Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 4 | Issue 3

Article 6

7-1-1987

Kierkegaard's Christian Imperative

Patrick Goold

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Goold, Patrick (1987) "Kierkegaard's Christian Imperative," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil19874330

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol4/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

KIERKEGAARD'S CHRISTIAN IMPERATIVE

Patrick Goold

This paper describes a strategy for defending some of the core claims of Christianity from evidentialist critics. The strategy is neither epistemological nor based on considerations of 'proper basicity'. Indeed, this strategy, if successful, shows Christian faith to be not merely permissible but ethically obligatory. It does so by taking seriously the claim that faith is a virtue (in the classical sense) and that a reflecting conscience will discover this. The paper also hopes to contribute to Kierkegaard scholarship by offering a new interpretation both of *Sickness Unto Death* and, by implication, of Kierkegaard's general significance for philosophy of religion.

Bernard Williams writes in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, "the issues about religious ethics are issues about the human impulses that expressed themselves in it, and they should be faced in those terms." He continues, "for those who do not believe in a religious ethics, there is some evasion in continuing to argue about its structure: it distracts attention from the significant question of what such outlooks tell us about humanity."¹ Now the first assertion is one with which Kierkegaard would fully agree. All of his writings, and especially *Sickness Unto Death*, the book I wish to discuss in this paper, take as their starting point human impulses of this sort and make explaining these impulses their final desideratum. Kierkegaard and Williams differ, however, in their conclusions, Williams thinking that this line of inquiry moves "in a direction that will destroy religion,"² Kierkegaard that it reveals the practical necessity of having faith. *Sickness Unto Death* is, as I read it, about the structure of religious ethics in a broad sense, and its final conclusion is that faith and human virtue are not dissociable. Since it starts from the acknowledged fact that certain human feelings and impulses frequently are manifest, Kierkegaard's argument is no distraction, nor can it simply be ignored by the unbeliever. For these reasons I have thought it worth looking at. What follows is an attempt to make the argument I find in *Sickness Unto Death*³ explicit and to justify it as a reading of Kierkegaard.

I

The main body of SUD begins:

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what

is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.

This paragraph contains five significant predications about the self:

- A) Spirit is the self.
- B) The self is a relation that relates itself to itself.
- C) The self is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation.
- D) The self is not the relation but the relation's relating itself to itself.
- E) The self is a synthesis
 - i) of the infinite and the finite.
 - ii) of the eternal and the temporal,
 - iii) of possibility and necessity.

Later in the same short section the following is asserted:

F) The self is a derived, established relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another.

The opening paragraph does not say that the self is a synthesis, but that "a human being is a synthesis." It follows however, that (1) since human being is spirit and spirit is the self, human being involves being a self, and hence (2) being a self, like being human, involves a synthesis. This inference highlights two problems for any interpretation of the passage quoted. First, the sense given to 'is' in these passages appears to vary, being sometimes the 'is' of identity and sometimes the 'is' of predication. How does one sort out which is which? Secondly, Anti-Climacus makes varying and apparently inconsistent use of the definite and indefinite articles. For example, 'spirit' gets no article at all, while 'self' takes 'the' throughout until the last sentence, where one finds reference to 'a self'. The problem: although it seems natural to infer that being human involves being a self as in 1 above, considered as a synthesis, "a human being is still not a self." One is forced to conclude that there is some important difference between *the* self and *a* self. Saying what this difference is must wait, however.

A more important obstacle to understanding the quoted passage is the apparent contradiction between B and F, on the one hand, and C and D, on the other. The key to understanding the sentence in which B, C, and D appear as components is understanding in what sense the 'or' that connects B and C is meant. There are at least three possibilities: 'or' might indicate exclusive disjunction, inclusive disjunction, or, as it sometimes does in colloquial English, apposition. D is consistent with the first possibility. On this view Anti-Climacus could be read

as making a disjunction-elimination argument: either B or C; not B; therefore, C. While this reconciles B, C, and D, however, it falters on F, which contains both disjuncts. The second possibility would make both the relation and the relation's relating spoken of in the quoted passage things Anti-Climacus would call a self. D cannot be reconciled with this possibility. This leaves the third possibility, which seems the best reading to me. On this view the 'or' is being used as it is in the sentence "Metal rusts, or oxidizes, more quickly in salt water than in fresh." It is shorthand for 'better yet,' 'to say the same thing more clearly,' or 'more strictly,' and the fifth full sentence of the paragraph could be paraphrased as follows:

While it is logically correct, and a convenient shorthand, to say that the self is a relation that relates itself to itself, it would be better to say that it is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; that is to say, strictly speaking the self never *is* the relation, but rather the relation's relating itself to itself.

This interpretation reconciles B, C, and F and fits nicely with much else in the exposition of Anti-Climacus. The B-formulation is used many places in SUD, and a successful interpretation must legitimize this. Considered strictly from a logical point of view, it is perhaps correct to say that the relation is the self. But humanly speaking, the self is acquired in time, and must be re-acquired in every succeeding moment. Hence, this relation never simply is, but is always coming to be. (See, for example, SUD, p. 17.) It is less misleading, therefore, to put the emphasis on the *action* of self-relation.

A third problem with B, C, and F is their apparent circularity. They seem to presuppose the very thing they set out to explain. For example, if "a self is a relation that relates itself to itself" is a definition of selfhood, the definiendum appears illicitly in the definiens. The solution to this difficulty has two parts.

The first is the notion of the self as a *positive* unity, rather than a merely negative one, i.e. the notion of the self as a *willing*. This notion is introduced in the second paragraph of the first part of SUD. 'Negative unity' here means 'a unity that is the result of an act of negation.' In the philosophical vocabulary of the 19th Century any sort of change is a negation. A carpenter, for example, negates a piece of wood in making it into a desk. In acquiring the new determinations of deskhood, it ceases to be what it was, a simple piece of wood. Anti-Climacus presents the synthesis of body and soul as an example of a negative unity. Here soul, pure immateriality, and pure matter join, and in the process change (are negated), to yield the unity that is a living body. The original terms disappear in the new unity, and for this reason it is called negative. A positive unity, on the other hand, is brought about by a third thing standing outside the other two terms of the relation. It brings these terms into relation while remaining

unchanged itself. The terms themselves are not altered, their relation being one more akin to juxtaposition than intermixture. In the case of the self, this third thing that does the relating is the will, the relation of the terms is an act of will, i.e. it is posited, and hence their unity is *posit*-ive.

The second part of the solution draws on the fact that the will can be reflected upon itself. By this I mean primarily that in addition to immediate desires, it is possible to have desires about desires, as when someone watching his weight wants a dish of ice cream and at the same time wants not to want that ice cream. Butler noted this and made it an important part of his ethics:

Brute creatures are impressed and actuated by various instincts and propensions: so also are we. But additional to this, we have a capacity of reflecting upon actions and characters, and making them an object to our thought; and on doing this, we naturally and unavoidably approve some actions, under the peculiar view of their being virtuous and of good desert; and disapprove others, as vicious and of ill desert.⁴

Following Butler, I style this capacity for reflection 'conscience.'

If the notions of positive unity and of conscience are allowed, then the problem of B's circularity is solved in the following way: the integral human self is analyzed into two constituent selves and each 'self' in the definiendum of B refers to a different thing than does the one in the definiens. Let us call the list of all 'instincts and propensions' that move a person directly, whether they be occurrent or dispositional, that person's *actual self*. And let us call the set of those propensions such that upon reflection a person would conclude that he ought to have them that person's *ideal self*. And finally, let us call the integral self that results when a person's actual self and his ideal self are held in a positive unity that person's *spiritual self*. B can then be paraphrased into these terms as follows:

B*) The spiritual self is a relation that relates an actual self to an ideal self. Since each of the senses of 'self' picks out a different thing, the problem of circularity is solved.⁵

The notion of the self as synthesis introduced in Proposition E above expands this description of integral selfhood and its components. It specifies more closely what sort of relation it is that is referred to in B*, and it gives significant labels to the two relata.

The relation of actual to ideal self is, says Anti-Climacus, a *synthesis* (Synthese). In general, a synthesis is any relation between two or more items in which the items stand combined in a new unity. There are, however, both negative and positive unities. It is the point of the second paragraph of SUD I.A.a to limit the relation between the two categories of self to syntheses producing a positive unity. This limitation serves sharply to distinguish self-synthesis of the

Anti-Climacean kind from the process of mediation (*Vermittlung*) that Hegel takes to be the origin of selfhood. In the negative unity of Hegelian mediation both elements lose their original identity. Moreover, this union is eventually (at the stage of Absolute Knowing) a happy one, wherein the elements find both rest and their fulfillment. The positive unity, as I pointed out above, is a *willed* unity, and hence extrinsic to the structure of the two relata. The synthesis that yields a positive unity appears to be far more a *juxtapositioning* of elements, than their melding. Finally, this juxtapositioning seems intrinsically unable to find a point of rest and fulfillment. This follows from the nature of the relata.

Anti-Climacus gives three sets of names to the elements of the self. This does not mean that there are six items involved in three distinct syntheses wherever there is a spiritual self, but only that the relata may be viewed from three different aspects. (1) Finitude/infinity is a distinction with regards to limits. One's actual self is limited by the who, what, when, where of the physical world. Sex and stature, for example, are boundaries of selfhood in this sense. One's ideal self, on the other hand, is limited only by the power of one's imagination.⁶ It is, in practical terms, infinite. Furthermore, to the extent that one takes the source of the obligatory desires that make up the ideal self to be God, this self will be infinite in the sense of being 'of the infinite.' (2) Necessity/possibility is the same dichotomy seen from the inside.⁷ One's actual self is shaped at least in part by one's animal nature. To the extent that one actually *has* a desire, to that extent one is driven by the inner necessity of its natural laws. The ideal self, on the other hand, is never simply attained. It is always a goal to be striven after, and if, per impossibile, it should be attained, it must be re-acquired in the next moment. Hence, it is never more than a possibility. This I take to be the meaning of Anti-Climacus' difficult remark about the self, "Insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is a possibility." (SUD, p. 35) (3) Temporality/eternality is a distinction with regard to durability. The mark of the temporal is changeability, and the actual self is obviously constantly changing. The desires to which one feels obligated, the ideal self, however, is (or ought to be) eternal. First, in the sense that one thinks of its oughtness independently of any concrete situation, and secondly, in the sense of being 'of the eternal' to the extent that one takes its contents to be specified by God.

The above points to the strongly normative character of Anti-Climacus' account of the ideal self. The function of the ideal is to provide a norm, but one could conceive of the actual content of the ideal as open to considerable variation, both within groups of different people and within the same person at different times. It even seems likely that in the movement of scouting one's inventory of actual desires and in making decisions about changing it, one would see new and hitherto un contemplated possibilities for an ideal. A connoisseur of wines, for example, struggling to put together the ideal cellar, might discover yet better

vintages in his search to find the ones on his shopping list. His ideal, then, has changed. In a higher sense, however, Anti-Climacus wants to make the ideal of human selfhood independent of particular persons. There is a single ideal self, he argues that is ideal for all and to which all men are obligated to conform, even if all men do not in fact have it consciously before them as an ideal.

The acquisition of this ideal is a process. For the sake of being able to describe the stages in this process Anti-Climacus will want to speak of, in addition to simple failures at synthesis, 'spiritual selves' that are such by synthesizing an actual self with a *deficient* ideal. One must make a distinction, therefore, not only between actual and ideal selves, but also between one's actual ideal self and the ideal (or genuine) ideal. With this distinction in mind, the question of how to interpret the strange use of '*the* self' and to distinguish it from '*a* self' can be answered. Failure to be *a* self (one self among many) is a failure to synthesize one's actual self with any ideal self whatsoever. To perform the synthesis (but with a deficient ideal), and in this way to attain a deficient ideal, is to become *a* self. *The* self (the one and only self of its sort), on the other hand, is acquired by synthesis with the genuine ideal.

Now conscience is the faculty by means of which one discovers the deficiency of one's ideal and moves toward a more adequate one.⁸ In the next section the operation of this faculty is more closely described.

II

It is self-deception and weakness of will that keep an individual from seeing the ideal ideal and making it his or her object. If the conscience is to direct one toward the genuine ideal, it will have to perform at least two functions: self-clarification and restoration of the will.

"It is imperative to have clarity about oneself . . ." (SUD, p. 47) The only path to clarity of this sort is critical reflection on the ideal self. This is the cognitive element of conscience. What is in effect an excellent description of this element of conscience is found in Ortega's *History as a System*:⁹

Man invents for himself a program of life, a static form of being, that gives a satisfactory answer to the difficulties posed for him by circumstance. He essays this form of life, attempts to realize this imaginary character he has resolved to be. He embarks on the essay full of illusions and prosecutes the experiment with thoroughness. This means that he comes to *believe* deeply that this character is his real being. But meanwhile the experience has made apparent the shortcomings and limitations of the said program of life. It does not solve all the difficulties, and it creates new ones of its own. When first seen it was full face, with the

light shining upon it: hence the illusions, the enthusiasm, the delights believed in store. With the back view its inadequacy is straightaway revealed. Man thinks out another program of life. But his second program is drawn up in the light, not only of circumstance, but also of the first. One aims at avoiding in the new project the drawbacks of the old. In the second, therefore, the first is still active; it is preserved in order to be avoided. Inexorably man shrinks from being what he was. On the second project of being, the second thorough experiment, there follows a third, forged in the light of the second and the first, and so on.

I quote this at length because I believe it describes precisely the sort of work the intellectual side of conscience does for Anti-Climacus, and describes it more clearly and forcefully than he manages to do. Still, it is discernible in the SUD account. For one thing, the principle is propounded that “the ever increasing intensity of despair depends upon the degree of consciousness or is proportionate to its increase . . .” (SUD, p. 42) Since objectively everyone who is not a Christian in the deepest spiritual sense is, for Anti-Climacus, in despair, to be subjectively more intensely in despair is to have a truer appreciation of one’s real situation. And at least one part of the increase in consciousness is the product of reflection upon the value of one’s ideal, or in other words, is the product of the cognitive element of conscience. One gains greater awareness of the reasons one holds the ideal one does, and of the extent to which this ideal is internally consistent. Hence, the animating principle behind Anti-Climacus’ “progress in despair” is just the sort of critical reflection described by Ortega.

Secondly, the language in which Anti-Climacus frames his descriptions of each new transition has the same strong flavor of the experimental that Ortega’s does. The spiritless man, for example, copes with despair by giving up his project of pure immediacy for the reflected immediacy of the crowd, and he does this on the basis of certain refractory experiences. Says Anti-Climacus: “He now acquires a little understanding of life, he learns to copy others, how they manage their lives—and he now proceeds to live the same way.” (SUD, p. 52) If the despairer is more reflective, the experimental-critical features of his reasoning are yet more pronounced:

with the aid of the reflection that he has, he attempts to sustain his self, and this constitutes another difference from the purely immediate man. He perceives that abandoning the self is a transaction, and thus he does not become apoplectic when the blow falls, as the immediate person does; reflection helps him to understand that there is much he can lose without losing the self. He makes concessions; he is able to do so—and why? Because to a certain degree he has separated his self from externalities, because he has a dim idea that there may even be something

eternal in the self. (SUD, pp. 54-5)

And so it goes. The section of SUD entitled "Despair over the earthly or over something earthly" is very rich in its descriptions of these 'coping-strategies.' In this cycle of reflection and adaptation one moves from unconscious to conscious despair, from wishing to be someone else to wishing to be no self at all, and then to letting externalities define oneself. Eventually one leaves behind these forms of despair over particular worldly projects and enters the stage of despair "over the earthly in toto." At each stage clarity about oneself is gained.

To understand how it is that conscience can overcome weakness of will it is necessary to recall the other factor in despair, namely to recall that "there is indeed in all darkness and ignorance a dialectical interplay between knowing and willing." (SUD, p. 48) The stress has been on the reflective and experimental side so far, but this is untrue to the dialectical nature of the process. Actually changes in the strength of one's resolve (one's passion, as Kierkegaard would call it) occur *pari passu* with reflective changes in viewpoint. Moreover, it is not only that the passion finds a new object, which is true but obvious, but that *it becomes more intense*.¹⁰ This is especially clear in the description of the move to despair over the earthly in toto: "When the self in imagination despairs with infinite passion over something of this world, its infinite passion changes this particular thing, this something, into the world *in toto* . . ." (SUD, p. 60) To reach this point one's passion must be infinite. Why? Because if one's project meant less to one, then one would simply abandon it for another.

But how does one get into such a state? Anti-Climacus is silent on this point, but Ortega once again has an explanation that fits in nicely with the Anti-Climacian account. He writes:¹¹

I cannot now "be Hermione's lover." But why? The point is this, that being a man of years I have already had time to be the lover of Cidalisa and the lover of Arsinoe and the lover Glykeia, and I know now what "being a lover" is. I know its excellences, I know also its limitations. In short, I have experienced to the full that form of life that is called "loving a woman," and, frankly, I have had enough. And so it happens that the "cause" of my not being a lover tomorrow is precisely the fact that I have been one. If I had not been a lover, if I had not already experienced love to the full, I should be Hermione's lover.

Here, then, is a new dimension in this strange reality of life. Before us lie the diverse possibilities of being, but behind us lies what we have been. And what we have been acts negatively on what we can be.

Ortega does not reach despair over the earthly in toto; he "has had enough" of being a lover and has moved on to another project. But what if he had persisted?

What if he had passionately chosen the erotic, decided to define himself above all in terms of "being a lover"? Then, presumably, having failed with Cidalisa, it would be even more important to him to succeed with the next. But he finds it impossible to "be a lover" to Arsinoe, and then to Glykeia. All the while he fails to be a self and confronts evidence that his project is impossible for him (namely, each successive failure). If he does not abandon it at this point, then the importance he will attach to success with Hermione is even greater than that he attached to success with any of the others. And so it would go, until as "a man of years" he would conclude that he has "experienced love to the full" and that other projects call him. Or until he would reach a stage at which nothing in the world is more important than being the lover of a particular woman, because this woman would represent for him the last chance of realizing his ideal, and hence, his last chance of becoming a self. If he chooses the former way, his consciousness, his passion, and his despair would be augmented, because there would be contained within his new project the past experience of failure, revealing that the dangers are greater and the prospects of success smaller than he had hitherto hoped. If he chooses the latter, then his passion would be infinite and his despair—over the earthly in toto.

One might object that such unbounded concern is unhealthy. And in a way it is—but not because of its unboundedness. If Anti-Climacus is right that concern for personal integration should outweigh all others (or as he would say, should be infinite), then the despairer's passion is correct as to intensity, although *flawed as to its object*. Moreover, the despairer discovers this because he pushes the project with total passion and does not decide that frankly he has had enough. Consequently, he is now in a position to move on to a project that is truer rather than merely different.

To summarize: the spiritual selfhood described by Anti-Climacus, the constant striving to bring one's actual self into harmony with the ideal ideal, can only be brought about by conscientious reflection. Reflection of this sort has two tasks. The first is to expose failures of the actual self to conform to one's passion, and failures of one's passion to conform to the ideal ideal. The second is to intensify this passion to the point of absolute earnestness, the necessary condition of faith and the natural outcome of conscientious reflection.

III

Anti-Climacus identifies this ideal ideal with God, or as he sometimes calls God, "the constituting power." There are at least three justifications for this identification. All depend on the premise that in time conscientious reflection will inspire an absolute earnestness in the individual, together with the corresponding need for a fitting ideal for such earnestness.

First of all, an individual must see the ideal ideal as objective, or as a power outside himself or herself, and such a power is naturally thought of as divine. Anti-Climacus argues for this in the beginning of his discussion of defiance (SUD, p. 69). It follows from the concept of an ideal ideal that it must be capable of consuming all of one's interest and of being pursued with absolute earnestness. It must, so to speak, be a large enough vessel to hold an infinite interest. Now the stoic, as Anti-Climacus calls him, tries to constitute his ideal ideal entirely out of the infinity of his own imagination and without reference to the infinite self that is the constituting power. In his ataraxia, his imperturbability, his self-command, the stoic denies his "natural capacities, predispositions, etc. in the specific concretion of relations" and to deny these is to deny the reality of the power that established them. Making the self absolutely its own master, however, has a fatal failing: "it is easy to see that this absolute ruler is a king without a country actually ruling over nothing; his position, his sovereignty, is subordinate to the dialectic that rebellion is legitimate at any moment." (SUD, p. 69) Having made itself entirely what it is, the stoic self (as far as it can tell) is always free to make itself into something else. "At any time it can quite arbitrarily start all over again, and no matter how long one idea is pursued, the entire action is within a hypothesis." (Ibid.) But a hypothesis is precisely the sort of thing that is *not* pursued with absolute earnestness. The stoic, like the waiter in *Being and Nothingness* can not be what he is, he can only play at being it, and stoicism cannot, anymore than waiterhood, serve as the ideal ideal. The transcendent reference point that would take the whole project out of the hypothetical, that would make it a large enough vessel for an absolute earnestness is missing. The ideal ideal must lie in the infinite, for only an infinite object could properly command an absolute earnestness, but in the infinite nature of the constituting power, rather than the infinity of imagination.

The 'king without a country' passage quoted above suggests a second argument for identifying the ideal ideal with God. If there is an ideal ideal it must have absolute authority over the individual. But it is plausible to think, in a cosmic application of the Lockean theory of property, that God and only God has absolute authority over God's creatures. From this it would follow that the ideal ideal and God are one.¹²

Thirdly, of the stoics "simulated earnestness" Anti-Climacus says, "Like Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, this is stealing from God the thought—which is earnestness—that God pays attention to one; instead, the self in despair is satisfied with paying attention to itself." (SUD, p. 68) Much later he emphasized this theme: "A cattleman who (if this were possible) is a self directly before his cattle is a very low self, and, similarly, a master who is a self directly before his slaves is actually no self—for in both cases a criterion is lacking." (SUD, p. 79) The key concepts here are "paying attention to one" and being "directly

before" someone. "The criterion for the self is always: *that directly before which it is a self* . . ." (SUD, p. 79. My emphasis) The point of the example of a cattleman must be something like this: if one made it one's ideal to be a cattleman and took his cattle as the measure of that ideal (say, in terms of their contentment, or milk production), then he would only need to be a self during certain hours of the day and certain days of the week. He might even hire someone else to do this for him—the paradigm of minimum selfhood, I would think. Such an ideal could not be the ideal ideal once again because it would not be adequate as an object of absolute earnestness. Such an earnestness must feel itself searched by its ideal at every moment and in every place. To the extent that the ideal self makes a lesser demand the spiritual self is diminished, because the synthesis of actual and ideal selves that is the spiritual self becomes an intermittent thing. The ideal so construed is an inadequate object for an absolute earnestness because it is something it is possible to escape. An earnestness that is absolute feels such no such possibility. An omniscient judge—God—is required.¹³

IV

The preceding section described several justifications for the claim that conscience demands that the individual make God his standard when judging the successfulness of his efforts to be a spiritual self. Anti-Climacus goes further, however. To be genuine spiritual self is to be free from despair, but in the typology of despair presented in SUD, there are several reflective attitudes that involve God as criterion but that nevertheless remain despairing. The man he calls "the passively defiant despairer" sees himself as an objection to God, as positive evidence that an omnipotent and omni-benevolent deity cannot exist. As Anti-Climacus puts it: "not even in defiance or defiantly does it [the self that constitutes itself in this manner] want to tear itself loose from the power that established it, but for spite wants to force itself upon it, to obtrude defiantly upon it, want to adhere to it out of malice" (SUD, p. 73) This because "a spiteful denunciation must above all take care to adhere to what it denounces." (Ibid.) The passively defiant despairer takes God as his measure, for he is that which proves that a just God does not exist.

At a higher stage there is "what could be called a poet-existence verging on the religious, an existence that has something in common with the despair of resignation, except that the concept of God is present." (SUD, p. 77) There is also Socrates: "Let us never forget that Socrates' ignorance was a kind of fear and worship of God." (SUD, p. 99) Finally, there is the despairer who despairs over his sins. Rather than relating himself "transparently" to the constituting power and in faith overcoming his sin, he makes it, or tries to make it, "internally consistent." (SUD, p. 109) His sin "closes itself up within itself . . . and protects

itself against every attack or pursuit by the good” (Ibid.) He in effect makes God his measure because he makes God the source of his sin.

Conscience cannot be satisfied with any of these standpoints, however, because the god-relationship in each case is merely *negatively* defined, and moreover, it is a prop to self-deception rather than an aid to self-clarification.

The concept of God has been fancifully used as an ingredient in human importance, in becoming self-important directly before God. Just as one becomes self-important in politics by belonging to the opposition and eventually comes to prefer to have an administration just to have something to oppose, so also there is eventually a reluctance to do away with God—just to become even more self-important by being in the opposition. (SUD, p. 115)

The penetration of this self-deception by means of conscientious reflection means an intensification of passion and self-knowledge that redefines the individual's god-relationship. “At this point, the intensification of consciousness of self is the knowledge of Christ, a self directly before Christ.” (SUD, p. 113) Christianity, and Christianity alone, Anti-Climacus maintains, does away with the possibility of, and the need for, blaming God for one's sins after the manner of the despairer who despairs over sin, because “now God offers reconciliation in the forgiveness of sin.” (SUD, p. 114)

To justify this “Christianity and Christianity alone” is impossible in the space of an article, perhaps in the space of a book, but I will briefly indicate what I take to be Anti-Climacus' main thrust here. First, the claim of uniqueness is, I think, an empirical claim. The necessary core of Christianity is, for Anti-Climacus the revelation of the God-man, and the promise of forgiveness. These ideas are too paradoxical ever to have occurred to the human imagination (“such a thought never occurred to any man” SUD, p. 125) and God brought them into history at one time and in one place. The second claim, that Christianity, if it were true, would offer a solid resting point for conscientious reflection is more interesting. If Anti-Climacus is right that conscientious reflection leads us inevitably to God as our ideal ideal, then conscience leads us inevitably to unhappiness unless we have some means of knowing precisely what this ideal would have us be, and unless we have some reason to think that it is an ideal possible of attainment. In the absence of special access to God, the former would be open to us only if God became man and proclaimed God's ideality in human form. Since attaining divinity is not a humanly attainable goal, the ideal ideal can be seen as a possible goal for human beings only if God is seen as offering to make up the difference, to blink the shortfall, in short to offer forgiveness. But this means Christianity. Conscience drives the individual to take God as her standard, conscience likewise drives her to think this standard attainable, conscience drives the individual up

against it, saying 'This, or unbearable despair.'¹⁴ This is the sort of reasoning that I take to underlie Anti-Climacus' claim: "Only in Christ is it true that God is man's goal and criterion." (SUD, p. 114)

V

To conclude: Anti-Climacus makes spiritual selfhood the essential function of truly human existence. It would not be farfetched, I think, to think of him as holding this quasi-Aristotelian principle: the highest good for an individual human being is to be a spiritual self (as spiritual selfhood was described in the beginning of this paper) to the fullest degree. Moreover, transmuting this Aristotelian idiom into talk of obligations, it is clear that he believes one to be ethically obligated to attempt to attain one's highest good. Section III showed how, on Anti-Climacus' account, true spiritual selfhood is possible only if the individual takes God as her ideal. From these three propositions it follows that one is ethically obligated to take God as one's standard. The conclusion of section IV was that only through faith in Christ can one make God one's standard. Since it is true in general that if some action A is obligatory for some person, and doing A implies doing some other action B, then B is also obligatory for that person, it follows from the previous two statements taken together that one is ethically obligated to have faith in Christ.

This argument is necessarily sketchy. The conclusions of sections III and IV are especially in need of further justification, and in a way Kierkegaard's entire authorship is directed at these points. I have only hinted at the ways he defends them. My interest in this paper has been to indicate a conception of how one arrives at faith and a strategy by means of which its claims might be defended that is very different from both the epistemological and the purely logical (for example, "Can God be both omnipotent and omniscient?") preoccupations that distract many philosophers of religion. I am content to indicate a line of inquiry I think will prove fruitful. If a strategy similar to that of Anti-Climacus can be worked out in detail, the role of divine-command meta-ethics, of reflection and emotion, of forgiveness and revelation, in Christian ethics will be made much clearer. All by taking seriously the claim that faith is a virtue and that it is known by the reflecting conscience to be so.

NOTES

1. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), p. 33.
2. Ibid.
3. Hereafter referred to as SUD. Page numbers refer to those in the edition edited and translated by Howard and Edna Hong and published by Princeton University Press in 1980.
4. Joseph Butler, "Of the Nature of Virtue," reprinted in *British Moralists*, ed. L. S. Selby-Bigge (Dover: New York, 1965), p. 245. See also Ingmar Pörn, "On the Dialectic of the Soul: An Essay on Kierkegaard," *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 32 (1981): 198-210. Pörn treats the same notion in terms taken from computer science. The example of the wine buyer used above is his.
5. Although B* is clearer than B, one need not assume that Anti-Climacus was muddled about what he was trying to say. Phrased the way it is, his insight has an unsettling effect upon the reader that might well be more edifying than the same insight laid out in full explicitness. The more compact formulation would then be precisely the one called for in a work intended "for upbuilding and awakening."
6. This is a statement about what one *can* do, not what one ought to do. It might be unethical to adopt an ideal such that it is far beyond one's power to realize it. But as long as one is talking about actual ideals, it is obvious that people can, and often do, give themselves impossible ones.
7. I realize that the pair Anti-Climacus presents here is "*freedom* and necessity" but this must be a slip on his part. When he expands on this topic later (pp. 35-42) it is phrased as *possibility/necessity* throughout.
8. This is a special sort of conflict of conscience—in the fight to harmonize the actual self and the ideal the despairer sees (though obscurely) that his ideal is very possibly beyond his powers of realization. It depends too much on the unpredictable actions of another person and upon too many chance events, something that could not be the case for a true ideal. His conflict, therefore, is not so much between actual and ideal as between actual ideal and ideal ideal.
9. José Ortega y Gasset, "History As a System" in *History as a System and Other Essays*, trans. Helen Weyl (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 215.
10. Passion and will are for Anti-Climacus' purposes synonymous. When Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms speak of passion they are almost always speaking of this as the indication of a choice of ideal self: "Let no one misinterpret all my talk about pathos and passion to mean that I intend to sanction every uncircumcised immediacy, every unshaven passion," Kierkegaard writes in the *Journals and Papers*, 7 vols., ed. and trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1967-78), #3127. By this he would rule out anger, joy, jealousy, pride, etc.—in short, the things one would commonly call passions, but that he would call sentiments. See in this regard *Journals* 3125. To be overcome by the sexual appetite is to be subject to a type of sentimentality, but to choose the erotic self as an ideal, as Don Juan does, is to possess erotic passion. Sentimentality is entirely a case of 'being affected'. It is a mark of the physical constitution. The object of passion, however, is chosen as much as encountered, and in the passion the will reveals itself.
11. Ortega, *ibid.*, 207-8.
12. To recognize God's demands as a legitimate expression of Her authority is what I take Anti-Climacus to mean when he talks about that state in which "the self rests transparently in the power which established it." (SUD, p. 14)
13. It might be thought that the Kantian moral law might satisfy an absolute earnestness, but this,

though not entertained by Anti-Climacus, was decisively, and I think rightly, rejected by Kierkegaard. See *Journals* 188.

14. "In this manner God certainly becomes a postulate, but not in the otiose manner in which this word is commonly understood. It becomes clear rather that the only way in which an existing individual comes into relation with God, is when the dialectical contradiction brings his passion to the point of despair and helps him to embrace God with the 'category of despair' (faith). Then the postulate is so far from being arbitrary that it is precisely a life-necessity. It is then not so much that God is a postulate, as that the existing individual's postulation of God is a necessity." Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1941), 179fn.

15. Clearly the term 'ethical' has been given a new meaning from what it had in *Fear and Trembling*. Anti-Climacus might well have called his book *Beyond Sin and Virtue*. See Anti-Climacus' contrasting of the pair of concepts sin/faith with that of sin/virtue at SUD p. 124. The parallel with Nietzsche's distinction of good/bad from good/evil is striking. Kierkegaard actually uses the phrase "beyond sin and virtue" in *Journals* 1218: "sin's forgiveness belongs to the pure God-relationship, far beyond sin—and virtue."