

# Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Conant's Conceptual Confusion

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## *Abstract*

Kierkegaard claims necessity on behalf of his method of indirect communication. James Conant has argued that Kierkegaard's method can be accounted for in terms of a Wittgensteinian project of grammatical investigation. Conant claims that the necessity of Kierkegaard's method is attributable to a logic of conceptual confusion: envisaging the situation of Kierkegaard's reader as one of conceptual confusion, and the end of his method as treating that confusion. I argue that Conant's account of conceptual confusion is contradictory and that this undermines both his interpretation of Kierkegaard's method and his relationship to the later Wittgenstein.

Kierkegaard notoriously claims necessity on behalf of his method of indirect communication. Recently, and influentially, James Conant has argued that Kierkegaard's method can be accounted for when understood in terms of a Wittgensteinian project of grammatical investigation. In doing this Conant claims that the necessity involved in indirect communication is attributable to a logic of conceptual confusion. Conant envisages the situation of Kierkegaard's reader as one of conceptual confusion and the end of his method as treating that confusion. This paper argues that Conant's view of conceptual confusion is contradictory. Conant formulates the contradiction that underlies his account of Kierkegaard's method as an instance of what he terms the problem, or paradox, of moral unintelligibility, and attempts to dissolve it in his paper "Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe on Moral Unintelligibility." I argue, first, that Conant fails to motivate the claim that his views result in a paradox rather than a contradiction; secondly, that Conant's attempted dissolution of his paradox fails; thirdly, and finally, that even if Conant's dissolution of his paradox were successful, this would still be an insufficient basis

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upon which to ground his reading of Kierkegaard. The result of this is that Conant's account of conceptual confusion must be rejected; and this undermines his account of the necessity Kierkegaard claims on behalf of indirect communication, his reading of Kierkegaard, and thereby his account of the relationship between Kierkegaard and the later Wittgenstein.

*I. Kierkegaard's Grammatical Investigation and  
the Necessity of Indirect Communication*

In this section I shall begin by first seeking to establish that despite ostensibly being a comparison of Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, Conant's account of the method of the *Postscript* contains numerous parallels to that outlined in the *Philosophical Investigations*. I shall then briefly consider Conant's attempts to account for the necessity Kierkegaard claims on behalf of his method of indirect communication, by attributing it to a logic of conceptual confusion. Finally I shall outline the important respects in which, for Conant, the *Postscript* and the *Investigations* are to be held analogous and disanalogous.

As commonly recognized by his commentators, Kierkegaard famously claims his method of indirect communication to be a matter of necessity.<sup>1</sup> Recently, and influentially, James Conant has claimed that certain

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1 For example, Kierkegaard writes of actuality: "Just because his actuality is a matter of indifference to me, the learner, and conversely mine to him, it by no means follows that he himself dares to be indifferent to his own actuality. His communication must be marked by this, not directly, of course, for it *cannot be communicated directly* between man and man (since such a relation is the believer's paradoxical relation to the object of faith), and cannot be understood directly, but *must be presented indirectly* to be understood indirectly" (*SKS* 7, 297 / *CUPI*, 325, emphasis mine). Those commentators who recognize that Kierkegaard claims necessity on behalf of indirect communication include George Pattison (*Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*, London: Macmillan 1992, p. 72); Dewi Zephaniah Phillips (*Philosophy's Cool Place*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1999, pp. 24 f.); and Jolita Pons (*Stealing A Gift: Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms and the Bible*, New York: Fordham University Press 2004, p. 46). For differing views about the nature of the necessity that indirect communication involves see C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International 1983, pp. 95–113; Genia Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the*

works by Kierkegaard can be read in an analogous fashion to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.<sup>2</sup> What unites Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein's work in this respect, claims Conant, is a certain conception of philosophical authorship, and the engagement of these texts in a strategy of indirect communication. Although Conant's project is ostensibly a comparison of the authorial strategies of the *Tractatus* and Kierkegaard's *Postscript*, Conant's interpretation of Kierkegaard includes substantial comparison with the methodology proposed by Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*.

Conant's comparison of the methodologies of the *Postscript* and the *Investigations* is something about which he is quite explicit. For in one of his early considerations of the relationship between these texts he asks: "[A]m I not here illegitimately projecting the teaching of the *Philosophical Investigations* onto (now both of) these earlier works [*Tractatus* and *Postscript*]? It had, I confess, actually been one of the more fervent hopes of my article to at least make plausible the claim that this is not an illegitimate projection."<sup>3</sup> The idea that some of the teachings of the *Investigations* equally well apply to the *Tractatus* is welcomed by Conant. For Conant hopes that we will reconceive the relationship between these texts as exhibiting greater continuity than previously supposed, and locate the difference between the early and later Wittgenstein in terms of a changing conception of philosophical authorship. Conant's motivation

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*Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007, pp. 29–31; and Jamie Turnbull, "Kierkegaard's Supernaturalism," *Acta Kierkegardiana*, vol. 3, 2008, pp. 83–87.

- 2 James Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?," in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. by Richard Fleming and Michael Payne, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press 1989, pp. 242–283; "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," in *Pursuits of Reason*, ed. by Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam, Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press 1993, pp. 195–224; "Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors," in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, ed. by Timothy Tessin and Mario Von der Ruhr, London: Macmillan 1995, pp. 249–331; "Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe on Moral Unintelligibility," in *Religion and Morality*, ed. by Dewi Zephaniah Phillips, London: Macmillan Press 1996, pp. 250–298. Similar readings of Kierkegaard have subsequently been given by Michael Weston ("Evading the Issue: the strategy of Kierkegaard's 'Postscript,'" *Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 22, 1999, pp. 35–64); Stephen Mulhall (*Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2001, pp. 323–438); and most recently by Genia Schönbaumsfeld (*A Confusion of the Spheres*).
- 3 Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?," pp. 254 f.

in projecting the teachings of the *Investigations* onto Kierkegaard's *Postscript*, however, is not so readily apparent.

The answer to this question, as far as Conant gives us one, is that he is influenced in his approach to Kierkegaard by the work of Stanley Cavell. Specifically what Conant takes from Cavell is a certain methodological approach to Kierkegaard: that of taking Kierkegaard's categories of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious, as analogous (or, even, *identical*) to Wittgensteinian forms of life or language games. As Conant states, "In...my discussion of Kierkegaard I took my point of departure from two articles by Stanley Cavell in which he explores a set of procedures that he refers to as Kierkegaard's 'grammatical investigations,'" a term, "which he in turn borrows from Wittgenstein."<sup>4</sup>

In the course of his project Conant seeks to make the case that numerous tenets of the work of the later Wittgenstein are also applicable to Kierkegaard. For instance, Conant holds that both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein's thought contain similar conceptions of the subject matter of philosophy as concerning "what is open to everyone's view."<sup>5</sup> The suggestion being that philosophy deals with our common responses on which we cannot help but find agreement. Conant envisages the connection between these thinkers to further extend to their views concerning the genesis of philosophical confusion. For in characterising the situation of the reader at which Kierkegaard's *Postscript* aims, with respect to that reader's use of the term "Christian," Conant states that "their use of the word hovers indeterminately between aesthetic and religious categories without respecting the conditions of the application of either. To put the point in the vocabulary of later Wittgenstein, they want to be both inside and outside the religious language-game at the same time."<sup>6</sup> Conant's adoption of the Cavellian strategy of taking Kierkegaard's categories to play an analogous role to language-games in Wittgenstein's thought is

4 Ibid., p. 255, p. 258; cf. Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," p. 209; Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," p. 267, p. 276, p. 278.

5 Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?," p. 246; cf. Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," pp. 205 f.

6 Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," p. 275. Conant comments upon this passage in a footnote: "This region of Kierkegaard's thought represents one respect in which the transition from Wittgenstein's early to his late thought marks a movement increasingly towards (rather than, as we shall see is the case in other respects, away from) Kierkegaard" (Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," p. 321). I shall turn to outline what Conant means by this movement away from Kierkegaard in a moment.

evident, the thought being that to fail to respect the conditions of application that these categories or games provide will be to fail to make sense, and thus potentially become the victim of philosophical confusion. The extent of the connection that Conant envisages between the *Postscript* and the *Investigations* is also evident in his phrasing a point about one of these texts in the terms of the other.

The extent of the parallel that Conant wishes to draw between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard also makes itself manifest in the strategy he attributes to the *Postscript's* treatment of nonsense. For this work, we are told, is one that attempts to make us realise that a case of (A) "unintelligible though apparently intelligible chatter" is really one of (B) "mere gibberish," and so attempts to return us to (C) "plain ordinary effable speech."<sup>7</sup> The idea that philosophical problems are the nonsensical result of a confusion of the logic of natural language, and that their solution is accompanied by a return to grammatical sense, being one expressed by Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*.<sup>8</sup> In this respect Conant concludes that "Wittgenstein's description of his method in the *Philosophical Investigations* applies equally well to both the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*: 'My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense' (#464)."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the central tenet of Conant's case with respect to the relationship between Kierkegaard and the later Wittgenstein is his claim that Kierkegaard's strategy of qualitative dialectic is analogous (if not *identical*) to a project of grammatical investigation. On this point Conant tells us that the aim of Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus is to show the philosopher that appeals to evidence have no role to play of the sort that he [the speculative philosopher] imagines in the logic of religious concepts such as faith and revelation. The later Wittgenstein might have called such a procedure a "grammatical investigation." Remarks such as the following could be thought of as being, in Wittgenstein's sense, "grammatical remarks": "Reli-

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7 Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?," p. 249. It could be argued that Conant is talking about the connection between the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus* in this passage, but given the continuity he holds to exist between the early and later Wittgenstein, I see no reason why he would object to this as a characterisation of the methodology of the *Investigations*. Indeed, Conant appears to actively encourage such comparisons: see Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?," pp. 246 f.; pp. 254 f.; p. 258; pp. 269 f.

8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell 1997 [1953], pp. 47–51.

9 Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," p. 218, emphasis mine.

gious faith excludes doubt,” “one must *become* a Christian,” “Christianity is not plausible.”<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, to these alleged examples of Wittgensteinian grammatical remarks in Kierkegaard’s work, Conant adds: A “Christian does not believe on evidence”; and a “revelation cannot be proved by evidence.”<sup>11</sup> The point of Kierkegaard’s offering these remarks is, in part, thought to be to remind the reader of the circumstances for using certain words sensibly, in an attempt to move him from a confused use of those words to a sensible one. This method, we are to understand, is “*Kierkegaard’s grammatical investigation...*”<sup>12</sup>

Conant depicts Kierkegaard, in Wittgensteinian fashion, as confronted by a reader who suffers from a sort of amnesia about the circumstances in which it is sensible to use certain words to express particular concepts: specifically religious, Christian, concepts.<sup>13</sup> On this point Conant holds that Kierkegaard’s method, like that expounded in Wittgenstein’s later thought, can be said to be one of “assembling reminders.”<sup>14</sup> Such reminders, we are to understand, comprise a perspicuous representation. In this respect “Wittgenstein’s later procedure parallels that of Kierkegaard’s method of qualitative dialectic—one of clearly marking of a concept from one of its neighbours, so as to home in on the moment in our philosophising when our words hover between the two concepts and fail to mean either.”<sup>15</sup> Against this background Conant casts Kierkegaard’s project as one of treating the person who “tends to deprive himself of a clear

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10 Ibid., p. 209.

11 Conant, “Putting Two and Two Together,” p. 276; Conant, “Must We Show What We Cannot Say?,” p. 255.

12 Conant, “Putting Two and Two Together,” p. 278, emphasis mine.

13 Conant remarks that “[t]he emphasis on ‘forgetfulness’ is a pervasive theme of the *Postscript*. It is as if Climacus [Kierkegaard’s pseudonym] saw the speculative philosopher’s fundamental malady to be a form of amnesia and his task in the *Postscript* to be one of assembling certain sorts of reminders” (Conant, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense,” p. 203).

14 Conant, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense,” p. 210.

15 Conant, “Putting Two and Two Together,” p. 303. Apparently calling on Wittgenstein’s notion of a “perspicuous representation” Conant writes, “if provided with a *perspicuous overview* of the category of the religious, he [Kierkegaard] thinks, they themselves [his countrymen] will be in a position to acknowledge their confusions *as* confusions...Kierkegaard’s procedure here closely resembles what Wittgenstein would call a ‘grammatical investigation’” (“Putting Two and Two Together,” p. 267, first emphasis mine; cf. “Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and An-scombe,” p. 264).

view of what is otherwise ordinarily visible to anyone,"<sup>16</sup> by attempting to get him to recognize what it is that "we otherwise all already know."<sup>17</sup> In this spirit Kierkegaard's problem is said to be "not one of teaching the reader something he does not know but rather one of showing him that, with respect to the activity of becoming a Christian, there is nothing further he needs to know."<sup>18</sup> So presented, at least part of the function of philosophy in both the *Postscript* and the *Investigations* is thought to be to return us to the basic notions of common sense from which we have strayed.

From the above it is evident that Conant thinks that there are substantial similarities shared by the methodologies of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* and Kierkegaard's *Postscript*. Indeed, if Conant is right, these figures are united at this point in virtue of their respective conceptions of philosophy, of the genesis of philosophical problems, of the idea that these problems result in nonsense, and of providing grammatical remarks and perspicuous representations as the solutions to those problems. Moreover, Conant can also be said to take the parallel between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein to consist in the idea: that the function of philosophy is to make one conscious of one's nonsense so as to return one to sense; that the method of philosophy is one of conceptual or grammatical investigation; and that the solution to philosophical problems consists in returning the reader to what he or she should already know. Thus although Conant primarily presents his project as an examination of the common authorial strategy employed by the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*, his account of the method of the *Postscript* draws extensive parallels with the *Investigations*.

That Conant holds the similarities between Kierkegaard and the mature Wittgenstein to be so pervasive is perhaps explicable in terms of another thesis concerning the relationship between them that he attempts to establish. For in "Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors" Conant states:

This paper, along the way, marshals the material for an argument to the effect that *Kierkegaard can be seen as having substantially influenced four aspects of Wittgenstein's mature thought*: (1) his conception of the intimacy of the relation between meaning and use, (2) his idea of a grammatical investigation, (3) his

16 Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," p. 206.

17 Ibid. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 210.

18 Ibid., p. 205.

idea that the aim of a philosophical work is to take the reader from a piece of disguised nonsense to a piece of undisguised nonsense, and (4) his idea that the correct expression in philosophy is the one which allows one's interlocutor to acknowledge the words offered him as expressing what he wants to say.<sup>19</sup>

If this thesis about the role Kierkegaard has to play in the formulation of Wittgenstein's later thinking is correct, it is perhaps understandable that so many of the ideas expressed in the *Investigations* can be retrospectively applied to the *Postscript*. Yet we are clearly entering a domain in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to disambiguate where the line of legitimate influence may end and that of potentially illegitimate and anachronistic projection may begin.

Conant recognizes that Kierkegaard claims necessity on behalf of his method of indirect communication, and attributes that necessity to a logic of conceptual confusion. For, Conant tells us, if Kierkegaard's reader held a false belief he could be corrected or presented with an argument as to why his belief is false.<sup>20</sup> Yet in the case of a conceptual confusion (or illusion) this cannot be done on the grounds that "[t]o attack an illusory point of view *directly* is precisely to concede that it *is* a point of view. It is *to concede the intelligibility of what is under attack*."<sup>21</sup> The problem with engaging a reader subject to illusion is not the truth or falsity of the claims he or she is inclined to want to make, but their intelligibility. For this reason a direct attack is held to be ruled out in that it "*only* reinforces one's interlocutor's conviction that what is at issue is a matter about which one can, at least provisionally, agree or disagree."<sup>22</sup> Conant thinks that a direct attack is ruled out because it will, apparently even tacitly, concede that the point of contention is one that can be true or false, and as such subject to dispute, as opposed to simply nonsensical. It is for this reason, we are told, that the method of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship "is predicated on the assumption that the route of direct communication is blocked,"<sup>23</sup> and that "if there were such a specific dispute in the offing, the direct approach would no longer be blocked."<sup>24</sup>

19 Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," pp. 249 f., emphasis mine.

20 Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," pp. 272 f. Cf. Phillips, *Philosophy's Cool Place*, p. 24, in which Phillips makes the same claim. "Putting Two and Two Together" is, in part, a response to an earlier paper by Phillips; the latter subsequently replied to Conant's criticisms in chapters two and three of *Philosophy's Cool Place*.

21 Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," p. 273, emphasis mine.

22 Ibid., emphasis mine.

23 Ibid., p. 284.

According to Conant a situation of conceptual confusion rules out direct communication, and as such necessitates indirect communication. For Conant claims that Kierkegaard's *Postscript* employs a method of indirect communication,<sup>25</sup> and that *only* by employing such a method can it achieve its end. For,

[t]he method employed in both the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus* relies upon the thought that *under such circumstances* [being confronted with a reader subject to an illusion of understanding] the *only* procedure that will prove genuinely elucidatory is one that attempts to enter into the philosopher's illusion of understanding and explode it from within.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of Conant's interpretation of indirect communication its necessity is attributable to a logic of conceptual confusion, and the subsequent treatment that the dissolution of that confusion requires.

Conant's attempt to account for the necessity Kierkegaard claims on behalf of his method has an interesting relationship to his view of the connections between the *Tractatus*, the *Postscript*, and the *Investigations*. For in "Putting Two and Two Together," in outlining the argument of his paper, Conant states that "the paper argues that...Wittgenstein's later writing embodies a rejection of Kierkegaard's method of philosophical authorship."<sup>27</sup> Conant now wishes to hold that the *Tractatus* and *Postscript* necessarily embody a method of indirect communication in virtue of participating in a strategy of philosophical authorship that is addressed to its prospective reader's conceptual confusion. Yet he also wishes to hold that the *Investigations*, a work that also attempts to cure its reader of conceptual confusions, does not constitute an indirect method of philosophical authorship, but is rather to be viewed as the rejection of such an authorial strategy.

This is possible, according to Conant, in virtue of the fact that the later Wittgenstein "holds on to (and further refines) Kierkegaard's conception of qualitative dialectic while detaching it from Kierkegaard's

24 Ibid., p. 274.

25 In commenting upon the connection between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Kierkegaard's *Postscript*, Conant claims that one can speak of "an overarching analogy between the *procedure* of the *Tractatus* and that of the *Postscript* as a whole; both works employ an 'indirect method' in which the author 'arranges everything dialectically' for the prospective captive, and then shyly withdraws" (Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," pp. 223 f.).

26 Ibid., pp. 217 f., emphasis mine.

27 Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," p. 249.

strategy of pseudonymous authorship.”<sup>28</sup> This alleged shift in Wittgenstein’s conception of the relationship between his philosophical method and authorial strategy is, Conant claims, understandable in the following way. Conant envisages Kierkegaard and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* to be united in virtue of taking as their targets a certain group of related philosophical confusions. That is to say each author takes aim at certain particular conceptual confusions to which he takes his reader to be subject, and crafts the structure of his work accordingly. In this way, Conant would have us believe that both the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript* begin by attempting to engage their prospective readers in the very philosophical confusion that it is their ultimate aim to dispel. The treatment of this specific confusion is thus “rendered visible through the construction of a single large mirror in which the entire etiology of our confusion is depicted.”<sup>29</sup>

According to Conant, Wittgenstein came to reject such an authorial strategy on the basis of his later more dynamic conception of the nature of thought, language, and our relationship to reality. The *Investigations* differ from the *Tractatus* and *Postscript* in this respect because their target is not a *particular*, or even *some group of*, conceptual confusions. The idea is that for the later Wittgenstein the dynamic and fluid nature of our grammar will continually result in the generation of different philosophical problems, as our grammars shift and our language games change. Conant suggests that it is this insight on Wittgenstein’s part that made an authorial strategy, based upon engaging the reader in a *particular* group of conceptual confusions in order to ultimately round upon them, no longer satisfactory. What the later Wittgenstein does, instead, is give us philosophical tools to cope with our ever evolving philosophical problems. As Conant puts it,

[f]or the later Wittgenstein, the etiology of our confusion is as complicated—and as difficult to survey—as are our lives and language. So the procedure of uncovering our individual confusions must remain a piecemeal one—one of constructing lots of little mirrors in which the reader can come to recognize himself in each of his moments of being tempted to insist emptily.<sup>30</sup>

I now hope to have outlined how Conant attempts to account for the necessity Kierkegaard claims on behalf of his method by attributing it to a logic of conceptual confusion. Furthermore, I hope to have made clear

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28 Ibid., p. 302.

29 Ibid., p. 303.

30 Ibid.

how, despite ostensibly being a comparison between the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript*, Conant's account of Kierkegaard's method draws serious parallels with the *Investigations*. Indeed, Conant actively invites us to make such comparisons as they are, for him, ultimately accountable for in terms of the fact that Kierkegaard was a significant influence on Wittgenstein's thought. Conant's reading wishes to draw these parallels despite the fact that, as we have seen, he ultimately sees a fundamental disanalogy between the authorial strategy engaged in by the *Tractatus* and the *Postscript*, and that used by Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*.

## II. *The Conceptual Clarification of Religious Concepts*

In terms of the above characterisation of Kierkegaard's method Conant's problem, I claim, is with giving a philosophically plausible account of (A) "unintelligible though apparently intelligible chatter," and ultimately (C) "plain ordinary effable speech."<sup>31</sup> Specifically the account of conceptual confusion upon which the above interpretation is dependant is, I maintain, subject to a contradiction. The reason for this is that Conant is committed to holding both that there are Christian concepts and that there are no such concepts; and so the inhabitants of Christendom both do and do not possess them.<sup>32</sup> This section will deal with Conant's commitment to the first of these claims, while the next section will treat his commitment to the second.

In characterising the confusion to which Kierkegaard's readers are said to be subject Conant depicts that confusion as one resulting from muddling the Kierkegaardian categories of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious. We are told, "Kierkegaard's criticisms are never directed at some mode of thought or action which properly belongs to one of the categories (say, for example, to the category of the aesthetic), but rather always at a mode of thought or existence that involves what he calls a 'confusion of the categories.'"<sup>33</sup> The target of Kierkegaard's thought is thereby held to be the "illusion of sense...generated through conflating aesthetic

31 Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?," p. 249.

32 "Christendom" is Kierkegaard's term for a society which thinks of itself as Christian while failing to appreciate what it means to follow Christ. On this point see Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," p. 267. Cf. Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, p. 29.

33 Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," p. 260.

and religious categories,” and the aim of the author of the *Postscript* “to clarify the categories of the ethical and the religious.”<sup>34</sup>

In terms of his bringing Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein together by means of a Cavellian methodology, this confusion of the categories is interpreted as one concerning the application or misapplication of our words; and the conceptual confusion that may result. In this Conant tells us that for Kierkegaard:

There are a great many words which *have a specifically religious meaning*—words such as belief, authority, obedience, revelation, prayer, silence, awe, wonder, miracle, apostle, and so forth. These same words, however, can be used in contexts in which they take on a different meaning. They can be used to express very different concepts—concepts which do not have a religious import.<sup>35</sup>

The impetus in making this point, for Conant, would seem to be to arrive in the following situation. Given that the same word can express a specifically religious meaning, or a concept which does not have a religious import, it is potentially confusing for us. For we might now, at least in principle, attempt to use the word to try and express the religious meaning in a context in which it can have no such application; and, presumably, vice versa.

Attention to the details of Conant’s account of this confusion, and its treatment, is rewarding. Conant writes:

Kierkegaard’s way of referring to the sort of confusion we enter into in such cases (when we take ourselves to be employing an ethical or religious concept, but no ethical or religious sense can be made of the word) is to say that we have fallen into a “confusion of the categories.” His name for the procedure he employs for unravelling such confusion is “qualitative dialectic.” A “dialectical” examination of a concept shows *how the meaning of the concept undergoes a shift*—and therefore, properly speaking, *what* concept it is that shifts—as the context in which it is employed changes. Qualitative dialectic is *the study of the decisive* (or qualitative) *shifts to which the meaning of a word is subject as its employment shifts from an aesthetic to an ethical to a religious context.*<sup>36</sup>

In this passage, in outlining what a Kierkegaardian procedure of qualitative dialectic *shows*, Conant makes it sound as though it is *one and the same* concept that takes on different meanings as the word which expresses it is used in aesthetic, ethical, and religious contexts. However, when he

34 Ibid., p. 282, p. 257.

35 Ibid., p. 275, emphasis mine; cf. Conant, “Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Anscombe,” p. 265.

36 Conant, “Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Anscombe,” p. 265, emphasis mine. Cf. “Putting Two and Two Together,” pp. 276 f.

is more circumspect, Conant claims, "Kierkegaard's point is often that, if we wish to avoid certain forms of confusion, we *must clearly distinguish between different* (religious, ethical, and aesthetic) *concepts that are all expressed by the same word.*"<sup>37</sup> In this passage it is not that *the same concept* expresses different meanings when the word that is used to express it is employed in different (aesthetic, ethical, and religious) contexts. It is, rather, that the same word is capable of expressing *different concepts* depending upon the context in which it is employed; concepts which, nonetheless, share certain features and can thus be confused. Conant continually slides between these two claims, although I suspect that it is the latter that he really intends to defend at this point; and upon which he envisages a significant connection between Kierkegaard's methodology of qualitative dialectic and Wittgenstein's grammatical investigation.

As an example of such conceptual confusion, Conant compares what can happen when we confuse a philosophical (aesthetic) and religious use of the word "belief." Conant writes:

The word "belief" ...can be used in a context where *it has a specifically religious meaning*. It can be used as a synonym for "religious faith." Used in this way, Kierkegaard thinks, *it expresses a completely different concept*—one which does not stand on a spectrum somewhere between opinion and knowledge, one whose application is not tied to concepts such as evidence and probability. When Kierkegaard says things like "Christianity is not plausible" or "A Christian does not believe on evidence" or "Religious faith excludes doubt," he does not take himself to be entering claims about the kind of evidence which grounds religious belief. He takes himself to be marking off *the religious category of belief and isolating the junctures at which we are prone to confuse the religious category with an epistemic (i. e. aesthetic) category*. This procedure of drawing categorical (Wittgenstein would call them grammatical) distinctions is in service of clarifying *the specifically religious* (or, in some cases, ethical) *uses of concepts*.<sup>38</sup>

In further outlining Kierkegaard's methodology of qualitative dialectic, and with particular respect to the confusion of these two meanings of the word "belief," Conant writes:

The indictment of the philosopher here lies in the charge that he not only fails to command a clear view of his life, but also of the language he draws upon to describe that life. He fails, according to Climacus, to attend to the decisive change in meaning a concept undergoes as its employment shifts from an aes-

37 Ibid., pp. 267 f., emphasis mine.

38 Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," p. 276, emphasis mine.

thetic, to an ethical, to a religious context....The philosopher, Climacus argues, entangles himself here in a *conceptual* confusion.<sup>39</sup>

Again these two passages suffer from the ambiguity of whether it is a single concept with different meanings or different concepts that are brought into play in our various uses of a word. Nonetheless, Kierkegaard's method is presented by Conant as one of demarcating the junctures at which we are prone to confuse two different meanings of the same word. By outlining the points at which we are prone to confuse these meanings, and thus in outlining how they differ, this method provides the reader with a basis upon which to formulate comparative judgements about the religious and non-religious applications of the same word. The reader is thereby provided with a means to be able to spot such misapplication, or confusion, in his or her own usage: a confusion to which we as philosophers are thought to be particularly prone.

One thing that the above two passages make clear: so presented it is essential to Conant's account of Kierkegaard's method that there *are* religious concepts, and that such concepts can be meaningfully employed. This must be the case if we are to understand Kierkegaard, *à la* Conant, as engaged in a project of marking off the junctures at which different concepts expressed by the same word can become confused. Indeed, this must be so if Conant is to be able to characterise the philosopher as subject to a "*conceptual* confusion," in which he or she "overlooks the 'essential incommensurability' between the immanent or secular use of such notions and the transcendental or religious use."<sup>40</sup> For such confusion can, presumably, only arise if certain words have a "transcendental or religious" usage.

As noted in the last section, there is an important connection between Conant's characterisation of the situation of Kierkegaard's reader as one of conceptual confusion and his account of the necessity Kierkegaard claims on behalf of his method. Conant remarks upon this connection as follows:

I am inclined to think Kierkegaard would say that he has no dispute at all with somebody who *actually thinks* one can be a Christian simply by being a citizen. There is nothing to dispute here because the word "Christian" has been reduced to a homonym—it is used by this person in a way which differs *completely* from any way in which Kierkegaard himself wishes to use the word.<sup>41</sup>

39 Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," p. 209, emphasis mine.

40 Ibid.

41 Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," p. 274, emphasis mine.

Kierkegaard's target is not the reader who no longer has any transcendent or religious use for Christian terms, but only a secular and homonymic one. It is, rather, a reader who is still able to employ words with their transcendental or religious meaning, but is in some respects confused about that. Indeed, in terms of Conant's account of the necessity Kierkegaard claims on behalf of his method, Kierkegaard's authorial strategy is necessitated by the existence of such readers.

That the existence of religious concepts is essential to Conant's account is further evident in the fact that, we are told,

Kierkegaard...*does not take himself to be differing with his countrymen about what the word "Christian" means.* His claim is simply that *by their own lights*—if they reflect upon what it is to become a Christian and if they reflect upon their lives and get into focus how much of a claim Christianity actually exacts upon them—they will find that they are not Christians.<sup>42</sup>

Kierkegaard's method is said to consist in getting his countrymen to compare what it means to become a Christian with their lives as they lead them. For them to be able to make such comparative judgements "by their own lights," and discern that they are not Christians, it is essential both that there are such concepts, and that Kierkegaard's readers are capable of employing them.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, both of these claims must be in play if we are to envisage Kierkegaard, *à la* Conant, as returning his reader from philosophical confusion to using such concepts with commonsensical application. This claim thereby also underlies Conant's portrait of Kierkegaard as offering the reader a series of grammatical remarks, with the aim of moving him from nonsense to sense, the idea that Kierkegaard is leading the reader to recognize what he already knows, as well as

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42 Ibid., p. 267, first emphasis mine; cf. Conant, "Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe," p. 264, emphasis mine: "Kierkegaard...*does not take himself to be differing with his countrymen about what the word 'Christian' means.* His claim is simply that *by their own lights*—if they reflect upon what it is to become a Christian and if they reflect upon their lives and get into focus how much of a claim Christianity actually exacts upon them—they will find that they are not Christians."

43 This is further evident in the fact that, as Conant writes, "most of his [Kierkegaard's] readers, *if forced to reflect upon the matter*, will see that what they want to be able to claim about themselves when they say that they are Christians involves a great deal more than their merely being citizens....Kierkegaard takes it for granted that his readers do not really wish the words 'Christian' and 'citizen' (or 'Dane') to be synonymous; this is not what they *want* to mean by the word 'Christian'" (Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," pp. 274 f., emphasis mine).

the claim that Kierkegaard is engaged in a project of assembling reminders for a particular purpose.

In a protracted footnote Conant accuses the secondary literature on Kierkegaard of being subject to a rampant misunderstanding. According to Conant, this misunderstanding is, at least in part, comprised of conceiving of Kierkegaard's categories of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious as mutually exclusive. Conant specifically targets the late D.Z. Phillips as inheriting some of this misunderstanding. In viewing Phillips as a fellow commentator who wishes to bring Kierkegaard and the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* together, Conant writes:

For Phillips' own purposes, *one needs to hold on to the idea that all of the categories can have an appropriate context of use within a single human life in order to make out the strength of the parallel between (Kierkegaardian) qualitative dialectic and (Wittgensteinian) grammatical investigation. In falling for the idea that only one set of categories can apply to a human life at a time, Phillips spoils his own best insight into the parallels between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein.*<sup>44</sup>

The irony of this, as we shall see, is that Conant is ultimately seduced by the very weakness to which he takes Phillips to have succumbed.

### *III. Obsolete Religious Concepts, and the End of Kierkegaard's Method*

In this section I shall outline Conant's commitment to the second claim that I have attributed to him: that there are no religious Christian concepts *per se*, and so the inhabitants of Christendom cannot possess them. This commitment will become evident by, once again, paying attention to Conant's depiction of the state of Kierkegaard's reader.

Kierkegaard's reader is, we are told, somebody with a tendency to "hallucinate sense."<sup>45</sup> To put oneself in the shoes of such a reader, one is said to be in a situation in which one takes oneself "to be employing an ethical or religious concept but no ethical or religious sense can be made of [one's] use of it."<sup>46</sup> In this situation we are subject to an illusion which we have engendered, and in which we become confused by "(apparently) religious concepts."<sup>47</sup> In our particular usage such concepts *appear* to have a religious meaning, when in fact they do not.

44 Ibid., p. 314, emphasis mine.

45 Ibid., p. 282. Cf. Conant, "Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe," p. 263.

46 Ibid., p. 276.

47 Ibid., p. 277.

In paying attention to the specifics of Conant's depiction of the situation of Kierkegaard's reader(s), his claims begin to take on a more sinister air. For instance, in regard to the use of the word "revelation," Conant writes, We

continue to use the word "revelation" in purportedly religious contexts *without realising that we mean nothing by it*. We do not realise that we have failed to give it any sense in such a context for we are not aware that *we have lost our hold on any sense it might have been able to have for us here*.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, in respect to the word "Christian," the "problem is that—to the extent that this word means anything at all when applied to their [Kierkegaard's readers] lives (*which it most certainly does not*)—*being a citizen is roughly all it can mean*. Thus, without realising it, to the extent that they mean anything when they say of themselves that they are Christians, this is roughly all they do mean by the word."<sup>49</sup> As outlined in the last section, the loss of sense affecting Kierkegaard's reader, or readers, is portrayed as a local condition. It is an affliction of a *particular person*, or a *group of individuals* (most likely philosophers), who are failing to use a word to express a concept that it otherwise *can* express. Yet Conant now appears to want to make the stronger claim that such a loss of sense is not merely parochial to a certain group of readers, but endemic to and pervasive of an entire community.

For this reason, a great deal hangs upon the scope of the "We" Conant is describing. One might, of course, claim that the quotations in the last paragraph do not conclusively demonstrate that by "We" Conant does not mean some subsection of society. For example, one might object: perhaps Conant writes "We" because he knows that philosophers are prone to such confusions, and his articles are addressed to a philosophical community of which he takes himself to be a member. Yet that Conant intends the stronger and more problematic claim, that words can no longer be used to express religious concepts or meanings *per se*, becomes evident. This claim makes its first appearance as early as "Must We Show

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48 Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?," p. 255, emphasis mine. Interestingly, throughout the course of his papers Conant continually uses the word "we" in making such remarks, as if he thinks any reader of his papers will be an inhabitant of Christendom.

49 Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," pp. 274 f., emphasis and brackets mine. Conant apparently contradicts himself in this passage by claiming both that the word "Christian" has *no meaning* and that *it means* being a citizen. I take it that Conant's point is not that the word "Christian" has no meaning, but that it has no "traditional Christian meaning."

What We Cannot Say,” where Conant says that the “confusion of *our age*” concerns “*the loss of certain of our concepts.*”<sup>50</sup> The subject of this loss of sense and concepts is not said to be a particular group, or subsection of society, but an “*age.*” Conant reiterates this point:

Climacus says that in *our reflective age we have simply “forgotten” what it means to be a Christian—we no longer have a religious use for these terms.* We continue to employ a term such as “faith” in purportedly religious contexts as if we knew what we meant by it. In such a pseudo-religious employment, the term no longer has any clear meaning. We do not realise that we have failed to give the term a clear sense, for we are not aware that *we have lost our hold on any religious sense it might once have been able to have.*<sup>51</sup>

Conant’s point is that in our age words can no longer be used to express religious concepts or meanings, and so any religious sense that those terms once had is now lost to us. What underlies this point is something that Conant never makes explicit—a tacit identification on his part of the situation of the reader at which Kierkegaard’s method is aimed with any reader, or potential reader, of his own articles. For throughout the course of his writing on Kierkegaard, Conant refers to Kierkegaard’s reader and his own in inclusive terms. For Conant it is “We” who are the targets of Kierkegaard’s method; and in this characterisation Conant clearly envisages both Kierkegaard’s readership and his own to share a common situation. The loss of sense affecting Kierkegaard’s readers is, Conant thinks, something to which we as contemporary readers of Kierkegaard are still subject.

In “Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe on Moral Unintelligibility” Conant goes into greater detail about the generic loss of sense of Christian concepts to which he thinks our age is subject. In this respect Conant tells us that Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe all “advance some version of the following thesis: in the wake of *the demise of a Christian tradition of religious thought and practice, we are left with certain concepts which continue to appear—but which no longer are—intelligible.*”<sup>52</sup> These concepts, we are told, “appear indispensable but *are in fact obsolete,*”<sup>53</sup> and the reason for this is that “a religious background we think is there *is not* (we imagine it is flourishing when it is *dead*).”<sup>54</sup> Conant’s point is that the religious, Christian, culture, in terms of which such con-

50 Conant, “Must We Show What We Cannot Say?,” p. 255.

51 Conant, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense,” p. 209, emphasis mine.

52 Conant, “Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe,” p. 250, emphasis mine.

53 Ibid., p. 262, emphasis mine.

54 Ibid., p. 282, emphasis mine.

cepts were sensible, is no longer, and as such they now no longer exist: they are "obsolete." In this vein, one of the ends of Kierkegaard's method is said to be "for us to end our collective acts of hypocrisy and confess *we no longer know what it would mean for somebody today to call himself Christian.*"<sup>55</sup>

Understood in this way, the end of Kierkegaard's method is not to show some particular reader, or group of readers, that they are not in fact Christians. Rather it is to reveal that it is no longer *possible* to be a Christian *per se*, because the very religious background that conditioned the sense of religious concepts is no more. On this point Conant envisages Kierkegaard's readers and his own to be united in virtue of inhabiting a society in which words have lost their ability to express religious or transcendental meanings. When the inhabitants of such a society use words that previously expressed religious concepts, then they can no longer be using those concepts, or expressing those meanings. It is for this reason that Conant holds that such words simply express secularised non-religious meanings, and this is all that those words *can* mean.

It should now, I hope, be clear that Conant does indeed fall into the very trap that he is concerned to accuse Phillips of falling into: of failing to hold onto the notion that all three of Kierkegaard's categories (specifically, the religious category) can have application in a human life, and so maintain the parallel between Wittgensteinian grammatical investigation and Kierkegaardian qualitative dialectic.

#### *IV. Conant's Conceptual Confusion*

If the above reading of Conant is correct, he is committed to holding both that there are Christian concepts and that there are no such concepts. *A fortiori*, the claim is that the inhabitants of Christendom both possess and do not possess such concepts. Evidently both of these claims cannot be true on pain of contradiction. It is this contradiction, I hold, that undermines Conant's account of conceptual confusion, his claim with respect to the necessity of Kierkegaard's method, his reading of Kierkegaard, and thereby his account of the relationship between Kierkegaard and the later Wittgenstein.

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55 Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?," p. 257, emphasis mine. Cf. Conant, "Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe," p. 264.

Once the above contradiction is noted, the details of Conant's reading quickly begin to unravel. For example, take the claim that the subject matter of Kierkegaard's philosophy is "what is open to everyone's view."<sup>56</sup> If it is true that Christian concepts are obsolete then they cannot be "open to everyone's view." The same holds for Conant's characterisation of Kierkegaard as engaged in a grammatical investigation, and offering his reader a series of grammatical remarks. For if there are no such concepts, it is mysterious how they can be expressed by grammar and so be the subject of grammatical remarks. The point also extends to Conant's characterisation of Kierkegaard's philosophical reader as being subject to a *conceptual* confusion. For if concept *x* does not exist, then I *ipso facto* cannot be confused about it.<sup>57</sup>

Conant's account of conceptual clarification, or qualitative dialectic, also falls apart. For example, in respect to the word "belief" Conant characterised Kierkegaard as "marking off *the religious category of belief and isolating the junctures at which we are prone to confuse the religious category with an epistemic (i.e. aesthetic) category.*"<sup>58</sup> The point of this, as outlined above, was to provide the reader with a means by which to be able to make comparative judgements between different concepts expressed by the same word—so as to be able to identify the moment in their own usage when these become confused. Yet if there are no religious concepts, there is no basis upon which such comparative judgements can be made, and so it makes no sense to depict Kierkegaard as engaged in a project of marking off the junctures at which we are prone to confuse religious and epistemic concepts.<sup>59</sup> The non-existence of Christian concepts thereby conflicts with Conant's claim that Kierkegaard's aim is to provide his reader with a perspicuous presentation in which the etiology of his conceptual confusion is writ large.

The above contradiction also challenges one of the senses in which Conant thinks Kierkegaard's works attempt to show something to their reader. For instance, we read:

Sometimes...Kierkegaard (or one of his pseudonymous authors) will want to paint a particularly vivid picture of what a Christian life would look like—what a life would be like that can *only* be understood in terms of Christian cat-

56 Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?," p. 246; cf. Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," pp. 205 f.

57 Schönbaumsfeld, too, notes this point; see *A Confusion of the Spheres*, p. 113.

58 Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," p. 276, emphasis mine.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 267; cf. Conant, "Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe," p. 264.

egories. The point is to contrast that life with the life of a reader who imagines himself to be a Christian. It is *only* in that other life, Kierkegaard wants to show, that the Christian categories have their full, mutually implicating meaning, and apart from it they may have any or none.<sup>60</sup>

Yet if Christian concepts are obsolete it is difficult to see how these examples can be intelligible, or what function they can serve.<sup>61</sup> Specifically it is difficult to comprehend how such pictures can, on Conant's interpretation, *show* Kierkegaard's readers anything. Conant's claim that Kierkegaard is offering his reader a series of reminders is also undermined. Specifically the claim that Kierkegaard's problem is "not one of teaching the reader something he does not know but rather one of showing him that, *with respect to the activity of becoming a Christian, there is nothing further he needs to know.*"<sup>62</sup> For if Christian concepts no longer exist, Kierkegaard's reader cannot be said to know, even in any tacit sense, what it is to become a Christian.<sup>63</sup>

That his account of Kierkegaard is subject to the above tension is not news to Conant but something he recognizes, although he does not formulate it or draw out its consequences in quite the same way that I have. According to Conant, his account is not subject to a contradiction, but a paradox. I shall now turn to consider Conant's paradox, and his proposed dissolution of it.

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60 Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," p. 277, emphasis mine.

61 There is a similar problem with Conant's claim that Kierkegaard's method is one of attempting to get his countrymen to compare his or her concept of what it means to become a Christian with his or her own life. For if there is no such concept, there is no basis upon which the reader can make such a comparative judgement.

62 Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," p. 205, emphasis mine.

63 Similarly, Conant states that the inhabitants of Christendom "do not mean by their words *what they want to mean*. What *they want to mean* is at odds with what they say. They have an *incoherent desire* with respect to their words—and, in particular, with respect to the word 'Christian'" ("Putting Two and Two Together," p. 275; cf. Conant, "Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe," p. 265). However, if the inhabitants of Christendom do not possess the concept "Christian," it is mysterious how they can be thought to formulate desires about it.

### V. *The Paradox of Unintelligibility*

Conant's treatment of the above tension occurs in his paper on moral unintelligibility, which is a reply to an article by R.W. Beardsmore.<sup>64</sup> In this paper Conant *initially* takes this tension, and specifically the notion of a concept that no longer has any sense or meaning, seriously; and formulates it as constituting a problem, or paradox, of moral unintelligibility. I will outline Conant's paradox. I shall then argue, first, that Conant fails to motivate the claim that his views result in a paradox, rather than a contradiction; secondly, that Conant's attempted dissolution of the above paradox fails; thirdly, and finally, that even if Conant's dissolution of his paradox were successful, this would still be an insufficient basis upon which to ground his reading of Kierkegaard.

Conant casts the idea that the inhabitants of Christendom seek to employ concepts which no longer have any sense or meaning as an instance of what he terms the problem, or "paradox," of moral unintelligibility.<sup>65</sup> As already noted, Conant claims that Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe all "advance some version of the following thesis: in the wake of the demise of a Christian tradition of religious thought and practice, *we are left with certain concepts* which continue to appear—but which *no longer are—intelligible.*"<sup>66</sup> Such theses as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe are allegedly concerned to level are thereby held to be subject to a paradox of unintelligibility. For our purposes the most useful way into Conant's paradox is as follows. With regards to a concept that both *is* but *is unintelligible*, he writes:

If we try to imagine such a concept, we end up identifying something which either (1) is a concept or (2) is not a concept. If (1), then it must be possible to *intelligibly* make out which concept is at issue; but in that case what we have is not an instance of "the interesting situation" (in which a concept survives the conditions of its intelligibility). If (2), then what is at issue is at most something which can be *mistaken* for a concept; but in that case what we have is not an instance of "the survival of a concept."<sup>67</sup>

64 I will not consider all of the details of Conant's argument with Beardsmore but will be concerned with how Conant formulates and attempts to dissolve his paradox.

65 Conant, "Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe," p. 277.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 250, emphasis mine.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 277. As Conant recognizes, if these thinkers "can make out which concept is at issue...that would amount to showing that there is *no* concept at issue, and hence nothing for their critique to be a critique of" (*ibid.*, p. 251). Conant's point is that if these thinkers can make out which concept is the subject of their

Conant states that his thinkers are “interested in cases in which we continue to employ certain words but *are no longer able to use them to express the concepts which those words formerly expressed*,”<sup>68</sup> and that in these cases they appear concerned to charge “that someone is not just *saying* something unintelligible, but *employing a particular concept outside the conditions which allow for its intelligibility*.”<sup>69</sup> In particular Conant holds Kierkegaard's charge that the inhabitants of Christendom desire to express Christian concepts, concepts which have no sense or meaning, to be an instance of this paradox of unintelligibility. What this adds to the earlier characterisation of Conant's dilemma is the idea that Kierkegaard's readers are, *per impossibile*, employing concepts outside of the conditions of their own intelligibility.

Conant now, at least provisionally, appears to have some tract with the notion of a concept that has no sense or meaning; indeed, a concept which has, we are to believe, survived the conditions of its own intelligibility. At this point we might pause and ask: What sense can be given to such an idea? Before we attempt to answer this question it would be wise to ask why we need to do so. In order to take this notion and the difficulties to which it gives rise seriously we would, surely, need to know why it is something that we cannot otherwise do without. For instance, is our positing such “concepts” forced upon us by Nietzschean, Kierkegaardian, and/or Anscombian exegesis? Or is the idea of an unintelligible concept something that we require in order to make sense of the apparently nonsensical behaviour of those around us? If so, what empirical evidence might warrant us taking such a notion seriously? Conant provides us with neither the textual nor the empirical evidence that would be required to take the idea of a concept surviving the conditions of its own intelligibility seriously.

It is reasonable to suggest that we will buy this notion as paradoxical, as opposed to contradictory, only if we feel forced to accept it as one we cannot otherwise do without. Conant does not attempt to motivate our acceptance of this idea, but simply appears to take it for granted that we need such a notion. The very fact that Conant accepts the idea that a concept can survive the conditions of its own intelligibility as paradoxical, I suggest, is noteworthy. For if we are not forced to buy Conant's

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charge of unintelligibility, they can no longer hold that it is literally unintelligible, for to charge that “x is unintelligible” is self-defeating.

68 Ibid., p. 276, emphasis mine.

69 Ibid., p. 251, emphasis mine; cf. *ibid.*, p. 265, p. 276, p. 282.

notion as paradoxical, then surely he must concede that it is contradictory. Conant states that it is not his intention to “defend or attack...*specific* charges of...unintelligibility” but “simply to clarify their logical structure.”<sup>70</sup> However, this underplays just how important clarifying and making sense of the logical structure of such charges is to Conant, because, given the above, his account of conceptual confusion, of Kierkegaard’s method, and thereby of the relationship between Kierkegaard and the later Wittgenstein stands or falls depending upon how his paradox is dealt with.

Conant’s next move is to attempt to dissolve the paradox to which he thinks Kierkegaard’s readers are subject. In attempting this dissolution Conant begins by distinguishing between words, or expressions, and the concepts they express. For “[n]either Nietzsche’s nor Kierkegaard’s point,” we are told, “is one about whether certain pieces of vocabulary have to be discarded. Their point is about what sort of concepts we are (presently) able to express with that vocabulary. Theirs is not a point therefore about what sort of *words* we have at our disposal, but about what sort of *use* we are able to make of those words—what concepts those words express.”<sup>71</sup> The point is not that certain words are unintelligible, for those words may now be used to express different concepts, and so just because one particular use of a word is problematic does not deem all uses of the same word so. The point of contention concerns the concepts that our words are able to express, and this is to be determined by the ways in which we can and cannot intelligibly use those words.

This point comes to the fore in Conant’s dispute with Beardsmore over the interpretation of Anscombe. The point of contention is said to be “about the conditions of intelligibly applying certain concepts—that is, that we fail to make sense when we attempt to use words...*in a very particular way*.”<sup>72</sup> The problem is not thought to concern all uses of a word, but only those particular uses in which that word expresses a concept which, Conant alleges, is no longer intelligible. Conant claims that it is on this point that Beardsmore gets Anscombe wrong. According to Conant, Beardsmore reads Anscombe as claiming that such an expression can have no meaning *per se*, and goes about trying to refute Anscombe by offering counter-examples of currently sensible uses of the word in ques-

70 Ibid., pp. 250 f.

71 Ibid., p. 267.

72 Ibid., p. 273, emphasis mine.

tion. As Conant apparently rightly notes, these counter-examples will fail to engage with Anscombe's argument; for that a word is currently used sensibly cannot of itself entail that it might have once been used to express a concept that is now unintelligible.

At this point Conant's proposed dissolution of his paradox becomes indistinguishable from his interpretation and defence of Anscombe's views. Quoting Anscombe, Conant states that what happens in such a case of unintelligibility is that "we transfer an expression from one context to another without transferring its use, and in which 'though we do not transfer its use we think we transfer some meaning.'" <sup>73</sup> What is apparently thought to happen in such cases is that although we do not use the word in the same way we previously have done, we think that it expresses the same concept or that it has the same meaning. In such cases "an *appearance* of meaning is engendered—an apparent meaning which, upon reflection, we perceive not to be a legitimate meaning but which we nevertheless take to be some sort of meaning." <sup>74</sup> The idea appears to be that this dissolves the paradox by denying that concepts literally survive the conditions of their own intelligibility. What is thought to survive is, rather, the appearance of meaning engendered when we transfer an expression, and think we transfer its meaning, from one context to another.

As a proposed dissolution of his paradox of unintelligibility the above is unsatisfactory, and for numerous reasons. For, Conant appears to have simply substituted the apparently more innocent sounding notion of an appearance of meaning for that of a concept that survives the conditions of its own intelligibility. Yet it is unclear how the notion of an appearance of meaning engendered by a no longer existing concept helps us; and since it is being asked to do the same work it should, I think, be subject to the same sceptical reservations as that of a concept surviving the conditions of its own intelligibility. This is certainly the case given the weight of interpretation that this notion is now being asked to bear. Rather than having to account for the existence of concepts outside of the conditions of their own intelligibility Conant now, surely, owes us an account of how it is that a non-existent concept can continue to appear meaningful to us. Indeed, given that such meanings are thought to appear to *us*, that is, to societies and social group such as Christendom, rather than to individuals, Conant needs to elaborate upon how this can be so without such meaning

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73 Ibid., p. 278.

74 Ibid., p. 279.

being conceptual. For one would think that if such meanings appear to social groups, then they must do so on the basis of some normativity.

Yet even if Conant could begin to answer some of these questions, there is a larger monster waiting in the wings. For Conant's notion of such apparent meanings is dependent upon the expression that gives rise to such appearances having a provisional sense and meaning. We are said to "transfer an expression from one context," in which it is presumably sensible, "to another":<sup>75</sup> presumably to a context in which it no longer makes sense. If this were now intended to be an account of *conceptual* confusion it *would* make sense in a situation in which a subject had a use for the concept in question, and then began to apply the term that expresses that concept in a confused way. However, this move is not open to Conant because, as we have already noted, the cases in which he is specifically interested are precisely those in which "we continue to employ certain words but *are no longer able to use them to express the concepts which those words formerly expressed.*"<sup>76</sup> The cases in which Conant (and his thinkers) are said to be interested are precisely those in which there are *no* sensible applications of the concept in question to act as the basis from which conceptual confusion (or apparent meaning) can arise.

Conant might respond to this by saying that he intends the above to be an account of the *genesis* of conceptual confusion (or apparent meaning), and that to get to the cases in which he is interested we need only imagine that the sensible use of the concept in question desists, while the nonsensical application of the term that served to express it persists (thereby serving to express the appearance of meaning). However, should Conant make this move we might fairly demand of him an answer to the following question: What is forcing us to describe such a situation as one in which the use of a term has been corrupted, and an apparent meaning generated, rather than one in which the use of the term has now changed such that it now expresses a different concept? To this important and problematic question we have no answer.

Yet even if we assume for the sake of argument that the notion of an apparent meaning left by a now non-existent concept is both unproblematic and intelligible, this is still an insufficient basis upon which to ground Conant's interpretation of Kierkegaard. The question is, then, can we conceivably substitute the notion of an appearance of meaning

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75 Conant, "Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe," p. 278.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 276, emphasis mine.

for that of a conceptual confusion and Conant's interpretation of Kierkegaard continue to work? The answer to this question is, I think, "No." Conant's dissolution of his paradox entails that the inhabitants of Christendom do not actually possess or express Christian concepts, but are simply subject to an appearance of meaning. Yet if this is the case then, once again, the situation of Kierkegaard's readers cannot be characterised as one of *conceptual* confusion at all. For on Conant's interpretation the target of Kierkegaard's work cannot be depicted as conceptual confusion, but must rather be understood as the apparent meanings which remain from now non-existent concepts.

On the basis of this point it should be apparent that Conant's attempt to dissolve the paradox that cripples his interpretation of Kierkegaard will not now allow his parallels between Kierkegaard and the later Wittgenstein to run. For if the situation of Kierkegaard's reader cannot be said to be one of conceptual confusion, a project of Wittgensteinian *conceptual* clarification as Conant has described it is not going to help. When trying to conceive of how Conant might ground his interpretation of Kierkegaard on the basis of the notion of an apparent meaning, once again, the details begin to come apart on us. For the apparent meaning of a now non-existent concept is also an insufficient basis upon which to characterise the inhabitants of Christendom as subject to grammatical confusion, and thereby to characterise Kierkegaard's method as one of grammatical investigation.<sup>77</sup> Specifically, Conant cannot now depict Kierkegaard as offering us "grammatical remarks." For in order for Conant's alleged examples to function *as* grammatical remarks it is, surely, essential that Kierkegaard's readers possess the concepts in virtue of which these are to be intelligible; indeed, this must be the case for them to *remark* upon *their* grammar. The same is true of the characterisation of Kierkegaard's method as one of offering his reader reminders, as in terms of Conant's reading there are now no sensible applications or uses of the concepts in question to be reminded of.

That Conant's attempt to resolve the contradiction that lies at the heart of his reading of Kierkegaard fails, entails that his account of the necessity Kierkegaard claims on behalf of his method of indirect communication cannot hold either. As outlined in the opening section of this article, Conant attributes such necessity to a logic of conceptual confu-

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77 Unless, of course, Conant is going to claim that such appearances of meaning have grammatical structure. In which case we would need to know why they do not count as conceptual.

sion. That confusion, we were told, necessitates an indirect treatment on the grounds that such an approach refrains from conceding to the reader that his, in fact unintelligible, views are intelligible. On this basis Conant characterised the authorial strategy of the *Postscript* as one that attempts to engage the reader in the very conceptual confusions that it ultimately seeks to undermine. Yet having followed Conant's views to their conclusion, the above characterisations of both reader and text cannot be drawn.<sup>78</sup> If we are to follow Conant's project to its logical conclusion, we must understand the *Postscript* as actively seeking to engage its reader in an appearance of meaning engendered by no-longer existing concepts. This point, if taken seriously, would raise serious questions as to how it could be possible for us to read the *Postscript* at all. This is certainly the case given Conant's tacit identification of Kierkegaard's readership with his own.

If we take Conant's reading seriously then we arrive in the following situation. The nonsense in which the *Postscript* tries to engage its readers, and ultimately dispel them from, is not simply the nonsense of conceptual confusion, but a nonsense that results from an appearance of meaning that has survived a now non-existent concept. That this should be the logical consequence of a project that began by taking issue with "virtually all of the secondary literature on both Kierkegaard and the early Wittgenstein,"<sup>79</sup> on the grounds of being committed to an unintelligible distinction between *kinds* of nonsense, is ironic to say the least. For against a lengthy tradition of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein scholarship Conant sought to maintain that "there are *no kinds of nonsense*. *All the nonsense there is, is old-fashioned, straightforward, garden variety, completely incomprehensible gibberish.*"<sup>80</sup> Given his penchant for characterising works of philosophy as ironic set-ups that lack any substantive philosophical content at all, this may be a conclusion that Conant embraces. Yet, as we have witnessed, in its descent into different kinds of nonsense we have good reason to question the intelligibility of Conant's own work on Kierkegaard and his relation to the later Wittgenstein.

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78 Conant cannot now characterise this difference by saying that the "difference between the sort of nonsense these authors themselves cultivate and the sort they see their readers talking is the difference between a self-conscious and an unwitting employment of nonsense" (Conant, "Putting Two and Two Together," p. 282).

79 Conant, "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?," p. 270.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 253, emphasis mine.

### VI. Conclusion

This article has considered Conant's attempt to account for the necessity Kierkegaard claims on behalf of his method, by claiming that it is attributable to cases of conceptual confusion. I have argued that Conant's account of conceptual confusion is contradictory. Conant formulates the tension at the heart of his reading as a problem, or paradox, of unintelligibility. In response to this I have argued that Conant fails to motivate the claim that his views result in a paradox, rather than a contradiction. Conant's attempted dissolution of his paradox fails, but even if it were to be successful, this would still be an insufficient basis upon which to ground his reading of Kierkegaard. The result of this is that Conant's account of conceptual confusion must be rejected; this rejection undermines his reading of Kierkegaard, and thereby his vision of the relationship between Kierkegaard and the later Wittgenstein.

While this paper is narrowly focused on a specific problem in Conant's interpretation of Kierkegaard, I believe that there are wider lessons to be learnt from it for Kierkegaard studies. For the methodological approach which leads Conant's interpretation to the inescapable impasse it finally faces is grounded in his desire to read Kierkegaard through the lens of Wittgenstein's work and thought. In this respect Conant's approach can be said to be representative of much of what has recently, and continues to, pass for Kierkegaard scholarship. It is common for commentaries to attempt to explicate Kierkegaard's thought through the work of later figures without *any* prior attempt to do justice to how it appears in his more immediate historical and cultural context. Yet, as has recently been suggested, if Kierkegaard's thought is *inescapably* tied to his immediate historical and intellectual context then an interpretative culture which only ever (or predominantly) licences the terms of more recent thought runs the risk of missing out on the views of the actual historical Kierkegaard *altogether*. It could just be that the desire to make Kierkegaard's thought amenable to contemporary philosophy has resulted in the repression of the historical Kierkegaard in favour of an anachronistic myth. The exploration of this suggestion must, however, await another occasion.

