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David D. Aiken

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KIERKEGAARD'S "THREE STAGES": A PILGRIM'S REGRESS?

David W. Aiken

The purpose of this paper is to explore an hypothesis rather than draw any unassailable conclusions. I argue that there is a fundamental tension between the sub-Christian account of the "Three Stages" presented in the earlier pseudonymous writings and the explicitly Christian account presented in the Anti-Climacean and later acknowledged writings. The earlier version is that of a progress from spiritless "immediacy" toward more complete integrations of the self, culminating in authentic religious faith; while the later is that of a regress from lesser to ever greater forms of spiritual peril, culminating in a disordered religiosity that vainly seeks to overthrow the established ecclesiastical order. Tracing the conflict between these two perspectives also enhances our understanding of the purpose underlying Kierkegaard's project by suggesting the possibility that the authorship constitutes a literary confession of Kierkegaard's own spiritual regress.

One of the most celebrated—and disputed—aspects of Kierkegaard's philosophy is his doctrine of the "three stages" [*Stadier*] or "spheres" [*Sfærer*] of existence. Not only is the pseudonymous authorship structured according to a succession of aesthetic, ethical, and religious perspectives, but Kierkegaard's Journals, both early and late, reveal their author's preoccupation with these contrasting orientations and the "pathos-laden" tensions that result from their collision. Though Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms offer various interpretations of the stages as their divergent purposes require, the task of distilling an essential definition falls to Johannes Climacus:

... While aesthetic existence is essentially enjoyment, ethical existence is struggle and victory, religious existence is suffering, not as a transitional moment, but as persisting.¹

Despite the clarity of Climacus's formulation, the fluid and sometimes inconsistent treatment of the "qualitative dialectic" found in various phases of the authorship has engendered endless interpretive difficulties, many of which continue to divide scholarly opinion: Did Kierkegaard intend the notion of existence-spheres to function primarily as a literary framework for his pseudonyms or was he advancing a sub-

stantive theory of human nature?² If the latter alternative obtains, does this theory present us with three incompatible and idealized human types, or is Kierkegaard positing some kind of developmental psychology?³ If, as the pseudonyms insist, the transition from one existence-sphere to another can never be effected by a logical transition of thought but only by means of a passionate leap, does it follow that the embracing of one stage requires a renunciation of the others—or do the lower become sublated in the higher?⁴

However important these problems may be, I do not propose to address them directly in this essay, but rather to explore a preliminary question whose clarification may well prove helpful for resolving the enigma of the stages: If these existence-spheres constitute successive intensifications of subjectivity in the life of the individual, does it follow that they also involve an advance toward human fulfillment or perfection? Now one way of deriving an affirmative answer would be to perform the following deduction: subjectivity, as Climacus asserts, is truth; subjective truth delivers from self-deception as it strengthens one's earnest resolve to live transparently before God; hence, every qualitative enhancement of subjectivity entails a commensurately higher integration of the self. But if the self's fullest integrity is attainable only within the religious sphere, it follows that the trajectory of the stages must be construed as a progress toward increasingly authentic forms of human existence. Indeed, the interior pilgrimage from contented worldliness—the lowest form of aesthetic existence—to self-abandonment in paradoxical faith—the highest form of religiosity—would seem to follow an ascending path strikingly similar to the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways of classical apophatic mysticism.

Before we consign Kierkegaard to the Cloud of Unknowing, however, we must confront some unsettling doubts: Is the line of reasoning I have traced above too smooth and certain to describe the rough and perilous terrain of passionate inwardness? Does it do justice to the self-subverting irony inscribed in the various pseudonymous accounts of each sphere? Moreover, even if it could be established that the pseudonyms from *Either/Or* through the *Concluding Postscript* invite the reader to embark on a "pilgrim's progress" through the stages, does it necessarily follow that Kierkegaard agrees with them in this matter? The chief reason for my affirmative response to the first question and my negative response to the others hinges on a peculiar discrepancy—even a disparity—between the Christian and sub-Christian accounts of the stages in Kierkegaard's authorship; but in order fully to explain this divergence it will be necessary to trace in some detail the outlines of each standpoint.

I. The Sub-Christian Standpoint: A Brief Sketch

Despite their evident differences, the "sub-Christian" pseudonyms concur in regarding the stages as a progress from spiritless "immediacy" toward fuller and more authentic integrations of the self's constituent functions. So, for instance, Judge William presents his ethical world- and life-view as a positive advance in the direction of self-realization as

over against the trivial routines of the philistine conformist and the aimless presentiments of the romantic poet. From the Assessor's standpoint, both forms of aesthetic existence dissolve one's capacity for spiritual integrity in such a way that one loses "the inmost and holiest thing of all in a [human being], the unifying power of personality" [*Personlighedens bindende Magt*].⁵ Such individuals "live their lives, as it were, outside themselves, they vanish like shadows, their immortal soul is blown away, and they are not alarmed by the problem of immortality, because they are already in a state of dissolution before they die." [EO II, p. 172] Moreover, the reflective Aesthete from the First Volume of *Either/Or*, would seem implicitly to agree with Judge William's assessment of his spiritual condition. In broken aphorisms and disfigured verse, he confesses the extent to which his life has become barren of purpose and empty of meaning:

And thus I . . . am bound in a chain formed of dark imaginings, of unquiet dreams and restless thoughts, of dread presentiments and inexplicable anxieties. . . .

I do not care for anything. I do not care to ride, for the exercise is too violent, I do not care to walk, walking is too strenuous. I do not care to lie down, for I should either have to remain lying, and I do not care to do that, or I should have to get up again, and I do not care to do that either. Summa Summarum: I do not care at all.⁶

Thus impelled by what Anti-Climacus calls the despair of possibility,⁷ the disillusioned poet hovers perpetually in ironical dissatisfaction above concrete actuality in all its apparent baseness, refusing to acknowledge those finite limitations which form an integral component the self.⁸ Before he can make the leap into the ethical sphere the Aesthete must be willing freely to fashion himself out of the given material of his own history. [EO II, p. 263] Nor is this task totally beyond his power, for according to the Judge everyone "can, if he will, become the paradigmatic man, not by wiping out his accidentality [*Tilfældighed*], but by remaining in it and ennobling it. But he ennobles it by choosing it." [EO II, p. 266] In this respect the aspiring ethicist must be willing to accept the burden of his existence and thereby become, in effect, "his own providence [*Forsyn*]." [EO II, p. 287] The Judge accordingly proclaims that his progress toward spiritual integrity is chiefly the result of his *own work*, undertaken "in such a way that even what has befallen me is by me transformed." [EO II, p. 255]⁹

The two Johannes pseudonyms, however, detect a fallacy in Judge William's reasoning which points to the untenability of an autonomous ethical existence. Ethicism, in and for itself, cannot attain its wonted *telos*, for the transformation of personal existence from spiritlessness to integrity (that state which Climacus calls *en evige Salighed* or "an eternal blessedness") demands more than a resolute act of self-appropriation: it requires also a renunciation of that volitional autonomy upon which ethical existence is founded.

In his "Panegyric on Abraham," Johannes de Silentio confirms Judge William's conviction that apart from ethicist's passionate self-concern nothing remains for the finite existent but despair over the transitoriness of all temporal phenomena.¹⁰ But he also goes further than the Judge in confessing that greatness of soul must be proportionate to the object of one's earnest striving, and consequently that there is a *telos* higher than that of self-legislation:

... For he who strove with the world became great by overcoming the world, and he who strove with himself [i.e. Judge William] became great by overcoming himself, but he who strove with God [i.e. Abraham] became greater than all. [FT, p. 31]

As over against the Judge's counsel, Silentio recognizes that the one who would ascend from autonomous moralism to religious faith must confess the incapacity of the self's finite volitional powers to achieve integrity apart from divine assistance. The religious individual accordingly finds his elevation, his paradoxical "greatness," by means of that power "whose strength is impotence," that wisdom "whose secret is foolishness," that hope "whose form is madness," and that love "which is hatred of one's self." [FT, p. 31]

If the aesthete falls short of spiritual integrity through inadequate self-concern, then it appears that the ethicist misses the mark through inordinate self-confidence. Only by resigning oneself to the incommensurability between the ethical ideal and its finite enactment can one make a decisive advance beyond Judge William's self-satisfied accommodation to matters of penultimate concern, such as his domestic and civic responsibilities. But higher still than the impassive piety of infinite resignation and the confession of radical insufficiency it exacts is religious faith "by reason of the absurd." The latter confidently believes and hopes all things, relying as it does on that Power for Whom nothing is impossible—not even the reinstatement of finite goods and the purification of the intention which aims for them. So Abraham, the biblical exemplar of such faith, held fast—in a wisdom transcending all natural modes of cognition—to the hope that his son would be restored to him. [FT, pp. 35, 45, 48, 51, 60]

Despite his evident agreement with the author of *Fear and Trembling* on the essential nature of the religious stage, Johannes Climacus advances a number of corrections and refinements which significantly alter Silentio's account of this existence-sphere. First of all, Climacus is convinced that the "Knight of Faith" is far too abstract to furnish an adequate paradigm for religious existence. [CUP, p. 47n] In particular, Silentio's "foreshortened" or ideal viewpoint misses the protracted suffering that accompanies one's effort to sustain the "infinite movement" of paradoxical faith within the constraints of finitude. The Knight of Faith may indeed hope all things, but this fact does not mitigate—indeed, it intensifies—the struggle to discern the will of God in a particular concrete situation.¹¹

In addition to its unwarranted idealism, Silentio's account of faith is

also incomplete insofar as it fails to distinguish sufficiently between the immanent and transcendent perspectives within the religious sphere. According to Climacus, there is a preliminary form of religiosity which is congruent with ethicism in its emphasis on unconditional obligation but qualitatively higher in its acknowledgement of "total guilt." [CUP, pp. 468-471] The ethicist may indeed find himself required to disavow a particular culpable act; the immanent religionist, on the other hand, repents of finite existence in its totality. Thus it would appear that Judge William has fallen prey to a subtle form of self-deception by confounding the loftiness of a moral ideal with the spiritual integrity of the one disposed to enact it. "I ought" may well imply "I can" as a matter of ethical theory; in practice, however, the intrinsic merit of this Kantian principle is powerless to make its practitioner meritorious. [CUP, p. 469]¹² The advantage of immanent religiosity over ethical idealism thus consists in the recognition that with every effort to fulfill an obligation, the eternal standard has already declared one guilty. The very attempt at self-exoneration is in truth a self-denunciation. [CUP, p. 471]

With this "eternal recollection" [*evige Erindren*] of guilt, however, comes the awareness that there is an absolute, benevolent, and sustaining Power who "embraces the exister on all sides," comiserating and co-operating with the culpable individual in the ethico-religious struggle. [CUP, p. 474; see also pp. 508, 515-519] Now if God's personal presence is recollected in and with the appropriation of "total guilt," then one's point of access to divine absolution is to be found *within* one's own subjectivity. [CUP, pp. 471, 475, 477-478, 480-481] Though religious faith first encounters God in this inward epiphany, thereby giving rise to what Climacus calls "Religion A," the final stage of existence has not yet been reached: for by adhering to the socratic insight that the Eternal is accessible through an intensification of inwardness, the immanent believer fails to acknowledge the more primordial *untruth* [*Usandheden*] of subjectivity. [CUP, pp. 178-180, 186] The existing individual, however, "cannot be untruth eternally, or eternally be presupposed as having been in untruth; [one] must have been brought to this condition in time, or have become untruth in time." [CUP, p. 186] But if the highest truth afforded to subjectivity consists in the discovery of the subject's fundamental *untruth*, then the socratic way of recollection has become insuperably blocked. [CUP, p. 186.] Consequently, the point of departure for this new and transcendent form of religiosity consists in sin-consciousness, in the confession that one has always and already offended the God whose absolving presence one seeks to recollect. From the perspective of "Religion B," therefore, the "eternal essential truth" is no longer "behind" the individual but "in front of him, as the absolute which has come into being within time." [CUP, p. 187]

Forsaking the immanent or socratic Deity, paradoxical faith presses forward to meet the God-Man. To complete this last and most strenuous ascent in the path toward integrity, one must jettison every last support of finitude: Enjoyment has been forfeited at the outset, for the ethical demanded that it be left behind; self-sufficiency, too, has been relinquished at the religious turn; but now subjective autonomy must be

foregone, and with it (severest abandonment of all!) the precious wisdom of Socrates, the truth of inwardness that furnished both compass and nourishment from the beginning of the way. So must one approach the Throne of Grace empty-handed. It is little wonder, then, that the two Johanneses, clinging anxiously to their "enclosed" subjectivity, remain unable and unwilling to make this last ascent.

II. *The Christian Standpoint: A Dialectical Reversal*

We may presume, however, that Kierkegaard and his decisively Christian pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, have at least attempted to scale this final height. And from their standpoint a most peculiar paradox comes into view: *in existence there is no ascent*.¹³ This unforeseen conclusion to the qualitative dialectic fundamentally calls into question the progressive view of the stages presupposed by the sub-Christian pseudonyms (despite their various internescine disputes). According to Anti-Climacus's counsel of Christian perfection, all forms of subjectivity—from philistine spiritlessness through the most sublime reaches of ethical and religious inwardness—must be consigned to despair.¹⁴ Moreover, despair is sin regardless of whether it is implicit and suppressed or explicit and confessed. [SUD, pp. 77, 81-82, 100-102] Now if offense at the God-Man represents the furthest extremity of such despair, and if it flourishes primarily in the domain of transcendent religiosity, then the final stage of existence does not guarantee the attainment of integrity, but rather delivers one over to the greatest spiritual peril. [SUD, pp. 113ff, 125ff]

To be sure, Johannes Climacus had recognized that the "eternal recollection of guilt" does not of itself propel the existing individual toward the appropriation of divine absolution, for the leap from "Religion A" to Christianity cannot be effected simply by the immanent content of consciousness: room must be made in the qualitative dialectic for the inscrutable operation of free choice. Nevertheless, Climacus, true to his name,¹⁵ clearly intends his *Concluding Postscript* to show how each stage of existence represents a positive enhancement of subjectivity over its predecessor, how each rung on the ladder of perfection brings the self closer to the beatitude which it passionately—and ever more passionately—seeks. For all his anti-hegelian polemics, Climacus never entirely dispenses with the principle of sublating synthesis. Just as Judge William requires that the aesthetic be dethroned but not destroyed, so also Climacus assumes, perhaps all too gratuitously, that a purified ethical subjectivity will ultimately be restored in some way to the empty-handed supplicant.

Lest we, like Climacus, seek a hasty refuge from omnivorous negativity in the solace of an *Aufhebung*, Kierkegaard is concerned in his explicitly Christian writings to impose an existential halt upon his readers: Granted that faith embraces—in fact, requires—obedience, what precisely does an enactment of the specifically *Christian* good entail, and does this transcendent *telos* perhaps stand all purely human valuations on their head? Anti-Climacus sermonizes most eloquently on the gospel

invitation, "Come unto me all ye who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," at the outset of his treatise on Christian *praxis*; but he abruptly forestalls the reader's incipient consolation by insisting that this call issues from Christ in His humiliation rather than in His glorification.¹⁶ Moreover, if there is any ethical moment restored in transcendent religiosity, this new obedience does not primarily consist in the cultivation of interiority, for this effort would simply provide human autonomy with another occasion to justify itself; rather, the Christian's obligation is ever to follow after the Suffering Servant in the present and unremitting expectation of persecution and martyrdom. [TIC, pp. 108-109, 115-122, 194-196, 214ff] But the difficulty of this task is so great that it may well occasion an "offense of obedience" wherein the religious individual undermines the severity of the Prototype's demand by confusing the recognition of the task with its fulfillment.¹⁷ Imagination may be an indispensable ally in the ascent to faith insofar as it enables us to envision the religious life in all earnestness, but it can also betray us when the moment of reduplication is at hand.¹⁸

This dialectical reversal serves to highlight the qualitative difference which separates the two accounts of the stages in Kierkegaard's authorship. The first, and sub-Christian, version regards the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious according to their respective *essences*—insofar as it posits these forms of life as ideal possibilities. From this "essentialist" perspective, the trajectory of the stages represents an ascending hierarchy of principles according to which the subjective life of the individual may be organized: The aesthetic life is grounded in the principle of maximum enjoyment; and whether the desired object be immediately apprehended (as with the "bourgeois philistine") or reflectively pursued (as with the romantic poet), it nevertheless constitutes an end insufficiently worthy to secure and sustain personal integrity. In resolute striving, on the other hand, the ethical life owns a fundamental option qualitatively higher and thus of greater intrinsic merit, insofar as it orients itself toward a *telos* that obtains eternally and obliges unconditionally. But religious faith comports the highest of all principles by abandoning itself to divine grace as anticipated inwardly in the concern for an eternal happiness and as manifested historically in the person of Christ.

The second and explicitly Christian understanding of the stages proceeds from the recognition that between the principle and its enactment falls the shadow of sin. The Christian account must accordingly approach the stages from the side of *existence* rather than *essence* by reckoning more thoroughly with the pervasiveness of self-deception and the fragility of human virtue. Thus from the existential standpoint the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious (including much that goes by the name of *Christian* religiosity) must be viewed as modes of *fallen* subjectivity.¹⁹ Within the experience of the concrete individual, the "disrelation" of sin vitiates the essential qualities of every existence-sphere, so that enjoyment becomes aesthetic *despair*, striving becomes ethical *despair*, and believing becomes religious *despair*.

Furthermore, the succession of stages involves ever more perilous and culpable forms of despair. The Aesthete from *Either/Or* clearly

views his existential predicament as that than which no greater can be conceived; but Judge William correctly dismisses his epistolary companion's self-assessment as so much poetic posturing. The Judge argues that no-one really knows despair until that person assumes the burdensome task of self-appropriation before the Eternal Good, but this project can only be undertaken once the aesthetic stage has been abandoned. [EO II, pp. 181-2; 210-212; 215-218] So also the self-enclosing despair to which the autonomous ethicist falls prey, when she discovers that her culpability is more primordial and intractable than she ever supposed, can only be acknowledged and confessed *coram Deo*—that is, from within the religious sphere. [EO II, pp. 343ff] Yet (to invert a Heideggerian maxim) where the saving power grows, there also the risk matures:²⁰ for the one who exists in defiant despair before the God in Time may not, in the end, accept the terms of divine reconciliation and thereby find healing for the sickness unto death, especially since those terms require one to follow Christ to Gethsemane and Golgotha.

Indeed, a cursory glance at the Anti-Climacean writings and later religious discourses reveals that their pages are peopled far less with saints and martyrs and far more with treacherous disciples all too zealous to betray the God-Man with a kiss of disobedient faith. It is idle to argue that these betrayers have simply missed the point of "Religion B": for they stand firmly upon the Mount of Transfiguration; they have made the good confession; they have seen the light. But what the light of grace discloses of their own wretchedness and of the Suffering Servant's majesty is too terrifying for them to countenance; offended, they turn aside their faces toward the safe precincts of established Christendom.

III. Kierkegaard's Literary Project: A Singular Confession

Who, then, are these offended believers, these pilgrims regressing ever further into the despair of disobedient faith? At least one face among them is clearly identifiable: it is that of an earnest reformer, wearied through long years of fruitless crusading against an institution which regarded him first as a harmless eccentric, then as a disagreeable malcontent, and finally as a dangerous embarrassment to corporate prestige who must be silenced by being resolutely ignored. Indeed, it is Kierkegaard himself: the one who, like us, averts his eyes from the sharp clarity of the Christian requirement; the one who, in the end, chose to remain the socratic conscience within a treacherous ecclesiastical body rather than effect that still more disastrous betrayal of the God-Man to which he was temperamentally inclined.²¹ For, as Kierkegaard muses in *Judge For Yourself*!:

. . . *the evil in our time is not the Established Church [det Bestaaende] with all its many faults; no, the evil in our time is precisely this evil lust [onde lust], this flirting with the will to reform, this hypocrisy of seeking escape from the consciousness of one's own incapacity by the diversion of wishing to reform the Church, a thing which our time is least of all capable of doing.* [JFS, p. 220; the italics are original]

This "evil lust" is nothing other than the impotent rage of the zealot and thus not to be confused with an authentic reformer's passion for social justice. Like Judas, his biblical prototype, the overzealous reformer refuses "[to] understand the slowness of the Good; that out of mercy the Good is slow; that out of love for free persons, it will not use force. . . . [H]e will not humbly understand that the Good can get on without him."²²

Anyone familiar with the details of Kierkegaard's life and with the countless Journal entries in which the Danish Philosopher struggles, before God, to define his singular religious vocation will recognize the confessional nature of these passages. And in this recognition a further possibility presents itself—namely, that the qualitative dialectic of the stages may well be more than just a literary framework: it may also be an act of self-disclosure.

Though I would strongly reject an exclusively psychological or autobiographical interpretation of Kierkegaard's writings, it is nevertheless difficult for the attentive reader who juxtaposes pseudonymous and acknowledged texts with contemporaneous Journal entries to resist concluding that Kierkegaard himself traversed those stages of existence whose characteristics he describes with such uncanny phenomenological acuity. From this standpoint, it is Kierkegaard himself who appears as the despairing poet, the prideful moralist, the self-enclosed subjectivist, the treacherous disciple—and perhaps above all as the one who was unable to master his own irony. Moreover, the disparity between the "essential" and "existential" interpretations of the stages, to which I have called attention above, may also have confessional significance. By building this uncanny dualism into the very structure of the authorship, Kierkegaard signals his reader that he was in fact unable to make the ascent prescribed by the fundamental principles of his qualitative dialectic, and that he consequently had regressed from the disobedient faith of the religious poet toward the treacherous faith of the overzealous reformer. Why else would he have expended such dialectical effort to distinguish his mission from that of the fanatical *extraordinarius* Magister Adler, unless the latter represented a kind of alter-ego, a "shadow-self," as George Steiner points out in a recent essay?²³

Now if we grant that the stages represent a diagnosis of those ways in which Kierkegaard's spiritual health progressively declined, then his literary career appears as a kind of logotherapy, a protracted confessional discourse directed primarily to God and secondarily to the individual reader who may be disposed to undertake a similar effort. This conclusion, however, presents us with a seemingly intractable problem: if Kierkegaard's writings belong to the category of confessional literature, how may we retrieve a *philosophical* significance from them? One classical definition of philosophy holds that it is the essential task of this discipline to apprehend that which is true universally or for the most part; on this view, the particular *qua* particular does not fall within the scope of theoretical thought since singularity is, strictly speaking, unintelligible. But according to its very nature an act of confession, as called forth by the particular exigencies of an individual's life and calling, constitutes

an unrepeatable event and perhaps also an indecipherable discourse. Thus it appears that Kierkegaard's singular confession has become philosophically moot in the making.

One possible way of addressing this problem would be to show that at least some confessional literature retains a prophetic import beyond those biographical and historical circumstances which shaped its content. Moreover, this clearly holds in the case of Kierkegaard's authorship—and that by design and not by accident.²⁴ For he explicitly intended the substance of his confession to serve as an indictment of the spiritlessness of his age and as a warning to those future generations which he expected to regress still further from obedient faith. Viewed in this way, Kierkegaard's literary confession takes on a maieutic aspect and thus also an exemplarity not afforded to strictly private self-disclosures. Kierkegaard's Journals also attest that he regarded his philosophical mission as a *corrective* for the sins of the age, fatally compromised though it was by his self-defeating dialectic of reticence and overzealousness.²⁵ And in what does this corrective consist? Kierkegaard gives his readers a forthright summary of it in the "Moral" which he appended to the First Part of *Training in Christianity*:

And what does all this mean? It means that everyone for himself, in quiet inwardness before God, shall humble himself before what it means in the strictest sense to be a Christian, admit candidly before God how it stands with him, so that he might yet accept the grace which is offered to everyone who is imperfect, that is, to everyone . . .

"But if the Christian life is something so . . . frightful, how in the world can a person get the idea of accepting it?" Quite simply, and, if you want that too, quite in a Lutheran way: only the consciousness of sin [*Syndens Bevidsthed*] can force one into this dreadful situation [*Rædsel*—the power on the other side being grace. And in that very instant the Christian life transforms itself and is sheer gentleness, grace, loving-kindness and compassion. Looked at from any other point of view Christianity is and must be a sort of madness or the greatest horror. Only through consciousness of sin is there entrance to it, and the wish to enter by any other way is the crime of *lèse majesté* against Christianity. [TIC, p. 71]

It would seem, then, that two purposes govern Kierkegaard's confessional-literary project: in the first place, to show how he came to acknowledge his offence at the severity of the Christian gospel and to believe that his sins were forgotten as well as forgiven;²⁶ and in the second place to encourage his readers to follow a similar trajectory from conviction of sin, through the confession of spiritual incapacity, to acceptance of divine grace. As a Lutheran prophet and evangelist, Kierkegaard recognizes that if any spiritual therapy is to be viable, the "cure" must in a sense *precede* the diagnosis: for the terror of the Law has greatest medicinal value for those who are at least beginning to trust in

its vicarious fulfillment. On the other hand, as one adept in the Socratic method, Kierkegaard realizes that this very therapy must itself be administered vicariously, for otherwise (like the Grace to which it bears witness) it may be taken in vain. It was for this latter reason that Kierkegaard resorted to authorial incognito and was prompted to withdraw the "Moral" (quoted above) from *Training in Christianity*. Though this passage, in my estimation, states most explicitly the corrective purposes for which Kierkegaard designed his literary confession, it was this very directness that caused his serious misgivings.²⁷ For in the context of a nominally Lutheran Christendom, the prescribing of an authentically "Lutheran" therapy might well come to be regarded as a redundancy and a commonplace. Kierkegaard realized that the corrective—which, in principle, begins and ends in grace—must not be made to seem too easy; it must challenge even as it consoles. Consequently, he turned from maieutic indirection to stern admonition at the final stage of his career.

At this point, one might be inclined to object to this overtly religious reading of Kierkegaard's literary vocation on the grounds that it seems too tidy, too reassuring, and insufficiently attuned to the irony that pervades even his explicitly Christian writings. Have I thus attempted to draw conclusions where none are to be found? Perhaps so; for if the essentialist account of the stages may be shown to founder on the ambiguities of existence, it would seem that the confessional interpretation must be similarly deconstructed. Confession is, after all, a tricky business: conceived in the reflective medium of discourse, it must then be reduplicated in act. But how does one go about establishing a proper correspondence between penitential words and deeds, since both are ambiguous signs? This ambiguity is particularly acute in the case of one, such as Kierkegaard, for whom the act of writing functions both as confession and as penance. Here the form of the act subverts its content, not only on account of any suppressed motives we may wish to attribute to the author, but more importantly because the very task of confessional writing may be a kind of self-deception.²⁸ For what one expresses is never exactly what one means, and what one intends to say is seldom what one needs to confess. Spiritual directors are well acquainted with this phenomenon, as was Augustine, who clearly recognized the necessity of confessing his confession. But how, then, does one bring closure to the process of retraction? If every diavowal must be disavowed, how does one even begin?

It is in reflecting on these disturbing questions that one discovers the paradoxical significance of the singular confession; for every act of confessional writing posits an endless regress of ambiguous self-indictments and thereby invites a kind of authorial martyrdom. Moreover, by meditating on this exigency of Kierkegaard's literary vocation, one comes to view the religious author as a tragic figure, well-hunged on the crossbeam of an unavoidable dilemma. He either strives to attain and express self-transparency before God, thereby encumbering himself in a potentially self-stultifying effort, or else he joins the ranks of the paragraph-mongers who ply their academic trade in the objective transactions of the lecture-hall, in which case he lapses into self-forgetful specu-

lation. Both options mislead: the former beckons toward the abyss of subjectivity in search of an elusive enlightenment; the latter invites us into the miasma of abstraction in the quest for an unattainable certainty.

This dilemma serves to highlight the difficulty, perhaps even the impossibility, of conducting philosophical and theological discourse in the form of a confession; for it suggests an unmediatable disjunction between a speculation that prescind from the messy ambiguities of confessional writing and a singular self-disclosure that remains indecipherable to author and reader alike. If it was Kierkegaard's intention to unite philosophy and spirituality, it would seem that his project was bound to fail.

Yet over against this skeptical conclusion I would set the example of Augustine's *Confessions*. Despite its many manifestations of undetected self-deception, this work manages to combine inwardness and speculation, subjective and objective discourse, ambiguity and transparency, in a most winsome counterpoint. Moreover, by inscribing a theological treatise within a prayer—a personal address in which both supplicant and Deity are relentlessly questioned—Augustine dissolves any disjunction between philosophy and spirituality. The *Confessions* thus represents a singularly instructive instance of theoretical thinking that retains existential poignancy while conveying an awareness of the dark mystery beyond the flicker of human discourse. More significantly, we find in this work a quest for certainty that does not dispense with, but indeed requires, the deepest intellectual humility. Given this remarkable coherence of qualities characteristically opposed in modernity, it is particularly regrettable that Augustine—and his not uncritical follower, Kierkegaard—failed to adhere more consistently to the spirit of the *Confessions*. Perhaps by comporting ourselves circumspectly toward this ancient paradigm, we can discern the point of departure for religious philosophy in a post-modern context.

Gordon College

NOTES

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [hereafter abbreviated "CUP"], trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 256. Danish: *Medens æstetik Existentis væsentlig er Nydelse, ethisk væsentlig Kamp og Seier er religiøs Existentis Lidelse, og ikke som Gjennemgangs-Moment som bestandigt følgende med*. Note that the phrase *som bestandigt følgende med* can also be translated "as constantly following thereupon."

2. Alastair McKinnon, for instance, defends the view that Kierkegaard himself does not subscribe to any of the varying accounts of the "stages" elaborated by his pseudonyms, since he intends the qualitative dialectic to function primarily as a parody of Hegel's threefold dialectic in particular and as a heuristic framework for the pseudonymous authorship in general; see Alastair McKinnon, "Kierkegaard's Irrationalism Revisited," *Philosophical Quarterly* IX (1969), pp. 165-176. Gregor Malantschuk, on the other hand, argues convincingly that the stages constitute an authentically Kierkegaardian teaching, formulated and elaborated in numerous journal

entries dating from the very beginning of Kierkegaard's career; see Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong, (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 48, 50-53, 77, 109-111, 118-120, 126-128). Moreover, a perusal of the following journal entries tends to support Malantschuk's conclusion over against that of McKinnon; see *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals And Papers* [hereafter designated "JP"], trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Bloomington Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978), I: 852, 868; II: 1232, 1565, 1567, 1690-92; III: 2807, 2858, 3074, 3245, 3272, 3796, 3804, 3872; IV: 4397, 4398, 4407, 4416, 4437, 4444, 4447, 4453, 4454, 4459, 4467, 4474, 4476.

3. Brand Blanshard argues for the position that the stages represent three mutually exclusive ways of life; see Blanshard, "Kierkegaard on Faith", *Personalist* LXIX (1968), pp. 5-23. James Collins, while agreeing with Blanshard that the stages are fundamentally diverse, nevertheless argues (contra Blanshard) that the ethical is fulfilled rather than annihilated in the religious stage; see James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953, rev. 1983), pp. 67-71. George Schrader also opposes the mutual-exclusivity theory by showing that Kierkegaard, unlike Kant, views the ethical life as a transformation, rather than as a renunciation, of aesthetic interest; see George Schrader, "Kant and Kierkegaard on Duty and Inclination," *Journal of Philosophy* XLV (1968), especially p. 691. C. Steven Evans, in *Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript": The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1983), offers a more subtle interpretation of the stages that mediates between the extremes of inclusive and exclusive disjunction. According to Evans, Kierkegaard treats the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious both as successive *stages*, the transition from the lower to the higher of which requires a decisive break with the previous mode of existence (p. 46), and also as concentric *spheres*, of which it may be said that "there is no reason in principle why [their] contents . . . cannot be achieved in one life." (p. 47) Though Evans's interpretation is eminently reasonable so far as it goes, I shall argue in this paper that the "optimistic" anthropology presupposed by what is basically a developmental view of the stages is insufficiently attentive to Kierkegaard's depth-psychology of sin; though, to be fair, it must be conceded that Evans's account is limited to explicating Climacus's sub-Christian standpoint.

4. The first alternative is held by Brand Blanshard, *op. cit.*, Rev. J. Weldon Smith, in "Religion A/Religion B: A Kierkegaard Study", *Scottish Journal of Theology* XV (1962), pp. 245-265, and by Kenneth Hamilton, in "Kierkegaard on Sin", *Scottish Journal of Theology* XVII (1964), especially pages 298-299; the second alternative is held by Collins, Schrader, Evans, and—to a lesser extent—Malantschuk, *op. cit.*

5. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, [hereafter abbreviated "EO"], Vol. II, trans. Walter Lowrie, rev. Howard A. Johnson. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 164.

6. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/ Or*, Volume I, trans. by David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson, rev. and ed. by Howard A. Johnson, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 33. (first paragraph) and p. 19 (second paragraph); see also *Diapsalmata* on pp. 24, 27, 35.

7. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* [hereafter designated "SUD"], ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 35-37.

8. Kierkegaard's account of the ironist's spiritual debility in *The Concept of Irony* closely parallels both the Aesthete's self-diagnosis and Anti-

Climacus's treatment of the "despair of possibility." See *The Concept of Irony: With Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. Lee M. Capel, (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 163-164 and especially p. 279.

9. It is important to note here that since only the self can, according to Judge William, transform itself, the act of ethical "repentance" cannot proceed unless the Kantian notion of a "radical evil" in human nature and its predecessor, the Lutheran doctrine of the "bondage of the will," are rejected. From the perspective of the "religious" pseudonyms, however, this move—so characteristic of the virtuous Judge—discloses the greatest limitation of the ethical world- and life-view: namely, its self-justifying autonomy. See particularly EO II, pp. 181, 279.

10. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear And Trembling [with Sickness Unto Death]*, hereafter designated "FT", trans. by Walter Lowrie, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 31.

11. This is the point of the (interminable!) "Deer-Park" passage from CUP; see particularly CUP, pp. 432-446.

12. Evidently Kierkegaard agrees with his pseudonym on this point: see, for instance, JP I:188.

13. This conclusion is not only suggested by the tenor of Kierkegaard's account of the spiritual life in his explicitly Christian discourses, it is directly supported by several Journal entries; see, for instance JP II: 1394, 1432, and especially 1789, in which Kierkegaard affirms that before the ideal all progress is regress.

14. Thus Anti-Climacus argues that everyone (whether aesthete, moralist, or religious believer) is to some extent always and already in the condition of despair, since each of us is possessed by an inner disquietude or discord whether we choose to recognize this fact or not. [SUD, pp. 22, 27] The commonsense view of despair regards it as an exceptional state of self-torment which is seldom experienced for protracted periods, except in the case of a few pathologically gloomy individuals; consequently, we tend to deceive ourselves by dismissing despair as an infrequently encountered aberration when in fact it is "quite common." [SUD, p. 23] Indeed, such self-deception constitutes the most commonly-encountered form of despair, for the relief of which we require a spiritual therapist (i.e. Anti-Climacus) who is well-versed in the many stratagems the patient may devise to deny his or her illness and evade a proper diagnosis. [SUD, pp. 23-24]

15. Kierkegaard chose the names of his pseudonyms wisely: The sub-Christian perspective is represented by Johannes Climacus ("John of the ladder," plausibly also "John the Climber"), whereas the counsels of Christian perfection are delivered by Anti-Climacus (who descends the ladder of perfection to rescue us from inauthentic faith). Note also that "John Climacus" is the name of a sixth/seventh century Orthodox mystic and author of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

16. Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* [hereafter designated "TIC"], trans. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1944); compare pp. 11-22 with 26-28 and 153-155.

17. *Judge For Yourself!* [With *For Self-Examination*, and hereafter designated JFS], trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 263, 166-167.

18. I would thus concur with M. Jamie Ferreira in regarding the imagination as central to the account of the stages presented in the pseudonymous writings, but would deny that their positive assessment of this faculty represents Kierkegaard's last word on the subject. The later religious discourses (which Ferreira largely disregards) are far more critical of the ways in which

imagination can deceive by "foreshortening" the long haul of following Christ. See M. Jaime Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1991. Particularly troublesome is Ferreira's contention that, "for the Pattern to be one we can imitate, it must first fall into place; we must recognize the Face (the life, that perspective on the world) before we can follow it." (p. 152) But how recognizable is that Face given the constraints of the Divine Incognito? If such imaginative recognition is possible, is it also permissible, given Anti-Climacus's (and the later Kierkegaard's) iconoclasm? And even if it were permissible would there not still remain a chasmic abyss between recognition and obedience? Despite these difficulties, however, Ferreira's insightful attempt to reconstruct a crucial (and often misunderstood) dimension of Kierkegaard's thought serves as a welcome corrective to the usual "voluntaristic" interpretation of the qualitative dialectic.

19. This hypothesis is supported by a number of commentators, most notably by John D. Glenn, Jr. in his article, "The Definition of the Self and The Structure of Kierkegaard's Work," *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), pp. 4-21. Glenn demonstrates—in my estimation, conclusively—that the stages of existence in the aesthetic writings may be assimilated to the stages of despair outlined in SUD. See also Hildegard Kraus, "Verzweiflung und Selbstsein", *Kierkegaardiana* XIII, ed. Niels Thulstrup (Copenhagen: Rothskilde og Bagger, 1974), pp. 39-46.

20. Two texts are particularly significant in respect to this assessment: "The Gospel of Suffering," in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, Trans. by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 256; JP II: 2817.

21. According to Kierkegaard's own admission, he was that "religious genius" whom Governance educated to expose—and in his own singular way to reform—the corrupt ecclesiastical order of his day. See particularly JFS, pp. 218-219 and *The Point of View For My Work as an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie, rev. ed. by Benjamin Nelson, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 69-71, 73-75.

22. Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing*, trans. by Douglas V. Steere, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956), pp. 101-102.

23. See George Steiner, "Introduction," in Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/The Book on Adler*, trans. by Walter Lowrie, (New York: Everyman's Library, 1994), pp. xviii-xxiii.

24. Merold Westphal is right on the mark in viewing Kierkegaard's philosophy as a kind of "prophetic" discourse whose purpose is to convey, through bitter irony and scathing reproof, a radical critique of the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. See Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), pp. 11-27.

25. See "Supplement," appended to *The Point of View For My Work As an Author*, and Walter Lowrie, *Kierkegaard*, (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 556, 587ff. See also JP I: 708, 709.

26. I refer here to Kierkegaard's momentous "Easter Experience" of 1848 which afforded him the realization—amounting to a "second conversion" to Christianity—that God had not only remitted the penalty for his sins in Christ but also no longer called them to remembrance; see Lowrie, *op. cit.*, pp. 392-402.

27. Thus, with Walter Lowrie, I find nothing in this passage which disconfirms—indeed, everything which epitomizes—Kierkegaard's understanding of the relation between law and grace as expressed in his Journals

and also in the acknowledged writings. My hunch is that Kierkegaard found the accentuation of grace in the "Moral" of TIC potentially misleading in light of his recently intensified campaign against the Established Church. Though he clearly wanted the emphasis to fall on the *obedience* of faith, he maintained to the end of his life that apart from the assistance of God's grace (which, unfortunately, can be taken in vain—hence, the disclaimer), there can be no possibility of authentic Christian belief *or* practice. See Walter Lowrie, "Translators Introduction," TIC, pp. xxv-xxvi.

28. This point is attested in many of Kierkegaard's writings, but nowhere more fully than in "Quidam's Diary." This "Imaginary Psychological Construction" fairly bristles with ambiguous self-indictments, particularly in the numerous "midnight" entries. See *Stages On Life's Way*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 217-221, 226, 229-232, 268-275, 286, 311, 313, 316, 333, 340, 372-384, 390-391. These ambiguities are also thematized as a problem for Christian spirituality in a signed discourse ("On The Occasion of a Confession") that appeared concurrently with *Stages*. See *Three Discourses On Imagined Occasions*, Trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), particularly pp. 12, 16, 27-30, 32-36, 39.