thing of all” (PF, 101). And since a paradox is, if nothing else, something *strange* with which one becomes *preoccupied* and at which one wonders, it follows that Climacus does not think that the paradox is a logical self-contradiction; otherwise one could not wonder at it as the highest and strangest thing of all. Furthermore, to know that the incarnation of God was a contradiction, one would need a thorough understanding of the essence of God and of temporal, finite human existence, so as to see that divine and human existence were utterly incompatible. But this is quite a lot of knowledge. Therefore, Climacus could claim that the paradox was a logical contradiction only if he also claimed to thoroughly understand God, time, and human nature; yet his reason for calling the incarnation the Paradox in the first place is to emphasize its incomprehensibility.<sup>8</sup>

If Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors do not in fact deny the logical principle of noncontradiction, why then do they so often seem to? A large part of the explanation is that they frequently use *contradiction* in a nonlogical sense to mean a tension or an unresolved opposition (PC, 39, 59, 60, 76, 82, 110, 113–116, 120, 124–125, 129, 131).<sup>9</sup> Oddly, Kierkegaard seems to have learned this use of *contradiction* from Hegel, whom Kierkegaard criticizes for using words in confusingly *volatized* senses (CA, 35). Perhaps he imitates the confusing Hegelian usage of *contradiction* as part of his pretense of irrationality.

A crucial sign that Kierkegaard respects reason is that he claims a person strives to become *good*—and striving to become good is at the very core of subjectivity—“with the aid of reason” (CUP, 161). And since the traditional name for using reason to become good is *practical reason*, we may say that subjectivity is some sort of practical reason. Presumably part of the aid that reason contributes to becoming good is to know the good so as to do it. Climacus corroborates his opinion of the

importance of reason when he refers to “Plutarch’s splendid definition of virtue: ‘Ethical virtue has the passions for its material, reason for its form’” (CUP, 161–162).

Another crucial sign that Kierkegaard respects reason is his great admiration for the rationalist Lessing, and even his greater admiration for Socrates, the prince of philosophers (CUP, 63–70, 368). It is very hard, if not impossible, to see how Kierkegaard could esteem Lessing and Socrates as highly as he does if he did not also have a great deal of respect for reason. For to esteem Socrates but not to respect reason would be like loving circles but detesting roundness.

One might suspect that, his respect for reason notwithstanding, Kierkegaard thinks that becoming a Christian in the end demands going beyond reason with an irrational leap of faith. In other words, one might think that Kierkegaard respects reason up to a point, or for some purposes, but that he thinks one must leave reason behind, and maybe even reject it, in order to become a Christian. Kierkegaard seems to confirm these suspicions in the following entry from his *Journal*:

What I usually express by saying that Christianity consists of paradox, philosophy in mediation, Leibniz expresses by distinguishing what is above reason and what is against reason. Faith is above reason. By reason he understands, as he says in many places, a linking together of truths, a conclusion from causes. Faith therefore cannot be *proved, demonstrated, comprehended*, for the link which makes a linking together possible is missing, and what else does this say than that it is a paradox. This, precisely, is the irregularity in the paradox, continuity is lacking, or at any rate it has continuity only in reverse, that is, at the beginning it does not manifest itself as continuity. (JP, 3:3073)

In agreeing with Leibniz that “faith is above reason,” but not “against reason,” Kierkegaard seems to say that faith is nonrational or suprarational but not irrational. His explanation for his claim that faith is nonrational is that Christianity “cannot be *proved, demonstrated, comprehended*.” But to say that faith is nonrational because Christianity cannot be demonstrated is to hold faith and Christianity to a very high standard of rationality. One might have thought that a way of life can be rational in some sense even if its basis cannot be *demonstrated*. Otherwise few or no people would have a rational way of life. If so, Christianity’s nonrationality would distinguish it from few or none of its rivals.



A second look at the preceding *Journal* entry reveals that it contains a very surprising implication, namely, that faith can be demonstrated—eventually. For the entry uses *continuity* as a synonym for *demonstration* or *proof* and then suggests that faith can achieve continuity, not indeed at the *beginning*, but “in reverse.” This is to say that faith, or its object, can be demonstrated after some unspecified evidence, experience, or capacity has been acquired. Thus in the very place in which he asserts that faith is above reason because its object cannot be proved, Kierkegaard also implies that faith or its object can in fact be proven—eventually. What is more, in suggesting that faith can ultimately prove what is initially above reason, Kierkegaard intimates that faith can elevate reason and maybe even perfect it. Therefore, when Kierkegaard says that faith is above reason, he might fairly be interpreted as meaning that faith is “more reasonable than ordinary reason” or that it “elevates or perfects reason.”

There are many indications in Kierkegaard’s writings that he thinks faith perfects (or at least strengthens) reason. According to the B hypothesis in *Fragments*, human beings in their *fallen* state lack the *condition* for knowing “the truth” (PF, 13–14). But, Climacus claims, “the god” gives or offers the condition to human beings, and Climacus calls the acceptance and use of this condition for the truth *faith*. Thus, according to Climacus, faith is not a blind acceptance of Christian tenets, but an elevation of the mind’s natural capacity to a condition in which it can understand or become deeply aware of what previously transcended it. In other words, faith involves the elevation or perfection of the mind’s natural capacity, which capacity usually goes by the name of reason.

Climacus’s comments about *autopsy* similarly show that he thinks faith is rational and even perfects reason. He explains that faith is or has *autopsy* (PF, 70, 102). In the drafts of *Fragments*, Climacus (or should I say Kierkegaard?) goes even further, writing that “all faith is *autopsy*” (PF, 198, 215). *Autopsy* literally means “seeing for oneself.” And *seeing for oneself*, which is to say, *not accepting something blindly on someone else’s authority*, is a rational norm. Therefore in calling faith autopsy Climacus implies that faith is rational. And since he thinks that the truth of which faith becomes aware is not just any truth but “the truth,” that is, the highest truth, Climacus also implies that faith elevates or perfects reason.

Kierkegaard expresses his agreement with Climacus that faith is autopsy when he writes that “through the relationship of your conscience to God . . . you [the single individual, judging for yourself, are] eternally responsible for your relationship to this doctrine” of Christianity (WA, 97; cf. 105). Like Kant and St. Thomas Aquinas before him, Kierkegaard sees *conscience* as a *rational* faculty (JFY, 91). Playing on the etymology of *con-science*, Kierkegaard sometimes refers to his “co-knowledge with God” (CUP, 155; cf. PV, 75). Presumably Climacus thinks that “everyone knows the ethical” because he thinks that everyone has this co-knowledge with God. Thus, in claiming that Christianity appeals to conscience, Kierkegaard indicates that Christianity appeals to reason, and not just to feeling, imagination, or the heart. And since Kierkegaard thinks that the Christian truth of which one becomes aware through the rational faculty of conscience is the most important truth, it follows that Kierkegaard thinks that faith elevates or perfects reason.

*Judge for Yourself* contains yet another indication that Kierkegaard thinks that faith perfects reason. In this work, Kierkegaard imagines a dialogue in which “the Christian” says to the “secular mentality,” “do become reasonable” (JFY, 96). This quotation obviously implies that becoming a Christian involves or requires becoming reasonable, or more reasonable, and thus an elevation or perfection of reason.

Kierkegaard’s theory of the stages of human existence provides strong evidence that he thinks becoming a Christian is not only compatible with reason, but its perfection. The theory of the stages is an ambitious attempt to schematize all human ways of existing: “I have set forth the decisive qualifications of the *whole* existential arena with a dialectical acuteness and a primitivity not to be found in any other literature, as far as I know” (JP, 5:5914; emphasis added). It is hard to see how Kierkegaard could so confidently propound such a bold schematization if he did not have great confidence in reason’s ability to understand all human existence, and Christianity’s place within it.

One might suspect that his boldness in schematizing is based on a belief that the stages are revealed in the Christian scriptures. But in fact he implicitly denies that the scriptures reveal them, when he writes that the Bible’s presentation of Christ as the *prototype* leaves out “all the middle terms” between Christ and typical human existence. According to Kierkegaard, these “middle terms” between the average human

being and Christ must be supplied by “human interpretation,” which presumably involves human reason. Furthermore, Kierkegaard adds that though the “essentially Christian” remains unchanged throughout the ages, it nonetheless sometimes needs *modifications* in order to “secure itself against,” or adapt itself to, the *new* (PV, 131–132). Presumably this work of modifying Christianity to suit new times must also involve reason. Thus the theory of the stages is the result of Kierkegaard’s efforts to use reason both to supply the middle terms between ordinary human life and Christianity, and, when necessary, to adapt Christianity to his own, modern age.

To supply the middle terms between the lowest stages of human development and Christ, and, when necessary, modify Christian doctrine so as to adapt it to the needs of one’s particular historical situation, reason must be able to understand several things: Christ’s actions, at least well enough to imitate them; therefore also the principles of his actions so as to be able to imitate them in new situations; which actions of Christ are to be imitated and which not; and the right way to adapt Christ’s actions both to human capacity and to new historical conditions of humanity. Therefore Kierkegaard’s attempt to supply middle terms and adapt Christianity to his own age evinces great confidence in human reason.

Even if Kierkegaard thought the only way to generate the theory of the stages was to begin from the scriptural revelation of Christ and then to interpolate a path leading from ordinary human existence up to a way of life characterized by faithful imitation of “the paradigm,” he would still have to think that reason and faith are somehow akin or commensurable. But, as we have already begun to see, in fact Kierkegaard does not believe the theory of the stages needs revelation as its starting point. To be sure, he asserts that revelation is necessary for becoming aware of the specifically Christian stage. But he does not think that revelation is required to work out and through all the other stages that lead to and prepare for the distinctively Christian stage. For Climacus claims that the highest stage just before Christianity, called “Religiousness A,” has only “universal human nature as its presupposition” (CUP, 559). This is to say that Religiousness A can be discovered and actualized by a capacity for knowledge and action that resides in human nature as such. Traditionally, such a universal faculty for knowledge and for action based on

knowledge is called *reason*. Thus Climacus claims that reason (or human beings equipped with reason) unaided by revelation can discover and actualize Religiousness A, the last stage of human development before Christian faith. And this is to say that though unaided reason cannot discover Christ, it can discover the way to or toward Christ.

Climacus confirms that he thinks reason by itself can and should discover and actualize Religiousness A when he claims that “Socrates was an ethicist . . . bordering on the religious” (CUP, 503). If Climacus thinks that Socrates, who is a figure and hero of natural reason, “bordered on the religious,” this means he also thinks that reason as it perfects itself tends toward the religious. And since Climacus regards Religiousness A as the last stage of human development before Christian faith, he also thinks reason in its perfecting of itself tends toward Christianity. That is why subjectivity, which as we have seen is practical reason, and Christianity “are a perfect fit” (CUP, 230).

Kierkegaard is convinced not only that Socrates worked his way toward Christianity; he is also “definitely . . . convinced that [Socrates] has become” a Christian (PV, 54). If Kierkegaard thinks that Socrates—who claimed that he was “such as to obey nothing else of what [was his] than that argument which appear[ed] best to [him] upon reasoning,”—has definitely become a Christian, then Kierkegaard must believe that the perfection of reason requires, or at least allows, converting to Christianity.<sup>10</sup> To put it starkly, to say that Socrates, the most rational man, has definitely become a Christian is to say that the *telos* of reason is Christianity.

Thus Kierkegaard thinks that reason, whether it uses only its own resources, or takes its goal from revelation and then interpolates a path from average human existence to Christianity, conceives of human development along the same lines. Hence he thinks that there is a very deep agreement between reason and revelation about the ethical and religious development of a human being, and that Christianity is the perfection and fulfillment of reason.

I shall add yet more arguments for the claim that Kierkegaard thinks that faith fulfils and perfects reason in a later chapter when I argue that Climacus sees the *downfall* of reason as the perfection of reason. But, for now, I shall quote a passage from *Practice in Christianity* that aptly epitomizes the cooperative relation of reason and revelation as it is un-

derstood by Kierkegaard: “I make an honest effort to use [my] knowledge” “of the secrets of existence” to “illuminate what is humanly true and what is humanly the true good. And this [knowledge] I use in turn to prompt, if possible, an awareness of the holy,” which “no human being can comprehend” (PC, 139). I propose that this passage says that Kierkegaard uses rational knowledge of human things to point to Christianity, which cannot be *comprehended*, that is, fully understood, but can be understood in part.

Thus Kierkegaard’s claim that faith is above reason is incomplete and misleading. For he also implies that reason leads to faith, that to acquire faith is to become (more) reasonable, and that faith is the perfection of reason. More fully, he thinks that becoming a Christian means becoming more honest, less self-deceived or more self-aware, more consistent and more adept at dialectic, more self-reliant in one’s thinking, more clearly aware of what it means to be a human being and of what a human being’s place in the world is, and therefore more in touch with the *universally human*. And since all of these changes make a person more rational, it must be acknowledged that Kierkegaard thinks becoming a Christian means becoming more rational.

More basically, since Kierkegaard cares deeply about such things as honesty, judging for oneself, consistency, dialectic, and knowledge, especially knowledge of the good, knowledge of oneself as an individual human being, and knowledge of what it means to be a human being in the world, and since honesty, autopsy, ethical knowledge, self-knowledge, and knowledge of universal human nature are rational norms, methods, or goals, it seems we must conclude that Kierkegaard is a rational thinker, perhaps a robustly rational thinker—though the full argument for this claim will not be complete until the end of the next chapter.

### Pretending to Be Irrational

We are now in a position to gather together some of the evidence *that* Kierkegaard pretends to be irrational in order to communicate rationality, though we are not yet well placed to appreciate *why* he thinks artfully feigning irrationalism is a wise method of promoting rationality in his readers.

Although Kierkegaard very often seems to reject reason, he in fact affirms it. If we grant that he knows what he is about as an author and is therefore largely in control of the appearance he presents in his writings, then we must conclude that though he is rational he wishes to seem irrational, or at least that he knowingly consents to seeming unreasonable.

If Kierkegaard is rational but wishes to seem irrational, and takes measures to seem so, it follows that he pretends to be irrational. Alternatively, suppose that he does not actively feign irrationality but merely consents to seeming irrational. Even so, this consent virtually amounts to pretending to be irrational in the case of an author like Kierkegaard who so often rants against *confusion* and *dishonesty*; for Kierkegaard certainly occasions much confusion by consenting to seem irrational; and in consenting to seem irrational, he is dishonest by consenting to appear as what he is not—especially since it would be such an easy matter for him to say forthrightly that he is, or intends to be, rational. Therefore, based on what Kierkegaard is and what he seems to be, it is fair to say that Kierkegaard pretends to be irrational.

Kierkegaard explicitly claims that indirectly communicating something existential requires an appearance of *equivocalness* about that thing (PV, 33–35). This equivocalness brings “attack and defense into a unity in such a way that no one can directly say whether one is attacking or defending” the thing that one is indirectly communicating (PC, 133; cf. CUP, 65). Despite the equivocalness of his indirect communication, Kierkegaard claims that “the true explanation [of what he is attacking, what he is affirming, and why] is available to the person who is honestly seeking” (PV, 34). This description of the equivocation of indirect communication perfectly describes the way that Kierkegaard writes about reason: He seems irrational, he partly conceals, partly reveals his rationality, and he hints at—makes *available*—the explanation of this equivocation.

Kierkegaard claims that a bad *author* or *teacher* “fears that someone will think that he does not know much,” and that instead of doing all he can to assist the learner, such an author “really aspires to be cited for excellence—by the learner” (JP, 1:637; PV, 49). This claim of Kierkegaard suggests that good teachers must be willing to seem less knowing, less wise, and less rational than they really are in order to aid their students to grow in knowledge, wisdom, and rationality.

Kierkegaard is professedly a great pretender. In writing pseudonymously he pretends to be another person with ideas and attitudes that differ from his own. Moreover, he calls his “esthetic works,” and the “esthetic in the works,” an *incognito*, thereby indicating that he uses a disguise or pretends to be what he is not in some of his writings (PV, 24, 67). The pseudonymous authors themselves also claim that they are pretenders. Climacus, for example, uses the images of a *spy*, and Anti-Climacus uses the image of an “ingenious secret agent”—that is, figures who disguise themselves—to describe their work as authors. Finally, Climacus explains that an indirect communicator such as himself frequently needs to operate *incognito* in order to accomplish his purpose (CUP, 466, 410).

Kierkegaard does not just pretend to be authors *different* from himself; he pretends to be authors he believes to be *inferior* to himself in important respects. For instance, in volume 1 of *Either/Or* he adopts the persona of the pseudonymous author named “A,” who represents an esthetic way of living and thinking to which Kierkegaard clearly thinks his own thinking and way of life are superior.

He pretends to be someone inferior to himself in another way when he adopts the persona of Judge William, the pseudonymous author of volume 2 of *Either/Or*. Commenting on *Either/Or*, Climacus claims that “A,” but not Judge William, “possesses all the seductive gifts of understanding and intellect,” and that “A” is “far superior” “as a dialectician” to Judge William. And yet Judge William is, according to Climacus, closer to the truth than “A” is (CUP, 253). Thus Climacus intimates that Kierkegaard pretends, for the purposes of indirect communication, to have far less dialectical skill than he actually has even as he defends truth against error—and this despite the fact that he identifies himself as a dialectician and is obviously proud of his dialectical prowess. Kierkegaard himself also explicitly says that he locates himself “higher than Johannes Climacus,” thereby indicating that in writing as Climacus he pretends to be someone less than himself (JP, 6:6433).

The strategy of selling oneself short is so important to Climacus that he has technical terms for people who adopt a persona inferior to their own in order to communicate subjectivity. Thus *irony* is the *incognito* of ethicists who conceal their ethical commitments and attainments as they indirectly communicate the ethical, and *humor* is the *incognito* of

indirect communicators of the religious who strategically obscure their religious convictions and achievements (CUP, 503, 505–506).

Kierkegaard explicitly calls his adopting an incognito in some of his writings a *deception* (PV, 24). Moreover, he explains that he attempts to *deceive* his readers “into what is true” (PV, 53). Thus he indicates that he attempts to deceive his readers into what is true by pretending to be what he is not, that is, by being untruthful. And since deception is contrary to the highest goals of reason, while truth is, or is among, the highest goals of reason, deceiving a person into what is true consists in using the irrational in order to bring about the rational.

According to Alastair MacKinnon, who performed word-counts of important terms in Kierkegaard’s authorship, the pseudonymous authors very frequently use *absurd* to describe faith and its object, but Kierkegaard himself scarcely ever does this.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Kierkegaard himself states that “when the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd—faith transforms it” (JP, 1:10). Thus Kierkegaard creates pseudonymous authors who disagree with him in that they think, suspect, or at least say that Christianity is absurd. And since readers naturally suppose that the pseudonymous authors represent the opinions of Kierkegaard himself, and since readers also generally assume that Kierkegaard is himself a Christian, by having his pseudonymous authors call faith absurd Kierkegaard in effect misrepresents himself as having rejected reason in favor of the absurdity of faith. Thus yet another way emerges in which Kierkegaard pretends to be irrational in and through his pseudonymous authors.

In the *Postscript*, Climacus writes that Socrates, in his efforts to help the learner, “initially speaks like a madman” (CUP, 83). Since Socrates is a figure of reason, and madness is a failure of rationality, Climacus implies that Socrates pretends to be irrational in order to communicate rationality. And since Kierkegaard sees his indirect communication as an imitation and appropriation of Socratic pedagogy, the implication is that he also pretends to be irrational in order to communicate rationality. He confirms this implication when he says of himself that “I chose . . . to seem to be the most frivolous person of all, to ‘become a fool in the world’” (PC, 228).

Similarly, Kierkegaard writes that helping a deluded person requires “taking the other’s delusion at face value” (PV, 54). But a delusion is a



self-deception, a case of irrationally tricking oneself out of the truth, and taking the other's delusion at face value means seeming to share his delusion, which is to say, pretending to be irrational. Thus Kierkegaard almost explicitly says that he pretends to be irrational in order to bring about the rational improvement of an undeception.

### An Example of Pretending to Be Irrational from *Fear and Trembling*

Kierkegaard pretends to be irrational in *Fear and Trembling* by adopting the persona and point of view of Johannes de Silentio, the book's pseudonymous author, who is partly irrational in that he practices self-deception to evade acting on his convictions about faith.

Silentio repeatedly claims that he "cannot make" "the movement of faith"—an incapacity that must weigh heavily on him, since he regards faith as the "true greatness" of a human being (FT, 36–37, 51–52, 81). As we shall see, his claim that faith is beyond his reach is extremely dubious.

Silentio gives only one reason, and that a very unconvincing one, to explain his inability to make the movement of faith. He cannot make this movement, he claims, because he "continually use[s] all [his] strength in resigning everything"—that is, he uses all his strength on the first movement of faith so that he has none left for faith's second and decisive movement (FT, 49–50). More plainly, faith is "just too hard" for him. Any parent, teacher, or coach quickly learns to be suspicious of the excuse that something is just too hard for the learner. Certainly Kierkegaard himself does not tolerate this excuse. In his *Journals*, he explains that "if the learner says: I can't, then the teacher answers: Nonsense, do it as well as you can, in order to get to know the task better and better" (JP, 1:653, 4). Thus Kierkegaard himself would not accept Silentio's justification for his lack of faith.

Silentio writes that "every time I want to make this movement [of faith], I almost faint" (FT, 48). Wanting to make the movement of faith is not the same as actually trying to make it. One can want to do something, but not attempt to do it, because one is not willing to endure the consequences of making a serious effort. Tellingly, Silentio never claims that he has attempted to make the movement of faith. But, supposing he

has never even tried to make this movement, it is highly doubtful that he could know that he is incapable of it.

It is possible that Silentio makes (or has attempted to make) the movement of faith, but for some reason remains silent about his achievements (or about his frustrated heroic efforts). But whether he really neglects to strive for faith or merely pretends to be neglectful, in either case he presents a convincing appearance of evading the task of faith. And it will be instructive for us to study this appearance, whether it be feigned or accurate.

Kierkegaard would admit that there is some truth in Silentio's claim that he *cannot* make the movement of faith, since Kierkegaard thinks that "without God's help" "a person is capable of nothing . . . at all," and that "to need God is a human being's highest perfection" (EUD, 322, 297, 307). But, Kierkegaard might add, since Silentio realizes that he cannot attain faith "by [his] own strength" (FT, 49), Silentio should ask for God's help, rely on God's assistance, and thus attain faith by accepting divine grace.

Silentio himself seems to understand that one becomes faithful not through one's own strength but through God's. For he writes that Abraham, whom he regards as the father and exemplar of faith, "conquered God by his powerlessness" and was "great by that power whose strength is powerlessness" (FT, 16). But if Silentio understands that faith requires reliance on divine might, his claim that by his own power he cannot make the movement of faith turns out to be an irrelevant excuse. Another pseudonymous author, Anti-Climacus, gives a description of a "poet-existence verging on the religious" that very well describes Silentio with his despair of acquiring faith. Judging by this description, the reason that Silentio fails to avail himself of divine assistance is that he will not "humble himself" to receive it (SUD, 77-78). This judgment is confirmed by Silentio when he repeatedly suggests that *humility* is what distinguishes faith from infinite resignation (FT, 34, 42, 44, 45, 49, 73).

Silentio also tells us that if only he could find a "knight of faith," "I would watch him every minute to see how he made the movements; I . . . would divide my time between watching him and practicing myself, and thus spend all my time in admiring him" (FT, 38). This claim that he "would practice" the movements of faith "if only" is highly suspicious. Since Silentio, by his own admission, already "can describe the movements of faith," surely he does not need a knight of faith to teach him

these movements (FT, 37). Moreover, Silentio claims that by appearances it is “impossible to distinguish” the knight of faith “from the rest of the crowd,” or, as Climacus would put it, that faith is an “essential secret” (FT, 39; CUP, 79–80). Therefore Silentio could never know that he had found a genuine knight of faith, nor could he observe the hidden, inner movements of the knight’s faith even if an obliging angel were to point such a knight out to him. Furthermore, according to Climacus no one is ever “assisted in doing the good by someone else’s actually having done it,” so that (if Climacus is right) seeing an example of faith would not help Silentio actually to acquire faith himself (CUP, 359). Consequently, since Silentio can already describe the movements of faith without having found a knight of faith, and since in any case he could not find a knight of faith, nor, if he could find one, could he observe the knight’s hidden movements of faith, nor, if he could observe these hidden movements, could he be inspired or helped to faith by this observation, his claim that he *would* practice faith *if only* he could find a knight of faith is basically an oblique confession that he has no intention to attempt the movements of faith, thank you very much.

It is also highly suspicious that Silentio says that if he found a knight of faith he would “spend all his time in admiring him,” since one can very well admire something without making the least effort at imitating it, and even use admiration as an evasion of imitation—a point stressed by Anti-Climacus, as we shall see.

Silentio’s claim that he cannot make the movement of faith loses all credibility when we reflect on the fact that he says that “no human being is excluded from” faith, and that “true greatness,” which he identifies with faith, “is equally accessible to all” people (FT, 67, 81). If all people can make the movement of faith, then surely Silentio can make it too, unless perhaps he were to beg off with the technicality that he is not a real person, but merely a fictitious pseudonymous persona. Therefore, to be blunt, his claim that he cannot make the movement of faith is a lie that he knows or ought to know for a lie; and, it seems, he deceives himself about his capacity for faith in order to evade faith, or as Kierkegaard might put it, because he “want[s] to make excuses and look for excuses” (JP, 1:649, 10).

“Poeticizing” faith “instead of being” faithful is perhaps the main way that Silentio evades faith (SUD, 77). In other words, Silentio substi-

tutes poetically celebrating faith, or *admiration*, for existentially striving to be faithful, or *imitation*. There are several passages in *Fear and Trembling* in which Silentio indirectly confesses that he desires to praise Abraham and his faith, but not to imitate him. For example, Silentio describes a man, suspiciously like himself, whose “one wish,” or “one longing,” was not to be like Abraham, but “to see” him and “to have witnessed that event” in which God tried Abraham (FT, 9). This suggests that Silentio’s one wish is to see and to *contemplate* the greatness of Abraham, but not to attempt such greatness himself. Similarly, Silentio claims that the poet—and, notwithstanding his protests to the contrary, Silentio very much seems to be a poet—is *happy* that the hero whom he admires is “not himself, that his love—can be admiration” (FT, 15). In other words, Silentio the poet is quite happy not to imitate his hero.

Given that Silentio is content to praise the hero of faith without imitating him, it is not surprising that he tries to justify or excuse his praise *sans* imitation. Silentio claims that “God created” the “poet or orator,” who “can do nothing the hero does; he can only admire, love, and delight in him”—a claim suspiciously at odds with his assertion that “no human being is excluded from the heroism of faith” (FT, 15). Furthermore, he says, *admiration* is the poet’s “humble task” and “his faithful service in the house of the hero” (FT, 15). With these words, Silentio indirectly asserts that God created him as a poet commissioned to praise the faith of Abraham, but he is incapable of imitating it—a dubious assertion, as we have seen, but also an ironically apt assertion, since Kierkegaard does indeed create Silentio as just such a poet.

Even though Silentio admits that faith is “the greatest of all,” it nonetheless seems that he attempts to suggest that doing the deeds of faith and observing faith are more or less equal, when he writes that “it is greater to have faith, more blessed to contemplate the man of faith” (FT, 17). Given Kierkegaard’s myriad objections to mere contemplation and his countless warnings about the necessity of acting on what one knows or believes, there can be no doubt what Kierkegaard would say about Silentio’s suggestion concerning the equality of seeing and doing.

Silentio completes his brazen and blustering substitution of poetizing faith for being faithful when he writes that if the poet “remains true to his love” for the hero, “then he has fulfilled his task, then he is gathered together with the hero” (FT, 15–16). Thus Silentio asserts that

he and his collaborator the poet share the heavenly reward of their hero, even though they have not dared what the hero dares, endured what the hero endures, and struggled and suffered as the hero struggles and suffers. Kierkegaard himself strongly disagrees with Silentio's estimation of the value of poeticizing, writing that "it seems a flagrant wrong" for the suffering imitator of Christ and anyone else to "be equally blessed" (FSE, 23).

Our suspicions concerning Silentio are corroborated by Anti-Climacus, who in many places analyzes and exposes "the sin of poetizing instead of being" in a way that calls Silentio to mind (SUD, 77–78, 30–33, 35–37; PC, 233–255). Anti-Climacus explains that whereas "an imitator *is* or strives *to be* what he admires . . . an admirer keeps himself personally detached," that is, objective (PC, 241). Anti-Climacus also explains why the admirer poeticizes the hero: "in every individual . . . there resides . . . a profound cunning . . . that is of evil" that wants to "sneak away from the *requirement*" by means of poetic *admiration*, which is essentially "excuse and evasion" (PC, 239–240). When imitation is not added to admiration, the latter is a "deceit, a cunning that seeks evasion and excuse" (PC, 242). Thus the admirer "is only spinelessly or selfishly infatuated with greatness" (PC, 246). Needless to say, it can hardly be an accident that Anti-Climacus's description of the poet-admirer so closely resembles Silentio.

Lest there be any doubt about this resemblance, compare the following utterances: Anti-Climacus says that the poet-admirer of the religious "loves God above all, God who is his only consolation in his secret anguish, and yet he loves the anguish and will not give it up"; and Silentio says that his "eternal consciousness is" his "love for God," and that he "find[s] joy and peace and rest in [the] pain" of his infinite resignation, which is based on his love for God (SUD, 77; FT, 48–49). The similarity of these two descriptions is striking: Silentio and Anti-Climacus's poet both suffer for God whom they love, and they both love and find consolation in their sufferings for God. Therefore, I conclude, Silentio is created by Kierkegaard (partly) to exemplify the sins of poetic admiration.

Silentio evades the task of being faithful not just by poeticizing faith and claiming that faith is too hard for him, but also by making out that he does not understand faith well enough to perform its movements. Sometimes he claims that he cannot understand faith; sometimes he doubts that anyone can understand it; and sometimes he even claims

that it is absurd. And yet both Kierkegaard and his pseudonym Anti-Climacus describe faith simply and without any hint that the difficulty of faith is that it is hard to understand. Indeed, Kierkegaard writes: “Ah, this matter of the essentially Christian is so strange; in a certain sense it is so indescribably easy to understand, and on the other hand it actually becomes difficult only when it is that which must be believed” (CD, 146). This is to say that the faith itself is not hard to understand well enough to enact it, but that people make it so in order to evade the task of having faith. Therefore, if Silentio finds faith hard to understand, this seems to be because he himself has complicated it. Incidentally, I do not mean to deny here that faith is a mystery that cannot be comprehended; rather, I mean to assert that one can understand it well enough to put it into practice, if one is willing—at least according to Kierkegaard.

Silentio disagrees not only with Kierkegaard and Anti-Climacus about the difficulty of understanding faith, but he also disagrees with himself. For if, as he claims, everyone is capable of faith, then understanding faith *well enough to be faithful* cannot require unusual intelligence. Moreover, Silentio does in fact describe some movements of faith fairly clearly, and admits that he can do this, but surely he could not do this if he did not understand faith with some clarity. Finally, he says or implies in many places that he does understand faith, most notably at the end of his book, where he writes the following: “Here again it is apparent that one can perhaps understand Abraham”—and therefore faith as well, since Abraham represents faith for Silentio—“but only in the way one understands the paradox. I, for my part, can perhaps understand Abraham, but I also realize that I do not have the courage to speak in this way, no more than I have the courage to act as Abraham did” (FT, 119–120). Here he seems clearly to admit that his problem is not finding the wit to understand the faith of Abraham, but finding the courage to imitate it. It is as if Silentio were thinking with himself thus: I am duty-bound to imitate the faith of Abraham only if I understand it. Can I help it that every time I try to understand it, difficulties, complications, and absurdities arise? Good question, Silentio. Perhaps readers who, like me, find their own way of thinking similar to his, should ask themselves the same question.

To understand why Kierkegaard presents Silentio as a self-deceiving evader of the task of faith, let us begin by noting that the basic function

of the Silentio pseudonym is to help readers become *aware* of and *admire* “the greatness of faith”: “the point is to perceive the greatness of what Abraham did so that the person can judge for himself whether he has the vocation and the courage to be tried in something like this,” that is, in the struggles and ordeals of faith (FT, 53). Similarly, Silentio, who, despite his protests, acts or writes like a poet, says that the “humble task” of the poet is to use his *song* “so that all may admire the hero as he does, may be proud of the hero as he is” (FT, 15).

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard explains that the best praiser of love proceeds in the “fear that someone will think that he was speaking about himself” when he praises what he admires (WL, 372). In other words, the best praiser of spiritual greatness fears that his audience will refuse to admire the greatness that he is celebrating because they suspect that he has the ulterior motive of wishing to be admired as an example of this greatness. More simply, he fears that they will dismiss his praise as unreliable, or not even listen to it, because they suspect that it is proudly praising himself. Therefore, Kierkegaard concludes, the best praiser of love or of faith must present himself as lacking the love or the faith that he celebrates. Thus it is necessary for Silentio, if he is to be the best poet of faith that Kierkegaard can make him to be, to present himself as lacking faith. Incidentally, by claiming that he has achieved the heroic greatness of “infinite resignation,” but denying that he has faith and thus placing himself below faith, Silentio gives an artful a fortiori argument for the loftiness and sublimity of faith.

Silentio’s claim that he cannot make the movements of faith is a crucial tactic for fulfilling his goal of assisting readers to become aware of and admire the greatness of faith. Kierkegaard thinks that faith is a task, or an “absolute requirement,” to which all human beings are summoned by God. But, he thinks, it would be bad strategy for him as a writer immediately to inform his readers of their unconditional duty to strive for faith. For faith is a difficult, dangerous, strenuous, and painful duty, and human beings will do virtually anything to evade such a duty. Therefore, if he were to begin his praise of faith by announcing that faith is a requirement for all human beings, it is likely that his readers would refuse to listen to him so as to avoid becoming personally aware of the requirement. As a countermeasure to this defense and others like it, Kierkegaard separates the greatness of faith from the requirement of faith

and tries to make his readers aware of the greatness before he tries to make them aware of the requirement. And to do this, he presents Silentio as excusing himself from the task of faith, as saying that faith is too hard for him. Because Silentio excuses himself in this way, he does not pose a threat to readers. Instead he comforts them—they have no fear that such a man is going to demand faith of them. And, shielded from this fear, readers are freed up to acknowledge and admire the greatness of faith. As long as there is no question that faith is required of them, they may very well have the magnanimity to admit that faith is a supreme greatness achieved by a few exceptional human beings like Abraham. Thus Silentio's self-excusing, self-deceiving, task-evading admiration of faith is Kierkegaard's way of getting his readers to be as receptive as possible to learning to admire and acknowledge the greatness of faith. As Anti-Climacus puts it, "the misunderstanding that goes under the name of admiration . . . is even necessary in order to attract people" (PC, 245). In short, Kierkegaard first tries to get readers to admire the greatness of faith, and then later he breaks the distressing news to them that the faith that they admire is an absolute duty.

Thus in general Silentio functions as an intermediary between Kierkegaard, who admits the greatness of faith and personally strives for it, and the *intended* readers of *Fear and Trembling*, who neither admire faith nor strive for it. Silentio is Kierkegaard's way of reaching out to such readers, a concession or a compromise, his way of meeting or finding them (near to) where they live and think. That is to say, in the person of the irrationally self-deceived Silentio, Kierkegaard pretends to be irrational in order to induce his readers to give faith an honest hearing.

In order to see yet another function of Silentio's self-deceiving evasion of the task of faith, let us suppose that Silentio succeeds with some readers in helping them to become aware of the grandeur of faith. The next step for such readers is to realize that mere admiration of faith is not enough; they must also imitate the exemplars of faith. Kierkegaard thinks that this next step is immensely difficult, that overcoming the temptation to self-deceiving evasion of the task of faith is a heroic accomplishment. By presenting Silentio as a deluded shirker of faith and its tasks, Kierkegaard gives his readers the chance to discover this deluded shirking in a character other than themselves, where it is easier to detect than it would be closer to home. And, if they discover self-deceived



evasion of faith in Silentio, then they will be better placed to discover it, or the temptation to it, or analogues to it, in themselves. Furthermore, by not accusing his readers directly of deluded dodges like those practiced by Silentio, but instead gently and indirectly inviting them to discover these things for themselves, Kierkegaard avoids provoking them to defend themselves irrationally, avoids tempting them to worm themselves deeper into a bog of self-deception. As Nathan the prophet first induced David to admit that the man who stole another person's beloved sheep was ignoble and despicable, and only then told him that in stealing Uriah's wife David was like that sheep-thief, so Kierkegaard invites his readers first to become aware of the artful dodging of faith in Silentio, and only then (indirectly) invites them to become aware of it in themselves.

Thus Kierkegaard has constructed *Fear and Trembling* so ingeniously that interpretation of it unexpectedly and disconcertingly turns into self-examination. Unsuspecting readers begin by thinking that they are reading "lyrical dialectic" about Abraham and his faith, and then to their dismay find that *Fear and Trembling* holds up a mirror to their own (possible) evasions, excuses, and self-deceptions. Consequently, *Fear and Trembling* has a triple meaning requiring a triple movement of interpretation: First one becomes aware of the greatness of faith; next one realizes that Silentio dishonestly and irrationally avoids the requirement of faith; and finally one compares him- or herself to Silentio to see whether Kierkegaard has cleverly and artfully maneuvered him or her, as Nathan maneuvered David, into the rhetorical trap that clamps down on a person with the distressing words: "Thou art the man."

### Unfinished Business

I have argued that Kierkegaard is or sees himself as rational. But I have not explicated his version of rationality. In the next chapter I will explicate subjectivity as Kierkegaard's conception and use of reason and show how the case for the reasonableness of subjectivity emerges from Kierkegaard's critique of what he calls *objectivity*. Finally, in later chapters, especially the last one, I will critically assess subjectivity.

I have argued that in order to communicate rationality Kierkegaard pretends to be irrational. In the next chapter I will explain more fully

why he thinks this strange strategy is necessary or useful. And in chapter 5, I will critically evaluate the “indirect communication” of which this strange strategy forms a major part.

Most of the remainder of this book, however, is dedicated to exploring the many paradoxes that emerge (partly) from Kierkegaard’s communication of rationality through a pretense of irrationality.