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ON STRAIGHT AND CROOKED READINGS:
WHY THE *POSTSCRIPT* DOES NOT SELF-DESTRUCT

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Afsluttende Uvidenskabelig Efterskrift (1846; Concluding Unscientific Postscript), although attributed by Søren Kierkegaard to a pseudonymous author, Johannes Climacus, has often been seen as the main statement of "Kierkegaard's philosophy." Indeed, it seems to many of us that we hear Kierkegaard's own voice more fully in this work than in most of his signed writings - the *Edifying Discourses* with their very self-consciously rhetorical, quasi-sermonic style.¹ A number of recent interpretations, however, have argued that, in order to take the pseudonymity of the *Postscript* seriously, we must see it, not as a statement of what Kierkegaard himself believed, but as an artful ploy. According to these views, Climacus is set up by Kierkegaard to blunder into making various errors, which we, the readers, are supposed to detect and thus become immunised against.

In this paper, I shall provide a critical examination of what seems to me the most interesting and challenging of these "ironical" interpretations of Climacus. This was first formulated by James Conant,² but I shall concentrate more on what is perhaps the most accessible version of it, which is to be found in Stephen Mulhall's book *Faith and Reason*.³ Conant's ideas have already received some very effective criticism from John Lippitt,⁴ and my discussion here is intended to supplement his work.

I

A particularly interesting feature of the Conant/Mulhall reading is that they draw close parallels between Kierkegaard and Ludwig Wittgenstein. That such parallels exist and that they are significant, I entirely agree. But I think Conant draws them wrongly, and that he goes astray in large part by trying to find parallels between the *Postscript* and Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), rather than focusing on

1 It is notable that in Kierkegaard's major non-"Edifying" signed work, *En literair Anmeldelse. To Tidsaldre* (1846; *Two Ages: the Age of Revolution and the Present Age. A Literary Review*), we find a style that, in its mercurial shifts between abstract philosophising, satire, humour and passionate exhortation, is strikingly like Climacus'.

2 See Conant, 1989, 1993 and 1995.

3 Mulhall. Subsequent references to this book will be indicated by page numbers in the text. I do not, incidentally, intend to imply that Conant's and Mulhall's views on these matters are in all respects identical.

4 See Lippitt and Hutto and Lippitt; also Lippitt's essay in this volume.

Wittgenstein's later work. Conant's idea is that the 'Revocation' at the end of the *Postscript*, where Climacus states that "everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked,"⁵ is to be understood in the same way as Wittgenstein's penultimate proposition in the *Tractatus*: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognises them as nonsensical He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright."⁶

Wittgenstein says this because the theory of language which the main body of the *Tractatus* appears to advance is a remarkably restrictive one. According to this theory, meaningful language can only be about contingent matters of fact; therefore, the necessary structure of language itself cannot be spoken of. Which means that the *Tractatus* itself must conclude in a sort of self-immolation.

Trying to understand the *Postscript* on this model, Conant and Mulhall want to see the 'Revocation' as a similar acknowledgment that the book attempts to do something that it itself forbids. Accordingly, what it leaves us with cannot be a body of doctrine, but rather a demonstration of the incoherence into which we will fall if we give in to a certain intellectual temptation; a demonstration that will, hopefully, free us from that temptation. So, at the heart of the Conant interpretation is the claim that there is some conflict within the *Postscript*; some way in which it is trying to do something which it says cannot be done.

There are, however, at least two, not obviously compatible, ways in which Mulhall and Conant try to make this point. One argument is that Climacus is a disinterested, aesthetic observer, trying to understand the nature of ethical and religious practices from a neutral, objective standpoint. But what he tells us is that they cannot be understood from such a standpoint. Hence the self-contradiction. However, as Lippitt has shown in detail, this argument is based on a misunderstanding. Climacus is not a disinterested aesthete, but a humorist, and as he explains, humour is a religious category. Indeed, Climacus refers quite explicitly to Religiousness A as that "within the boundaries of which I have my existence."⁷ So when Mulhall says that Climacus "denies that religion has a foothold in his life"(49), this is a straightforward error. He does deny that he is a *Christian*, but that is a different matter.

Climacus, for all his copious use of irony as well as humour, and despite his often rather flippant and teasing tone, is a seriously concerned ethico-religious individual, not an aesthete. Accordingly, there is no problem in his talking about the ethical and religious spheres, since he exists within these spheres; so the contradiction Conant and Mulhall want to find cannot lie in Climacus being an objectively minded aesthete talking about what he says can only be understood subjectively. Their other suggestion is that the real problem lies in Climacus being a self-styled subjective thinker who actually does produce objective theories. He claims to be an existentially concerned religious individual, while actually going in for speculative theorising on the sly. They think that Climacus starts off well in Part One of the *Postscript*, by making purely "grammatical" points (in a Wittgensteinian sense) (23-35). However, they allege that Climacus then starts slipping away from this legitimate kind of philosophising and into presenting his

5 Kierkegaard, 1992, I 619.

6 Wittgenstein, 1961, 6.54.

7 Kierkegaard, 1992, I 557.

own objective theories about the nature of Christianity and of ethico-religious belief. Eventually, he ends up talking nonsense himself, in attempting to represent Christianity as the Absolute Paradox (41-45).

This claim, that Climacus gradually slips from sense into nonsense, is supposed to justify the reading of the 'Revocation' at the end of the *Postscript* in the light of the *Tractatus*' concluding self-immolation. But far from supporting that interpretation, it actually undermines it. If the 'Revocation' of the *Postscript* is to be usefully compared to the end of the *Tractatus*, then it must function in the same way, that is, to repudiate the whole book as ultimately unintelligible. But this would mean revoking the earlier "grammatical" enquiries which Conant and Mulhall approve of, as well as the "nonsense" which they think Climacus slips into later. The 'Revocation' tells us that the whole book is "revoked." Since not even Conant wants to claim that the whole book is simply nonsense, then the 'Revocation' - which does apply to the whole book - cannot be understood as a declaration that what went before is simply nonsense. In other words, the 'Revocation' cannot be doing what the final propositions of the *Tractatus* do.

There is a further problem for Conant's reading of the 'Revocation'; it would seem to make the pseudonymity of the *Postscript* redundant. If Kierkegaard ascribed the *Postscript* to Johannes Climacus in order to distance himself from its arguments, then why have *Climacus* himself revoke the work? Surely Kierkegaard could have produced the effect that Conant thinks he aimed at, simply by showing Climacus becoming seduced despite himself into talking nonsense. The pseudonymity itself would serve to indicate that we need not take the nonsense at face value as what Kierkegaard wanted to communicate; just showing Climacus falling over his own feet would have been enough to make the point. But why in that case have Climacus revoke the work, if that revocation functions, as Conant supposes it does, to tell us not to take the work at face value? On Conant's interpretation, instead of Kierkegaard indirectly communicating something by letting Climacus make a fool of himself, Climacus himself directly communicates to us that he has made a fool of himself. But if the book is to be written and then revoked, in order to show us that one cannot write such books, why bother with Climacus at all? Kierkegaard could have written it all in his own name, and then revoked it all. So the presence of the Revocation within a pseudonymous work itself suggests that Conant's interpretation is seriously mistaken.

II

In this section I want to consider (part of) Mulhall's account of how Kierkegaard sets Climacus up for a fall. According to Mulhall, when Climacus slides away from his legitimate grammatical enquiries, he comes up with two main arguments to justify the choice of a religious, and furthermore, a specifically Christian way of life. (These can be seen as successive stages of a single argument.)

The first argument is that we are driven through the stages of life, from the aesthetic to the ethical to the religious, in order to unify our selves; to overcome the psychological disintegration that afflicts the aesthete by learning, in a deeper and deeper sense, what it is to will one thing (37-40). This process will ultimately lead me "to realise that meaning

can only be given to one's life as a whole by relating to something outside it" (39). Such an ultimate standard beyond my own life is the absolute Good, which is just another term for God. Mulhall then criticises this argument on the following grounds:

a) it supposes that one can stand outside the stages and judge which one is most adequate according to a common criterion (i.e. which enables us to most fully develop a coherent selfhood). But Climacus' own emphasis on the situatedness of human existence makes it clear that we cannot occupy such an external point of view (45-46);

b) it is based on a reading of Kierkegaard's other pseudonymous writings which interprets them as stages in a single overall argumentative strategy, and therefore "fails to respect the integrity and specificity of each pseudonym" (46). He passes over their "careful delineations of concrete individuals in specific relations and situations," thus "filleting them, transforming them into avocations of easily summarisable theses" (46-47).

c) Climacus takes the pseudonymous texts to be answering the question he was motivated to ask by his graveyard experience, when he witnessed an old man lamenting that his son had died outside of orthodox Christianity, having been let astray by philosophical speculation.⁸ But he has missed the point of that experience by going off on a philosophical project which someone else could also execute (and in fact the other pseudonyms do), rather than concentrate on giving his own life a meaning (47).

Mulhall also considers, and criticises, a second argument which he finds in Climacus and which is supposed to take us from Religiousness A to Christianity. We are supposed to do this because human existence is inherently paradoxical - characterised by tensions between body and soul, actuality and possibility etc. - and Christianity, by increasing the paradox to an absolute level, is thus the doctrine best suited to such a paradoxical being (40-43). I shall not consider this argument or Mulhall's criticism of it here, mainly for reasons of space. But also because, while the first argument Mulhall discusses is at any rate (a distorted version of) something that can actually be found in the text, I think it is a serious misreading of Climacus to suppose he is presenting anything much like this second argument.⁹

According to Mulhall, these bad arguments are not the result of Kierkegaard being confused; rather, he has devised them as a way of showing us - and hopefully directing us away from - the final temptation: to make a philosophy of religion out of demonstrating that there can be no philosophy of religion. If, however, Climacus' arguments do not have the flaws Mulhall attributes to them, this interpretation will be undermined. I shall now contribute to this undermining by attempting a point-by-point rebuttal of Mulhall's three-pronged critique of the first argument:

a) Neither Climacus nor Kierkegaard supposes that one can adopt a position outside the stages and judge them all according to a common criterion. Rather, it is necessary to work through the stages for oneself. There *is* a common criterion, but it is not something

⁸ Kierkegaard, 1992, I 234-41.

⁹ Mulhall's critique of the argument is still of interest, however; it depends upon a doctrine about the nature of nonsense - one that denies that there can be degrees or gradations of nonsense - that plays a major role in Conant's work, and is derived in large part from Cora Diamond's interpretations of Frege and Wittgenstein (Diamond). To discuss this adequately would take another paper, but there is some effective criticism of the Conant/Diamond line by Dan Hutto in Lippitt and Hutto, 1998.

that can be understood clearly at any of the stages; the progress through the stages is precisely a progress towards a clearer understanding of the criterion. The aesthete starts with an in-choate sense that there is something missing from her life; as she gets more reflective, she conceptualises it as a lack of unity in her life. But she can now start to understand what the ethical is offering her; she will be able to at least get a grip on what ethical demands might mean. Similarly, once someone has started looking for meaning and unity in her life, then the questions raised by religion start to become meaningful for her. Kierkegaard's account of the stages does not come from a perspective outside any stages, but is a retrospective from the religious point of view.¹⁰

b) There is a difference between giving a synoptic overview of a subject and approaching it in a wrongly objective manner. The pseudonymous texts do provide a continuous chain of arguments, and were meant to do so. To read them together and as developing a cumulative argument does not, of course, have to mean reading them as successive volumes of a systematic treatise. One can perfectly well read them as contributing to a single strategy while still respecting the difference between the pseudonyms; indeed, to understand the strategy one has to understand the differences. And one can still recognise on such a reading that the detailed evocation of particular individuals is crucial to the purpose of the pseudonymous writings. Climacus nowhere suggests that his summary is a replacement for the works themselves. Would Mulhall say that one could not write about the development of ideas about the nature of human existence in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels because to do so one would be failing to respect their specificity and concreteness? A bad critic may do so. But Mulhall does not seem to allow there could be such a thing as good criticism, which sends us back to the texts rather than makes us try to replace them.

c) One authentically religious response to the graveyard scene might have been to say, "Away with vain philosophy! I shall concentrate on living a life of simple piety." But there is no reason at all to say that that would have been the only authentically religious response. Granted that it brings home the way in which objective reflection can be religiously damaging, a proper response for a religious but intellectually talented individual might well be to investigate the confusion between religious subjectivity and philosophical objectivity. By doing so, one may extirpate the confusion within oneself - which isn't to be got rid of by simply smiting one's breast and making a vow never to open a philosophy book again¹¹ - and also be of service to others. The only problem with taking this as a religious task would be if this were itself a project that could only be pursued objectively. And this brings us to what is really the deepest error of the Conant/Mulhall reading.

Mulhall seems to assume that philosophical thinking has to be objective, and that, since objectivity is out of place in religion, there can be no religious philosophising. But this assumption is deeply un-Kierkegaardian; it wholly obscures Kierkegaard's real achievement and takes us right back to the crude old view of him as a wild irrationalist.

¹⁰ For detailed accounts of this process through the stages, and of why it is neither irrational, nor explicable from a detached, "objective" point of view, see Ferraira, Piety, and Rudd.

¹¹ Consider Pastor Adler's religious "awakening," which led him to burn his Hegelian writings, but did not, according to Kierkegaard, do much to free him from continuing to think in a deeply muddled Hegelian fashion. See Kierkegaard, 1998, *passim*.

For Kierkegaard's whole point is that there can be a passionate, interested, subjective rationality, which is no less rational for that.¹² The "Subjective Thinker" is still a *thinker*, i.e. a rational intellect. Mulhall and Conant's apparently very sophisticated reading of Kierkegaard collapses back into the crudest old caricatures of him as an irrationalist, as if he were saying that we must reject reason because reason = objectivity and objectivity is bad. What he is arguing for is a conception of rationality that is situated and interested, not "pure" or "abstract". Because he clings to the dualism of reason and emotion that rules out the possibility of a genuinely passionate rationality, Mulhall supposes that if the progress through the stages *were* a rational one, it would have to be a matter of pure logic, understandable from an external point - and since it can't be, he concludes that the process can't be rational at all.

III

If Climacus was presenting objective theories about ethics and religion, that would indeed contradict his stated approach. But I can see no reason to suppose that he is. Conant has a genuinely important point to make in comparing (some of) what Climacus does to the later Wittgenstein's "grammatical" investigations. He goes wrong by not taking these analogies seriously enough, and by emphasising instead the alleged similarities between the *Postscript* and the *Tractatus*. I have already tried to show how this leads him astray. But if we do take the hint that Conant provides but fails to properly follow up, and look more consistently than he does to the later than the early Wittgenstein, then this can do a lot to illuminate the nature of Climacus' investigations.

Wittgenstein sees concepts as having meanings only within the contexts in which they are used, and argues that their meanings can only be understood if they are placed in those contexts. Philosophical confusions arise when an attempt is made to understand concepts in a decontextualised manner. Wittgenstein's philosophical therapy consists in returning concepts to the contexts in which they are actually used, where they have their life and their meaning. "What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday sense."¹³ This gives us no new information; it reminds us of what we already knew, but blinded ourselves to in our rush to create abstract, objective theories.

Climacus, too, is concerned, not to provide us with any more knowledge, but to enable us to understand correctly what we already know: "My main thought was that, because of the copiousness of knowledge, people in our day have forgotten what it means to *exist* and what *inwardness* is."¹⁴ Conant argues that Climacus, by *insisting* on his reminders, transforms them into philosophical theories. This seems to me to be a mis-reading. Climacus does not advance any interesting new *theory* to the effect that religious and ethical teaching should be understood subjectively; rather he reminds us of the contexts within which ethical and religious concepts do have their meanings. And - rightly or wrongly (I think rightly) - he claims that these contexts *are* essentially personal ones; ones in which each of us asks as the individual that he or she is, what meaning does my

¹² This is a central theme in C.S. Evans' writings on Kierkegaard. See Evans, 1983 and 1992.

¹³ Wittgenstein, 1958, # 116.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, 1992, I 249.

life have for me? The whole argument about Objective and Subjective truth is a grammatical one in the Wittgensteinian sense: an attempt to remind us of the contexts in which certain concepts operate, and to bring us back from the metaphysical fantasies of "Pure Thought" to the contexts of self-examination and existential concern.

Lippitt has suggested that the 'Revocation' simply functions as a humorous disclaiming of authority by Climacus. I agree with that, but I think something more is going on, and this is best understood in comparison with the later, not the early Wittgenstein. Climacus spells out the point of the Revocation when he says "I have no opinion."¹⁵ And Wittgenstein says exactly the same thing: "In all questions we discuss I have no opinion."¹⁶ He repeatedly denies that he has any *thesis* to put forward. But in his later work he does not repudiate what he does say as nonsense; rather, he insists that it must be understood as a collection of "grammatical" reminders, not as substantive claims. I think this is also what Climacus means by revoking the *Postscript*; it is meant as a warning to us not to read the book as expressing a theory, but to take it as a series of reminders of what we already knew, but had forgotten. But there need be nothing nonsensical about such reminders themselves.

IV

Conant's and Mulhall's readings of the *Postscript* constitute an interesting and indeed valuable hermeneutical experiment. But as with many experiments, what is instructive about it is the way it fails. And that it does fail is important. For their interpretation fails to recognise Kierkegaard's central philosophical achievement, which was to show us how there can be a passionate, interested rationality; that reason can be demythologised without being abandoned. Reasoning is an activity carried on by finite, embodied, temporal creatures - the idea of a "Pure Reason" detached from our humanity is a myth. And one of its dangers is that those who abandon that idea will still suppose that rationality depends on this fantasised notion of total objectivity and abstraction from all human concerns. In which case the baby of rationality will be thrown out with the bath water of "Pure Thought."

Though in a very subtle way, it is this irrationalism that Conant's interpretation is serving. For him, articulate, reasoned argument is associated with the notion of objectivity which Climacus (and Kierkegaard) condemn in the ethical and religious spheres. Hence he concludes that if Climacus is offering rational arguments, he must be going in for the sort of Objective thinking which he himself condemns, and is therefore caught up in self-refutation - a self-refutation deliberately engineered in order to show us the futility of any attempt to reason about ethics or religion. But the real moral of the *Postscript* is that rationality can be separated from the philosophical fantasies which have grown up around it. To reason need not mean indulging in the illegitimate objectivism

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, 1992, I 619.

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, 1982, 97. Quoted in Conant, 1995, 269.

that Climacus condemns; and his own reasoning is a paradigm of how one can reason responsibly, in a non-fantastical manner. As he himself says of *Either/Or*:

There is no didacticising, but this does not mean there is no thought-content; to think is one thing and to exist in what has been thought is something else. Existing in relation to thinking is not something that follows by itself, any more than it is thoughtlessness.¹⁷

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, 1992, I 254-55.

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