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ON CLIMACUS'S "AGAINST REASON" THESIS: A CHALLENGE TO WESTPHAL

Eleanor Helms

I object to Merold Westphal's characterization in *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith* (2014) of faith as "against reason." I argue that Kierkegaard scholars emphasize the tension between faith and reason more than Kierkegaard does, affirming and perpetuating a broader antagonism in our own cultural climate. I suggest that the view of faith as "transforming vision" developed by M. Jamie Ferreira and others makes better sense of the different facets of faith pointed out by Westphal and the strengths of his account (especially faith as a passion) while avoiding conceptual and practical problems with the account Westphal has recently offered.

Introduction

If we know anything about Kierkegaard, it is that for him faith is in some sense "against reason." While most scholars do not consider Kierkegaard to be a fideist or irrationalist,¹ there remains significant disagreement as to what exactly that means. Merold Westphal's recent book *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith* offers a helpful overview of some of these disagreements, but in the end, I argue, comes down too strongly on the side of faith being "against reason." I show more generally that Kierkegaard scholars emphasize the tension between "faith and reason" more than Kierkegaard does, and I suggest moreover that this undue emphasis has the unfortunate result of affirming and perpetuating a broader antagonism between Christianity and academia in our own cultural climate. Framing Kierkegaard's concept of faith as "against reason" both misrepresents Kierkegaard and offers the wrong kind of guidance in our current social context. I propose that the view of faith as "transforming vision" developed by Jamie Ferreira, Rick Furtak, Patrick Stokes, and others (or what I will call the "Vision Model"), makes sense of the different facets of faith pointed out by Westphal and the strengths of his account (especially faith as a passion) while avoiding both the interpretive and practical problems with Westphal's recent account.

¹See for example the collection of essays in *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*, especially Davenport, "The Meaning of Kierkegaard's Choice," 75–112.



*Reason and Understanding in
Kierkegaard Scholarship and Early Translations*

In *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, Westphal offers twelve different aspects or characteristics of faith. This multifaceted approach enables Westphal to follow different themes through Kierkegaard's work. He also recognizes the importance of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, associating each aspect with one primary pseudonym (Johannes de Silentio, Johannes Climacus, or Anti-Climacus). Through these different discussions, one theme to which Westphal returns at several points is the relationship between faith and reason and the extent to which they are opposed or can be reconciled.

I take Westphal's view to be that faith and reason are *not* essentially opposed; however, his claims are ambiguous in several ways. Westphal first attributes an "'against reason' thesis" to Climacus before going on to offer nuance as to what such a thesis could mean.² He plays up the thesis in several ways, including in chapter titles: we consider faith as the "Teleological Suspension of Reason" in chapter 5 and as a "Striving Pathos That Goes against Reason" in chapter 11. At the same time, Westphal cautions that "we should not latch onto just any possible meaning of the phrase 'against reason' and attribute it to Climacus."³ Westphal then goes on to say that Climacus is likely challenging the Platonic epistemology of recollection⁴ as well as the Platonic ontology according to which time and eternity are logically exclusive,⁵ in contrast with Climacus's claim that they are a synthesis for the self. Christianity would be irrational according to such an ontology, but of course it is not the only possible or logically defensible one. (In fact, Hegel argues *for* such a synthesis.) Elsewhere, Climacus complains that "speculative philosophy" does not dispute Christianity but rather explains away its central paradox (i.e., eternity entering time).⁶

Perhaps surprisingly, however, Climacus does not use the phrase "against reason" at all, either in *Philosophical Fragments* or *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, as I discuss further below.⁷ In mitigating the possible ways in which such a thesis might be misunderstood, Westphal is solving a problem he is at the same time helping to create—that is, the mistaken view that faith is obviously "against reason" for Climacus and all that remains for scholars to do is determine exactly what he means by this controversial claim. Where does the idea of an "against reason" thesis come from?

²Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 224.

³Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 224.

⁴Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 225.

⁵Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 226.

⁶Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 212, 214.

⁷All textual counts here are based on searching the digital texts supplied by the Søren Kierkegaard Center at <http://teol.ku.dk/skc/english/>. Many thanks for the many individuals at the SKC who have worked to make these online texts freely available.

Climacus does use the phrase "against understanding [*Forstand*]" quite often, as I discuss below. As Westphal rightly observes, however, "understanding" and "reason" are distinct powers for Hegel,⁸ as they are for Kant. "Understanding" is the way in which minds conceptualize and give structure to the world as it appears; "reason" is more speculative, going beyond what appears (at least for Kant) to ideas such as the self, God, and the universe, which can never appear in experience.⁹ For Hegel, reason is likewise holistic: the totality of being and becoming are united as Spirit and made explicit.¹⁰ For both philosophers, reason resolves dialectical tensions that arise at the level of understanding. For Kant, reason resolves the transcendental dialectic of the antinomies by recognizing that the universe is an idea of reason, not an object of possible experience (i.e., of understanding).¹¹ For Hegel, contradictions at the level of perception and understanding are resolved in a higher synthesis of reason as self-consciousness and unity.¹² While I do not propose that Kierkegaard agrees with Kant and Hegel on exactly these points, it would have been odd for Kierkegaard to expect people familiar with Kant and Hegel to hear the phrase "against understanding" as a critique of reason in the transcendental (and quite technical) Kantian and Hegelian sense. While Kierkegaard may not be maintaining the same technical distinction (perhaps using "understanding" more loosely to mean "common sense understanding"), it is odd to then *also* treat the generic phrasing as inclusive of specific transcendental accounts, in which reason is very unlike our "common sense understanding."¹³ Yet Westphal insists that Kierkegaard includes all these types of reason (put forward by Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel).¹⁴

So what exactly does Kierkegaard mean to include by the phrase "against understanding" when it appears in various works? This question arises already at the level of translation, and decisions by early translators may have influenced the perspective of contemporary commentators. Andrew Burgess has provided a valuable overview of correspondence between Walter Swenson and David Lowrie on their disagreement over the term *Forstand*. Lowrie, noting the Hegelian distinction above, preferred to translate *Fornuft* as "reason" (like the German *Vernunft*) and *Forstand* as

⁸Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 132–133, 242.

⁹Kant, "Third Part," *Prolegomena*, 65.

¹⁰Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 482–483; para. 794. See also Westphal's discussion of Hegel, *Philosophy of Religion*, at 132–133, especially 3:261.

¹¹Kant, "Third Part," *Prolegomena*, §§50, 74.

¹²"For knowing is itself the movement of these abstract moments, it is the universal self, the self of itself as well as of the object and, as universal, is the self-returning unity of this movement." (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, para. 583, 356)

¹³In fact, Kierkegaard sometimes uses it positively, for example when he writes that "to understand and to understand are two different things" (*Concept of Anxiety*, 142; cited in Gouwens, "Imagination in *Repetition*," 287).

¹⁴Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 20–25.

"understanding" (like the German *Verstand*).¹⁵ Swenson argued instead that dividing the terms risks communicating (mistakenly, Swenson thought) that some type of reason is not affected by the Absolute Paradox.¹⁶ Burgess sums up the disagreement well:

Lowrie prefers the term "understanding," because that usage leaves room for someone to think there is another higher principle, the reason; while Swenson insists on the term "reason," precisely in order to prevent anyone from thinking in this way.¹⁷

Part of Swenson's argument is that there is no consistent distinction in everyday Danish between "reason" and "understanding," just as there is none in English.¹⁸ Lowrie asks in reply: "Why is it that S. K. does not use the words interchangeably, but (in the contexts we are interested in) uses exclusively *Forstand*?"¹⁹ Burgess then observes that Swenson never replies directly to this question of why Kierkegaard so privileges just one term.²⁰ How consistent is Kierkegaard on his use of these terms? The term *Forstand* appears 1,344 times in Kierkegaard's published writings. *Fornuft*, by contrast, appears only 7 times.²¹ If this is simply a matter of equivalence and convenience (as it is more common in English to say "I understand X" than to say "I reason X") then we should find the same relative proportions in scholarship and commentaries. In fact, what we do find is an inversion, with scholars and commentators showing a marked preference for "reason" and *Fornuft* over "understanding" and *Forstand*, even in commentaries on texts where these terms are not used at all, such as *Philosophical Fragments* and *Sickness unto Death*. In searchable Danish commentaries at the Søren Kierkegaard Research Center, the term *Forstand* appears 504 times (fewer times than Kierkegaard), while the term *Fornuft* appears 122 times (much more often than Kierkegaard). If the terms are equivalent within each language, why is *Fornuft* (reason) used disproportionately by scholars, in preference to the term Kierkegaard actually uses, which is almost always *Forstand* (understanding)?

As already suggested, English-speaking Kierkegaard scholars do this as well, though it is more difficult to document quantitatively. What we do readily find are examples of commentators glossing a quote in which Kierkegaard uses the term "understanding" as a broad stroke against

¹⁵Andrew Burgess, "*Forstand*," 112, citing Walter Lowrie, correspondence, Univ. of Minn. #33, Princeton #30.

¹⁶Burgess, "*Forstand*," 113, citing Swenson, *Something About Kierkegaard*, 219–220.

¹⁷Burgess, "*Forstand*," 113.

¹⁸Burgess, "*Forstand*," 113, citing Swenson, *Something About Kierkegaard*, 218–219.

¹⁹Burgess, "*Forstand*," 114, Walter Lowrie, Swenson-Lowrie correspondence, Univ. of Minn. #45, Princeton #41.

²⁰Burgess, "*Forstand*," 115.

²¹*Forstand* appears an additional 1,259 times in unpublished writings, including journals, papers, and letters. *Fornuft* appears an additional 48 times in other writings.

reason in general.²² C. Stephen Evans, who has knowledge of the Swenson-Lowrie debate and history, explicitly does so to make an interpretive point (that is, to show his support for Swenson's decision). Here the translation preference is not merely a point of linguistic usage (e.g., that there is no difference in spoken Danish usage between the terms) but explicitly a philosophical one. That is, his use of the term is an expression of his agreement with Swenson that Kierkegaard's critiques apply to all types of reasoning, as he explains in a footnote in *Passionate Reason*.²³ Such decisions by established scholars have meant, unfortunately, that readers of the early Swenson-Lowrie translation of *Philosophical Fragments* as well as readers of contemporary secondary sources in English will come away with the idea that Kierkegaard frequently uses both terms and varies their context. Beyond foiling the basic goal of textual accuracy, conflating and even inverting the terms has two more significant consequences I will develop here. First, it undermines the claim, accepted by many scholars (including Westphal, I believe), that faith and reason are *not essentially* opposed. Regularly referring to "reason" rather than "understanding" in contexts in which Kierkegaard emphasizes some kind of opposition with faith will make the kinds of reconciliations and refutations of irrationalism, even those proposed by commentators like Westphal, difficult to fill out consistently (as I discuss further below). Second, changing Kierkegaard's terminology makes it harder to (re-)introduce the technical Kantian-Idealist notion of *transcendental* reason into our contemporary conversations about faith, even though it is needed for reasons I will elaborate below. In my discussion, I will focus my discussion on Westphal's book *Kierkegaard's Concept of*

²²In Karen Carr's conclusion to "The Offense of Reason," for example, she ends by treating "reason" as synonymous with logical inference (249) and with a quote on "crucifixion of the understanding" (quoting *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 559). See Carr, "The Offense of Reason" and Carr, "After Paganism"; see also Buben, "Neither Irrationalist nor Apologist," 319. Buben uncritically adopts language from Evans, citing passages on "understanding" in support of Evans's broader claim about "reason," even though Buben ultimately objects to Evans's conclusion. Moreover, both "reason" and "understanding" are regularly reduced to the concrete situation of "having reasons or evidence," so that the issue becomes the question of the role of apologetics (cf. Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 164-65, and Buben, "Neither Irrationalist nor Apologist," 321, 324). For an in-depth discussion of his view on the relationship between faith and reason (and a defense of "against reason" language), see Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 93-113. He concludes that reason is essentially concrete (a set of norms for reasoning that are socially acceptable) (94-96), which is of course quite different from the Kantian transcendental view. In fact, Evans explicitly argues that Kierkegaard can reject "concrete reason" without challenging "ideal reason" (94), which seems to me very much in line with the Kantian view properly understood.

²³Evans agrees with Swenson that the Kantian-Hegelian distinction is not relevant. He argues that *Philosophical Fragments* as a whole "leaves no doubt that Climacus thinks that human beings are completely unable to comprehend the paradox of the incarnation. It was in fact to preclude this misinterpretation that David Swenson originally translated *Forstanden* as 'the reason.' To signify my own agreement with Swenson on this point, I shall talk interchangeably about reason or understanding in discussing these issues" (Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 188n7). It is noteworthy here that, like Swenson, Evans makes his choice here in order to affirm a particular interpretation, without claiming that Kierkegaard himself uses them interchangeably.

Faith, but I will also provide examples from other Kierkegaard scholars of the same kind of conflation and inversion of terms. I take Westphal's usage to be a particularly clear and well-developed representation of a larger trend in Kierkegaard scholarship toward treating different kinds of cognitive activities all under one generic name "reason."²⁴

Reason or Claims about Reason?

The central question is whether faith and reason are essentially (i.e., necessarily) opposed, and if they are, what the "reason" that faith opposes is supposed to be. Westphal's overall conclusion is that faith and reason are *not* essentially opposed. I take it that this is Westphal's overall conclusion even though he at times directly states the opposite. For example, Westphal calls Socrates "an analog of the Christian faith that goes *not merely beyond but against reason*."²⁵ On the other hand, he also writes, "Abraham's faith is unreasonable—madness, absurd, paradox—not intrinsically but relatively, that is, only in relation to some interpretation of reason or understanding from which some essential of biblical faith has been excluded a priori."²⁶ Here Westphal treats the terms "reason" as equivalent to "understanding" as he does throughout *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith* (as well as to other terms such as "human wisdom").²⁷ The difficulties come when Westphal begins to spell out the way in which faith and reason are only relatively opposed, and to do so his definition of reason must evolve. Westphal initially defines reason as "the exercise of the human intellect unaided."²⁸ But this definition on its own says nothing about the intellect's assessment of its own abilities (i.e., whether it recognizes any need for revelation or excludes biblical faith "a priori"). Introducing the claim that faith is "against" reason requires Westphal to supplement this initial definition: reason is not just human power unaided but "the human power to understand everything and leave no mysteries unresolved."²⁹ "Reason" now comes to mean not just an activity but a claim about the scope of that activity. Faith is not against reason or human power *per se*, he clarifies, but rather "particular, substantive, metaphysical" claims *about* what reason can accomplish (that is, its claim to be absolute).³⁰ But this means that the "'against reason' thesis" is really an "'against some claims about reason' thesis."

²⁴Evans offers some clarifications in *Faith Beyond Reason*, 94, such as the distinction between "concrete" and "ideal" reason (see n. 22 above). But Evans goes on to make what would be category mistakes (from a Kantian-idealist perspective) by describing reason itself as selfish and prideful. From a Kantian point of view, this is like describing mathematics as prideful or sinful, whereas surely it is only persons (e.g., mathematicians) to whom moral qualifications can meaningfully be applied.

²⁵Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 224 (emphasis mine); see also 199.

²⁶Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 100.

²⁷Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 225.

²⁸Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 83.

²⁹Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 86.

³⁰Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 227.

Further complicating the relationship between faith and reason, Westphal later adds an additional qualification: "If in faith one goes beyond these modes of reason, it will not be to abandon or abolish them but to suspend them teleologically in something taken to be higher and more inclusive."³¹ To which definition of reason does teleological suspension apply? Surely unjustified claims about reason (e.g., its potential to leave "no mysteries unresolved"³²) should be rejected once and for all, not just suspended. And human power unaided (the initial definition, without any claims about its scope) does not need to be "suspended" so much as appropriately restricted, again once and for all. So we actually need a third definition of reason to make sense of the claim of teleological suspension. It turns out that "reason" in this context actually means "the historically contingent perspective of a society," i.e., "the ethical," or *Sittlichkeit*.³³ This (obviously quite different) third definition sits easily with the others only because it happens to converge with the second definition in the Enlightenment: the historically-contingent perspective of an Enlightenment-style society includes particular, substantive claims about the sufficiency of reason. By now we have gotten well beyond ordinary English or Danish uses of the term "reason" (or *Fornuft*), and likewise well beyond Swenson's initial arguments to Lowrie for translating "understanding" as "reason." Westphal instead now emphasizes Kierkegaard's direct engagement with Hegel, where the term "reason" is invoked alongside other *technical* terms such as "speculation" and "system," while at the same time being nevertheless broad enough to include Kant and Spinoza as part of a generic "religion of reason."³⁴ Yet—like Swenson—while embracing the technical application to Hegel, Westphal resists aligning the terms with Hegel's own (more limited) usage. Westphal—like Evans—insists that Kierkegaard's critique is aimed at *concrete* or situated reason, and yet wants to draw a conclusion about *transcendental* reason as well.³⁵

The term "reason" cannot mean all these things at the same time. It cannot at once be generic (all attempts to leave no mystery) and also technical (addressing Hegel's transcendental system in particular), an epistemological error to be rejected and also restored through teleological suspension, absolute and also culturally situated. Most importantly, I see little justification for using a loaded, technical term like "reason" for this third sense, to mean something more like "being understood by one's culture." This third sense may often have little to do with logic or rational thought in a philosophical sense (much less reason in the transcendental sense used by Kant and Hegel). In the special case of the Enlightenment, as I have pointed out, two logically distinct things converge: (1) "reason" in

³¹Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 227.

³²Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 86.

³³Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 169.

³⁴Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 22, 132–133.

³⁵See Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 94, 96.

its transcendental sense and (2) “reason” as historically-conditioned social or cultural expectation. In the Enlightenment—and in Kierkegaard’s Denmark—the historical time period (cultural expectation) just so happened to care a lot about transcendental reason and made bold claims about what it could accomplish. Westphal’s insistence that all of these are simply “reason” conflates these important distinctions.

We’re indebted to Westphal for putting forward the idea of historical or situated reason at all. Westphal has argued that when Silentio in *Fear and Trembling* talks about a teleological suspension of “the ethical,” he does not mean a suspension of moral goodness but something more like social context. On the other hand, if the “reason” that is teleologically suspended in faith does mean something more like *Sittlichkeit*, or common social understanding, there is no need to also reject (or even suspend) reason in its transcendental sense. Westphal nevertheless at times plays up a conflict between faith and reason in general without adding such qualifications. It would help avoid even initial confusions, for example, to replace the chapter title “Faith as a Striving Pathos That Goes against Reason” (chapter 11) with “Faith as a Striving Pathos That Goes against Social Norms,” and “Faith as the Teleological Suspension of Reason” (chapter 5) with “Faith as the Teleological Suspension of Culture.” Doing so would affirm the conflict between faith and reason as historically contingent (cultural reason) rather than necessary (transcendental reason), if this is Westphal’s ultimate conclusion. Even the phrase “against understanding” feels less loaded, more inclusive of Westphal’s actual conclusions and of the focus of *Fear and Trembling*, which is Abraham’s inability to give an account of himself to others. Since “understanding” [*Forstand*] is a term that *does* appear in *Fear and Trembling* and the *Postscript*, and points more clearly to problems of communication and cultural acceptance (not logic),³⁶ why not use it consistently—even exclusively—in commentaries on these works?³⁷

Here Swenson’s other philosophical and theological reasons emerge as bearing all the remaining weight: even if Kierkegaard is himself ambiguous or prefers “understanding,” choosing to translate *Forstand* as “reason” allows the translator to reinforce a particular, substantive claim: no part of human thinking is untouched by the paradox. Using the term “reason” also allows Westphal to emphasize the ways in which Kierkegaard challenges Enlightenment-style thinking broadly understood: Hegel, Kant, Plato, and even Aquinas, as well as contemporary views. (Westphal mentions positivism and the dominance of natural science.³⁸) But this is again an attempt to have two contradictory things. Either Kierkegaard is criticizing contingent social norms *about* transcendental reason that turn out to be wrong, or the paradox (and faith) are contrary to reason

³⁶See especially Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 565.

³⁷By contrast, Westphal proposes “Faith is incommensurable with reason” as one of Kierkegaard’s “theses” (*Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith*, 61).

³⁸Westphal, *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith*, 225.

in its transcendental sense. Philosophers have made a variety of claims about transcendental reason, as Westphal notes.³⁹ And it may well be that Kierkegaard disagrees with all of them—Aquinas through Hegel—on the relationship of faith to reason. Even so, Kierkegaard joins this debate as a philosopher—in fact retrieving Kant's reservations, contra Hegel, about the sense in which to know a boundary is already to transcend it, as Westphal himself has argued.⁴⁰ If so, these are "claims about reason₁" vs. "claims about reason₂"—two varieties of *historical* (cultural) reason—not "reason (in general) vs. faith." Westphal points out such differences among Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel but takes Kierkegaard to be somehow above the fray.⁴¹

Is there any sense in which a conflict between faith and reason is strictly necessary (i.e., logically essential), according to Westphal? Is there a way, in other words, in which faith and *transcendental* reason conflict? Westphal includes a quote from Evans that apparently embraces the ambiguity:

Insofar as God transcends the social order, and *insofar* as the social order attempts to deify itself and usurp divine authority, there is a *necessary* opposition between faith and "reason," just as there is a tension between faith and what in *Fear and Trembling* is called "the ethical."⁴²

Evans could mean that, since the social order *does necessarily* deify itself, there is a *necessary* tension between it and reason. Or, he could mean the exact opposite: faith and reason are *not necessarily* in tension, but *only insofar* as the social order attempts to deify itself, which it does not *inherently* do but—as it turns out—often does.

Here again, much of the problem—the need to find just the right thing to say about reason—is self-inflicted. In the passage just quoted, "reason" and "the ethical" are in quotation marks, presumably because they do not refer to reason or ethics in a strict sense but rather to some historical (cultural) claims about reason. But it becomes easy to now treat these terms (and the connection between them) as if they belong to Silentio. On the above passage from Evans, for example, Westphal writes: "Silentio insists that, while the knight of faith has gone beyond 'reason' and 'the ethical,' he does so only 'after' having been immersed in them and without abandoning them."⁴³ Saying that "Silentio insists" any of this is misleading: the analogy between reason and the ethical is made by Evans, not Silentio. Like Climacus, Silentio never uses the term "reason" [*Fornuft*] at all.⁴⁴ Here

³⁹Westphal proposes reason_v, reason_c, and reason_h to describe the different views of reason in Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel (*Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 21).

⁴⁰See Westphal, "In Defense of the Thing in Itself," esp. 134–141.

⁴¹Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 21.

⁴²Evans, "Faith as the Telos of Morality," 24, quoted in Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 100 (emphasis mine.)

⁴³Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 101.

⁴⁴Similarly, Westphal writes: "Silentio does make explicit that this does not invalidate the ethical universal but only relativizes it, and that for faith it is the relation to God that

again, Westphal and Evans first do significant work to exaggerate the tension before adding nuance, while nevertheless trying to have it both ways when a decision is clearly called for: Is the “reason” Silentio is concerned with here a contingent, Enlightenment claim we can discard (and/or teleologically suspend), or is it an essential feature of how human thinking (necessarily) works, i.e., something transcendental we cannot logically (or teleologically) abandon?

I will not argue here for either of these theses. My wider observation—and I think the culturally more important one—is that we as scholars place undue emphasis on Kierkegaard’s challenges to reason while in the end offering little concrete insight into exactly how far such challenges extend. We will make more progress, I suggest, if we discard the presumption of an opposition between faith and reason. This presumption is both cultural, as I will show below, and philosophical, in the sense that it has become traditional to frame reason as autonomous and revelation as a source of alterity (a dichotomy which would have been nonsensical to earlier philosophers like Augustine and Aquinas). One strain in Kierkegaard scholarship that does not force this opposition is the view of faith as transfiguring vision, or what I will call the “Vision Model,” as put forward by Jamie Ferreira and others. In the last section, I will examine the cases in which Kierkegaard does use the term *Fornuft* (“reason”) and argue that the Vision Model makes better sense of these examples in context.

Vision and Fornuft

What about the times Kierkegaard does discuss “reason” [*Fornuft*] itself? There are so few instances it is easy to address them individually. They do not suggest any kind of “against reason” thesis or even a sustained critique of reason. A few of them do suggest, however, an emphasis on new ways of seeing, as I will elaborate.

Several uses of the term *Fornuft* come in the course of general summary or paraphrase of someone else’s view. For example, in *Johannes Climacus, or de omnibus dubitandum est*, Climacus writes: “Therefore, it is really interesting to see how Hegel wishes to formulate the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness, from self-consciousness to reason. When the transition consists merely of a heading, it is easy enough.”⁴⁵ Again discussing other thinkers, Vigilius Haufniensis writes in *Concept of Anxiety*: “Usually immediacy is posited in opposition to reflection (inwardness) and then the synthesis (or substantiality, subjectivity, identity, that in

governs our relation to society, whereas for reason, at least in its distinctive modern forms, it is the other way around” (Westphal, *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith*, 96), implying that Silentio “explicitly” says this about reason and its similarity to the ethical. These shortcuts become sedimented: in the index of *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith*, for example, one finds “as stockbroker of the finite” under the heading “reason,” when in *Fear and Trembling* it is a reference to “the understanding” (91). The entry “Understanding” in the index to *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith* refers the reader to the entries for Hegel and defines “Understanding” as *Vorstellung*. Westphal also treats “reason” as equivalent to “human wisdom” more generally (225).

⁴⁵*Philosophical Fragments* IV B 10:12, n.d., 1842–1843; *Johannes Climacus*, 257–258/SKS 15, 56.

which this identity is said to consist: reason, idea, spirit)."⁴⁶ In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the term appears as part of a humorous story. In the same spirit, Climacus adds the story of "Hilarius, Executioner," who has lost his son, and says, "Take heart, reason, he lives!" as if "reason" (in general) needs comfort."⁴⁷

Of the four remaining uses of the term "reason" [*Fornuft*], two are qualified by "human." In *Works of Love* Kierkegaard writes:

When Christianity came into the world, it did not itself need to point out (even though it did so) that it was contending with human reason, because the world discovered this easily enough. But now, now when Christianity for centuries has lived in protracted association with human reason, now when a fallen Christianity (just like those fallen angels who married mortal women) has married human reason, now when Christianity and reason have a *Du* relationship—now Christianity must above all itself pay attention to the obstacle.⁴⁸

In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus writes: "But what is the offense, that which offends? That which conflicts with all (human) reason."⁴⁹ But this usage no more justifies an "'against reason' thesis" than Anti-Climacus's claim that "human compassion is a miserable invention that is cruel where the greatest need is to be compassionate and is compassionate only where in the truest sense it is not compassion!"⁵⁰ constitutes an "'against compassion' thesis."⁵¹ Just as "human compassion" is not true compassion, "human reason" is not true reason.⁵²

In one of the remaining examples, from *Stages on Life's Way*, "reason" seems to be used in the sense of reflection (of the kind criticized in *Two Ages*):

Wenn in kleinen Städten ein Selbstmord vorfällt, wie lange wird nicht darüber gesprochen, wie viel wird nicht darüber vernüffelt [When a suicide occurs in small towns, how long one talks on and on about it, how much one reasons and palavers]! (However, I believe that one is through with it more quickly than if one were to introduce reason into this wisdom. Poor Paris!)⁵³

⁴⁶*Concept of Anxiety*, 142; IV 408/SKS 4, 442.

⁴⁷*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 514n/SKS 7, 466.

⁴⁸*Works of Love*, 199/SKS 9, 189.

⁴⁹*Practice in Christianity*, 26; XII 25/SKS 12, 40–41.

⁵⁰*Practice in Christianity*, 17.

⁵¹"But it must be remembered that with regard to differences in life everyone wants to cling to his own; it is because of this fixed point, this consideration, that *human* compassion is always merely to a certain degree. Sausage peddlers will consider that in being compassionate it is descending too far down to go to paupers in the poorhouse and express equality with them; the compassion of sausage peddlers is trapped in one consideration [*Hensyn*], consideration for other sausage peddlers and then for saloon keepers. Thus this compassion is not totally reckless [*hensynløs*]" (*Practice in Christianity*, 59).

⁵²Westphal emphasizes the importance of the qualifier "human" for "human reason" in the opening of Kant's *First Critique* (Westphal, "In Defense of the Thing in Itself," 118, 136).

⁵³*Stages on Life's Way*, "Letters to the Reader," §6, 480n/SKS 6, 44.

But here there is no indication that Kierkegaard (or the pseudonym, Hilarius Bookbinder) intends a far-reaching critique of reason in general rather than simple over-reflection or calculation. It is clear in context, moreover, that the term “wisdom” is being used sarcastically.

The last example, from “The Tax Collector,” in fact more directly supports the Vision Model—namely, faith as a kind of sight, a transforming vision, as developed by Ferreira.

He cast his eyes down, but the downcast gaze *sees* God, and the downcast gaze is the *uplifting* of the heart. Indeed, no gaze is as sharp-sighted as that of faith, and yet faith, humanly speaking, is blind; reason, understanding, is, humanly speaking, sighted, but faith is against the understanding.⁵⁴

While faith and reason are indeed opposed in this passage (and reason is, moreover, treated as equivalent to understanding), they are also presented as different kinds of activities or a turning of attention in different directions. Significantly, both reason *and* faith are described as a kind of sight. In another passage as well, cited by Westphal in support of a tension between faith and reason, it is actually a new kind of sight that is being emphasized. For example, framing a quote from “A Sermon” by Kierkegaard,⁵⁵ Westphal says the following: “Where ‘reason’ claims autonomy and self-sufficiency for itself, it will find divine revelation to be ‘unreasonable’.”⁵⁶ Like the passage in *Without Authority*, this discussion is actually about vision:

The glory of which we are speaking was certainly not very acceptable to the earthly eye, since it was a stumbling-block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. The eye which saw it, therefore, was not the earthly eye, but the eye of faith, which confidently peered through the terror in order to see what no earthly eye can discover if he who gazes is ignorant of what there is to see.⁵⁷

The emphasis here is much more on recognition and anticipation rather than “reason” in any traditional philosophical (much less transcendental) sense.

Such passages more obviously support the Vision Model of faith as put forward by Jamie Ferreira, Rick Furtak, and Patrick Stokes. For Ferreira, the decision or appropriation of faith is best described as a paradigm shift, or what she calls “an imaginative transition which is a reorienting, transforming shift in perspective.”⁵⁸ Drawing on the writings of Henry David Thoreau, Rick Furtak adds that even ordinary visual perception is always a matter of appropriation and receptivity. According to Thoreau, the “objects which one person will see from a particular hilltop are just as different

⁵⁴“The Tax Collector,” *Without Authority*, 132/SKS 11, 268).

⁵⁵Collected in *Johannes Climacus*.

⁵⁶Westphal, *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith*, 88.

⁵⁷*Johannes Climacus*, 88. The “eye of faith” has been examined by Robert Wyllie as will combined with intellect rather than as a challenge to reason. See Wyllie, “Kierkegaard’s Eyes of Faith,” 545–564.

⁵⁸Ferreira, *Transforming Vision*, 56.

from those which another will see as the persons are different," since things are concealed from us "not so much because they are out of the course of our visual ray as because we do not bring our minds and eyes to bear on them."⁵⁹ Patrick Stokes develops a concept of moral "interest" [*inter-esse*] based on implicit self-awareness that enables one to locate oneself as an individual in relation to the world as it is perceived.⁶⁰ None of these accounts pits reason or understanding against faith. They instead view faith as a mode of understanding reality and one's place in it.

Faith and Reason in American Christendom

I agree with Westphal's overall claim: Enlightenment thinkers such as Hegel and Lessing argued that religion could be replaced by rational education and that reason is in some sense higher than faith, and Kierkegaard disagreed. Westphal (along with Evans and others) has brought subtle and illuminating attention to this difference over the course of many years. But Climacus's critiques of Hegel and Lessing regarding understanding are very specific, targeting some aspects of some forms of German Idealism while accepting and presuming others (such as dialectic). These specialized critiques do not necessarily imply, in other words, that faith is against reason in general, or "the reflectively organized common sense of mankind," as Swenson argues.⁶¹ The reverse is also true: revelation may challenge our common sense cultural understandings without challenging all types of transcendental reason. (Kierkegaard could challenge Hegel while agreeing with much of Kant, for example.) In this case, unfortunately, it also turns out that scholars who side with Swenson are quick to import a preoccupation of our own culture (let's call it "American Christendom"), which is all too comfortable with a "faith vs. reason" paradigm. In the section below, I lay out some ways in which the "faith vs. reason" dichotomy plays out in our own cultural context and explain why American Christendom—our *Sittlichkeit*—needs the Kantian transcendental view of reason as a corrective.

Alan Jacobs recently argued in *Harper's Magazine* (September 2016) that Christian intellectuals have largely retreated from the public sphere. Whether or not we agree with his claim, it is hard to imagine such an essay being written in Kierkegaard's time. Earlier in 2016, Nicholas Kristoff wrote in *The New York Times* about George Yancy, a sociologist who stated he faces more discrimination as an evangelical in academics than as a black man outside it.⁶² In this time of "fundamentalist extremism," "intellectual elitism," "science denial," and "secular" more often than not prefacing

⁵⁹Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," 393, cited in Furtak, "Skepticism and Perceptual Faith," 529.

⁶⁰Stokes, "Kierkegaard's Mirrors," 89. See also Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*.

⁶¹Burgess, "Forstand," 115, citing Swenson, *Something About Kierkegaard*, 99–100.

⁶²Cf. Kristoff, "A Confession of Liberal Intolerance." About George Yancy, a sociologist who is both black and evangelical, he writes: "'Outside of academia I faced more problems as a black,' he told me. 'But inside academia I face more problems as a Christian, and it is not even close.'"

“academy” in everyday conversation, we expect a daily showdown of religion against reason in the public sphere. A reader approaching Westphal’s book with these cultural prejudices—historically contingent, substantive beliefs about faith and reason—will too readily find confirmation that faith and reason are “ill wed,” as Westphal describes them.⁶³

In Kierkegaard’s time, playing up the ways in which faith is “against understanding” was a corrective for an age influenced by Christian Hegelians. Our age is different. Anyone who has taught Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Existentialism is a Humanism” recently knows how students love Sartre with the deep love sophomores have for someone telling them what they already think. The essay affirms for them that (1) reason is limited, (2) nevertheless, decisive actions are required, and (3) such actions constitute our identities. Many college students—religious, atheistic, and (relative) bystanders—*presume* that faith is in conflict with reason (both logic and science), that life is about authentic, decisive, identity-constituting action in practical contexts, and at the same time that most human so-called knowledge is perspectival, cultural, and ultimately pragmatic. Can it be that our culture at large, led by our college students, has absorbed Kierkegaard’s dialectical wisdom? I doubt it. But as a result of such cultural changes, the oppositional framework that Westphal, Evans, and others continue to reinforce fails to act as a cultural corrective—a voice from elsewhere—in the ways they hope.

Moreover, they have rejected in advance some of the philosophical resources that *can* play such a corrective role. For example, Westphal challenges the dominance of natural science.⁶⁴ One effective way to do this in our time, contrary to Westphal’s emphasis, is by teaching and understanding Kant’s claims about the limits of objective knowledge and scientific observation. Religious students as well as atheists have all been told from their respective sub-cultures that religion and science are at odds. In the 2014 film *God’s Not Dead*, for example, heavily advertised by Christianbooks.com (whose tagline “Everything Christian for less!” cries desperately for Kierkegaard’s satirical touch), a Christian student enrolls in a philosophy class and is immediately asked to write “God is dead” on a sheet of paper and sign his name to it. The Christian student refuses (the only one in a class of about 85 to do so), sparking a class debate over the existence of God that lasts until the end of the film. The film closes with a scrolling list of real-life Academia vs. Christianity court cases. Students raised in the Christendom of films like this one *expect* a showdown between reason and faith. Non-religious and atheistic students likewise expect “reason” (science, logic, and common sense) to present a unified front against “faith,” the stubborn outsider. They do not expect an intramural debate about knowledge between reason and science. Playing faith against reason discourages us from examining philosophically (that is,

⁶³Westphal, *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith*, 133, 182.

⁶⁴Westphal, *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Faith*, 225.

intramurally) what reason is and from distinguishing between different types of reason, as well as its social standing in our culture. My concerns here are both conceptual and practical: I have a philosophical concern to preserve or restore the conceptual subtlety of nineteenth-century reason in its transcendental, Kantian sense, in contrast with pure logic, conceptual understanding, and scientific observation, as I have discussed above; I also have a practical, pastoral concern about encouraging the pre-existing tendency of American Christians to treat reason and its university guardians with suspicion, as exemplified in the film.⁶⁵ I find Kierkegaard to be quite subtle on this point, critiquing "calculation" and "probability" but accepting other more sophisticated kinds of knowledge (as developed by Ferreira, Furtak, and Stokes, for example). We can accept these insights without claiming that reason can substitute for or replace revelation and faith, but it is difficult to do so if we reduce rich philosophical discussions of reason (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example) to mere common sense and cultural norms.

Lastly, playing faith against reason, including by drawing lines of demarcation to separate their domains, diminishes our ability to form any "concept" of faith, Kierkegaardian or otherwise, by emptying the proposed alternatives of meaningful content. On the "leap," for example, Westphal writes: "Cognition provides no bridge; a decision to act is needed."⁶⁶ What does a "decision to act" mean? Is it the result of deliberation? Westphal references Aristotle's practical syllogism.⁶⁷ But a practical syllogism is hardly beyond or against reason. *All* means-ends reasoning, for Aristotle as well as for Kant, entails a decision to act in reality and to treat reasons or facts, as Stokes puts it, as "claiming" us.⁶⁸ How is faith different from Aristotelian or Kantian practical reason on Westphal's view? Moreover, action in response to testimony and authority would be rational according to many philosophers.⁶⁹ How is religious faith unique? Westphal claims that one insight Kierkegaard appreciates from Lessing is that even "cognitive" leaps cannot be made cognitively.⁷⁰ Does it all come down to personal appropriation?⁷¹ If so, is such appropriation arbitrary, or is it based on something?

⁶⁵*God's Not Dead 2* was released April 2016. In this sequel, a Christian high school teacher does battle with a school board for quoting Scripture in class. It finished 4th in its opening weekend.

⁶⁶Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 198.

⁶⁷Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 200.

⁶⁸Stokes, *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, 11.

⁶⁹See for example Audi, "Testimony as a Social Foundation of Knowledge," 507–531. See also articles in *Episteme: A Journal of Individual and Social Epistemology* 7:1 (2010), especially essays by Saul Traiger ("Experience and Testimony in Hume's Philosophy," 42–57) and Fred Wilson ("Hume and the Role of Testimony in Knowledge," 58–78). On authority, see Linda Zagzebski, "A Defense of Epistemic Authority," 293–306.

⁷⁰Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 198.

⁷¹Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 201.

Ferreira's Vision Model answers these questions by including decisive action as an essential component of faith without asking it to carry the burden of *being* faith. The model of "transforming vision" accounts for the cognitive and existential shifts in the same movement. Ferreira writes the following:

When what is seen is not a neutral possibility laid out before one, but a possibility recognized and appreciated as a "task," the relation between imagination and choice can no longer be the simplistic one in which imagination first lays out options and *then* we shut our eyes and hold our breath and "will" one.⁷²

A new "seeing-as," for Ferreira, is often multi-leveled and complex, invoking the will *at the same time* as the perceptual recognition, but without faith simply being a response of the will.⁷³ Westphal rightly emphasizes, for example, that "the joy of knowing that one is related to an eternal happiness is dialectically inseparable from the suffering entailed in that relation."⁷⁴ This is so because the peculiar kind of joy received in suffering is joy in *consciousness*⁷⁵—a new way of seeing one's suffering. Yet here again, Westphal turns the suffering of guilt into a tension "between faith and reason or understanding."⁷⁶ This addendum is not required or implied in the context of Climacus's discussion. It leads us to see ourselves as mainly engaged in an ongoing battle against the Enlightenment rather than—at least on this point—as joined in wonder *with* these thinkers (and Kierkegaard among them) at the paradoxicality of consciousness and the richness of its objects,⁷⁷ with new and higher pleasures offered to the rare Christian trained in philosophy and German Idealism who, like Kierkegaard, understands just how deep all this can go. Falling back instead on the familiar "faith vs. reason" dichotomy serves mainly to confirm the direction our culture at large is heading on its own, without any help from Kierkegaard.

No model of faith is likely to be the whole story. Westphal rightly emphasizes that Kierkegaard employs multiple pseudonyms in part in order to let each voice be one-sided.⁷⁸ Kierkegaard writes, "Nothing is easier for the one providing the corrective than to add the other side: but then it ceases to be precisely the corrective and itself becomes an established order."⁷⁹ At the same time, this means that readers of Kierkegaard should

⁷²Ferreira, "Imagination and the Despair of Sin," 63. See also Furtak, "Skepticism and Perceptual Faith," 555.

⁷³On the ways in which Kierkegaard lends complexity to the question of whether faith is "voluntary," see M. Jamie Ferreira, "Imagination and the Despair of Sin," 16–34.

⁷⁴Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 216.

⁷⁵Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 216, and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 452.

⁷⁶Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 220.

⁷⁷Cf. *Johannes Climacus*, 145.

⁷⁸Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 217.

⁷⁹*Point of View*, 205.

recognize, perhaps more than anyone else, that being a cultural corrective will not mean pushing in the same direction always and for all time. My hope is that we will not overlook resources in Kierkegaard's thought that do not fit comfortably with the ways we have become used to thinking, including the familiar ways of classifying philosophers in our Western cultural heritage. For us, here and now, the Kantian and Hegelian distinctions among different types of reason are so far from being the established order that they have now become a corrective.⁸⁰

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⁸⁰See *Point of View*, 205, quoted in Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, 217. Many thanks to Merold Westphal and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on this article. Thanks also to Andrew Burgess and Rick Furtak for their encouragement.

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