

# The Role of Irony in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*

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## *Abstract*

Recent authors have suggested that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings are fundamentally ironical, and that it is mistaken to see them as containing philosophical and theological claims. Rather, the point of these writings is to show that the really important theological and philosophical truths cannot be expressed. I argue that such interpreters are correct to see pervasive irony in Kierkegaard's writings, but wrong about how this irony works from a literary perspective. *Philosophical Fragments* is analyzed as a test case to see how Kierkegaard uses irony, and to show that this use of irony is consistent with the advancement of substantive philosophical and theological claims.

Many authors, beginning with Kierkegaard himself, have seen the writings attributed by Kierkegaard to the Johannes Climacus pseudonym as having a central place in the Kierkegaardian authorship. In *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* Kierkegaard says that *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is "the turning point in the whole authorship."<sup>1</sup> To signal its special place in the authorship, as a book that is, strictly speaking, neither esthetic nor religious, Kierkegaard says that it had to be attributed to a pseudonym, "although I did place my name as editor, which I have not done with any purely esthetic production – a hint, at least for someone who is concerned with or has a sense for such things."<sup>2</sup> Of course, *Postscript* is a postscript to *Philosophical Fragments*, albeit a rather long-winded one, and since Kierkegaard had already placed his name on that earlier volume as "editor," we are probably safe in assuming that the same kind of "hint" is being offered in the case of *Fragments* as with *Postscript*.

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<sup>1</sup> *SFV*, *SVI* XIII, 542.

<sup>2</sup> *SFV*, *SVI* XIII, 523.

But what kind of hint is being offered? There is a long tradition of reading *Fragments* and *Postscript* as Kierkegaard's definitive treatments of theological and philosophical topics. This tradition has recently been criticized by literary-minded commentators, who argue that to read Kierkegaard "straight" as a philosopher/theologian is to misunderstand him. Roger Poole, for example, criticizes what he calls the tradition of "blunt reading" of Kierkegaard in North America.<sup>3</sup> Poole attempts to explain this "blunt reading" as due to the fact that the first two prominent interpreters of Kierkegaard in North America were Walter Lowrie and David Swenson. Lowrie, according to Poole, was a retired minister with a "plain, honest mind," and Poole misidentifies David Swenson as a "professor of religion at the University of Minnesota."<sup>4</sup> Thus, Kierkegaard was initially seen in North America through religious eyes, and this "emplacement within theology is the reason why Kierkegaard was translated as he was, and also translated as an orthodox Christian believer...in a manner that paid extraordinarily little attention to the contours of what Kierkegaard obsessively used to refer to as his 'indirect communication.'"<sup>5</sup>

In reality Swenson was a philosopher in one of the most secular departments and secular universities in the United States; there was no department of religion at the University of Minnesota at that time or even today.<sup>6</sup> However, this mistake on the part of Poole is probably not important, since he sees most philosophers as equally "blunt" in their readings of Kierkegaard as the theologians.<sup>7</sup> The real problem

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Poole "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 48-75 (abbreviated "The Unknown Kierkegaard"). See particularly pp. 57-66.

<sup>4</sup> "The Unknown Kierkegaard," pp. 59-60.

<sup>5</sup> "The Unknown Kierkegaard," p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> There is, however, currently a program of "Religious Studies" that is housed in the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies.

<sup>7</sup> Poole singles out my own work as an especially bad example of "blunt reading," taking special exception to the subtitle of my book *Passionate Reason*, which is "*Making Sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments*." (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 1992.) Poole apparently takes the subtitle to imply that Kierkegaard's book is confused and needs to be "rescued." However, my book is a sustained argument that *Fragments* is philosophically clear and coherent, though the philosophical content is packaged in a humorous and ironical form; some contemporary readers may need help but that is more a comment on today's educational system than a critique of Kierkegaard. Curiously, Poole praises Robert Roberts' *Faith, Reason, and History* to the skies, as a great contrast to my work. If he had read both my book and

seems to be that philosophers and theologians have taken Kierkegaard to be offering claims or views on various issues, and even as supporting such claims with arguments. Poole claims that such an approach is doomed to failure, because "Kierkegaard's text does not offer itself to be the object of the question, 'What does it mean?' It offers itself as the proponent of the question 'What do you think?'"<sup>8</sup>

Now one might reasonably think that a false dilemma is here assumed and ask whether or not Kierkegaard's texts could inspire new thinking if they have no meaning of their own that we could understand and respond to. However, Poole claims that such a question betrays a failure to understand that the Kierkegaardian texts "demonstrate to a nicety the Lacanian perception that all we are ever offered in a text is an endless succession of signifiers."<sup>9</sup> If we read Kierkegaard in this Lacanian way, we will see that "Kierkegaard writes text after text whose aim is not to state a truth, not to clarify an issue, not to propose a definite doctrine, not to offer some meaning that could be directly appropriated."<sup>10</sup>

To avoid blunt reading, commentators such as Poole stress that one must pay special attention to Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms and the role irony plays in the authorship. And quite a few writers have done so. James Conant, for example, has written a series of articles in which he compares Kierkegaard to Wittgenstein, arguing that the "Revocation" attached to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is formally analogous to the famous ending of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in which Wittgenstein affirms that the content of the book is nonsense: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)"<sup>11</sup> Conant argues that the "Revocation" attached to *Postscript* by Johannes Climacus functions in the same way as Wittgenstein's oracular "conclusion," identifying what has gone before in the book as

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Roberts' book carefully, he would have learned that Roberts and myself are close friends and shared many ideas in the writing of both books. While Roberts and I certainly disagree on some points, the two books are in basic and broad agreement.

<sup>8</sup> "The Unknown Kierkegaard," p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Poole *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press 1993, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1961, p. 151.

“nonsense.”<sup>12</sup> If irony as a rhetorical form consists in part in saying something entirely different from and even opposite of the surface meaning of the text, then on Conant’s reading the Climacus writings are ironical through and through; the irony consists in the fact that the texts apparently express what is in fact inexpressible.<sup>13</sup> The real point of Kierkegaard according to Conant is that religious truth cannot be expressed but only lived, and the attempts on the part of Climacus to express this truth cannot help but be nonsensical. That generations of philosophers and theologians have read the works without perceiving the nonsense is itself what one might call a deep situational irony.

The tradition of taking Kierkegaard seriously as a philosopher and theologian is certainly not confined to North America, however, and Lowrie and Swenson hardly deserve all the blame (or credit) for this tradition. The late Niels Thulstrup surely provides an excellent example in his “Commentary” on *Fragments*. Consider, for example, Thulstrup’s judgment on the question of the pseudonymity of *Fragments*: “The work is both thought and written in Kierkegaard’s own name and therefore cannot be considered a truly pseudonymous work.”<sup>14</sup> Since the work is not truly pseudonymous, Thulstrup feels free to regard the book as the one in which Kierkegaard gives “the outline of his dogmatics.”<sup>15</sup> *Fragments* is seen as a book in which “Kierkegaard raises philosophical and Christian problems one after the other and gives his solutions, which open one’s eyes to ever-widening perspectives.”<sup>16</sup> Poole would surely judge this account of *Fragments* as an “outline of dogmatics” replete with “problems and solutions” to be blunt reading indeed.

In this paper I want to argue that the literary scholars are quite right to call attention to the ironical character of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous literature, including the writings attributed to Johannes Clima-

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<sup>12</sup> Probably the clearest of these articles of Conant’s is “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense” in *Pursuits of Reason*, ed. by Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam, Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Strictly speaking, Conant makes his claim only about *Postscript* and does not really discuss *Fragments*. However, in support of his interpretation of *Postscript* as deeply ironical, he cites a journal passage from *Postscript*, mentioning the “incessant activity of irony,” that is explicitly about *Fragments*. (See “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense,” pp. 215-216.) This leads me to think that Conant sees the two Climacus books as continuous.

<sup>14</sup> Niels Thulstrup “Commentator’s Introduction” in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by David Swenson, trans. revised and commentary trans. by Howard V. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1962, p. lxxxv.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xlv.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. lxxxv.

cus, but wrong to think that this implies that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings do not contain theological and philosophical claims and arguments. Specifically, irony plays a key role in *Philosophical Fragments*, and that book cannot properly be understood without paying attention to the specific standpoint of Johannes Climacus or the irony that pervades his authorial perspective. I shall claim, however, that paying attention to the pseudonymous and ironical character of the book does not require us to judge the book to be "nonsense." Rather, the irony *presupposes* the validity of most of the distinctions and arguments it contains.

Johannes Climacus is a kind of philosopher, and paying attention to the literary character of *Fragments* by no means requires us to regard the book as having no serious philosophical and theological content. The complaint that authors such as Lowrie and Thulstrup effectively ignored the pseudonymous character of *Fragments* is partially valid. This failure on their part, however, does not mean that their writings, as well as those of many other authors who have thought of *Fragments* as serious philosophy, do not contain helpful insights into what is going on in the text.

### *The Ironical Character of Fragments*

In *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard distinguishes two forms of irony: "The most common form of irony is to say something earnestly that is not meant in earnest. The second form of irony, to say in a jest, jestingly, something that is meant in earnest is more rare."<sup>17</sup> I believe that *Philosophical Fragments* is an example of this second, rarer type of irony. To understand the book then requires us to see it as a jest, but at the same time to see that through the jest something serious is being said.

How can we recognize this? Indeed, how can we recognize a book as ironical at all? These are the questions that Wayne Booth attempts to answer in his magisterial *A Rhetoric of Irony*.<sup>18</sup> It is a fact, says Booth, that many authors employ irony successfully in that at least some readers come to understand the author's ironical intentions. It does not take too long for most readers to come to recognize that Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, which argues that the nineteenth century surplus Irish population could be reduced by selling young

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<sup>17</sup> *CI*, 248.

<sup>18</sup> Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Irish children for food, is highly ironical, despite or because of its tone of “mad reasonableness.”<sup>19</sup> Nor does it take many readers very long to recognize that the cheery optimism of the narrator of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* is very far from being the voice of the author.<sup>20</sup> The question then is not whether irony is recognizable, but how we perform the trick of recognizing it.

Booth discusses a whole host of ways we detect irony in an author. One obvious way is direct guidance from an author, looking at such things as an author’s preface, a title, or an epigraph. Such direct guidance may or may not be helpful; we also look for such things as deliberate errors, disharmonies of style, and conflicts of belief within the text.<sup>21</sup> All of these tests are highly fallible. To detect a disharmony of style, we must have some sense of how we think the author himself would write if he or she were writing straightforwardly. Detecting a deliberate error of fact requires some sense of what the author believed to be true. Obviously, all of us make mistakes about this sort of thing. We are particular prone to being “taken in” by irony that is critically aimed at positions we ourselves hold dear.

I know a man who wrote a fictional story called “The Salvation of Zachary Baumklettner,” about a young man who starved himself to death while attempting to follow the moral teachings of those who stress the obligations of those who have resources to share what they have with the poor.<sup>22</sup> I know the author’s political position well and I believe that the story was ironical; the intended purpose was to satirize the position of those who claim that morality does not permit us to enjoy luxuries such as stylish clothes and automobiles in a world in which others are starving. Much to the author’s surprise, however, some people took the tale of Zachary Baumklettner as a story about a moral hero to be emulated. The irony is that the irony of the story was opaque to the people it was intended to satirize.

Booth argues that this sort of case can be generalized: “Every reader will have the greatest difficulty detecting irony that mocks his own beliefs or characteristics. If an author invents a speaker whose stupidities strike me as gems of wisdom, how am I to know that he is not a prophet? If his mock style seems like good writing to me, what am I to do? And if his incongruities of fact and logic are such as I

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<sup>19</sup> See Booth *A Rhetoric of Irony*, pp. 105-123, for a brilliant discussion of Swift’s work.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82-86.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 47-86.

<sup>22</sup> The story was not published as a book but as a “Tract” by InterVarsity Press.

might commit, I am doomed.”<sup>23</sup> These are points to keep in mind as we think about how to detect irony in *Fragments*, and also about what sort of person is likely to miss the irony.

If I am right in my contention that the irony in *Fragments* is the kind in which something serious is said in the form of a jest, then detecting the irony could be difficult. Some of the tests that Booth proposes, such as incongruities of fact and logic, may not be present at all, and indeed there is a logical coherence to the “thought-experiment” of Johannes Climacus. As he says in the “Moral” to the book, the “project indisputably goes beyond the Socratic, as is apparent at every point.”<sup>24</sup> It is therefore vital that we have other kinds of clues. Fortunately, these are provided in abundance, in such a manner that the ironical character of *Fragments* can hardly be seriously doubted.

First and foremost we have direct assertions on the part of the author(s), both Kierkegaard and Climacus. In *Postscript* Climacus himself comments on a German review of *Fragments*:

His report is accurate and on the whole dialectically reliable, but now comes the hitch: although the report is accurate, anyone who reads only that will receive an utterly wrong impression of the book....The report is didactic, purely and simply didactic; consequently the reader will receive the impression that the pamphlet is also didactic. As I see it, this is the most mistaken impression one can have of it. The contrast of form, the teasing resistance of the experiment to the content, the inventive audacity (which even invents Christianity),...the indefatigable activity of irony, the parody of speculative thought in the entire plan, the satire in making efforts as if something *ganz Auszerordentliches and zwar Neues* [altogether extraordinary, that is, new] were to come of them, whereas what always emerges is old-fashioned orthodoxy in its rightful severity – all of this the reader finds no hint in its report.<sup>25</sup>

Of course the reader may be on guard against this direct assertion on the part of Climacus. May not this claim be itself ironical, leaving the original text as straightforward prose? This is of course possible, but there is not the least hint of any such thing in the style or claims of the footnote where Climacus comments on his own earlier work.

In any case we do not have to rely simply on what Climacus says about *Fragments*. There is also a direct assertion by Kierkegaard himself in his *Journal*, in an entry from 1845:

The review of my *Fragments* in the German journal is essentially wrong in making the content appear didactic, expository, instead of being experimental by virtue of its polar form, which is the very basis of the elasticity of irony. To make Christianity seem to be

<sup>23</sup> Booth *A Rhetoric of Irony*, p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> *PF*, 111.

<sup>25</sup> *CUP*, 274-275n.

an invention of Johannes Climacus is a biting satire on philosophy's insolent attitude toward it. And then to bring out the orthodox forms in the experiment "so that our age, which only mediates etc., is scarcely able to recognize them" and believes it is something new – that is irony. But right there is the earnestness, to want Christianity to be given its due in this way – before one mediates.<sup>26</sup>

One could hardly expect a more direct claim of irony on the part of an author. Of course one can suspect Kierkegaard himself of being ironical here, but the suspicion is lessened by the fact that the claim is made in Kierkegaard's personal Daybook. If this is ironical, who is the intended "victim" of the irony? Kierkegaard himself?

In any case the strong suspicion of irony that these claims support is greatly strengthened when we look at the text of *Philosophical Fragments* itself, which is liberally strewn with pointers toward its ironical character. We could focus on the title itself. In the world of Hegelian philosophy in which "philosophy" and "system" are pretty much synonymous, the title *Philosophiske Smuler* is itself highly ironical, since "scraps" or "bits" of philosophy could hardly be said to be philosophy. A full treatment would take account of the "Epigraph" from Shakespeare, and the "Preface" as well.<sup>27</sup>

The most prominent clues, however, are the dialogues with an interlocutor who appears at the end of each chapter, and it is on these I want to focus attention. The interlocutor, about whom more will be said later, appears at the end of each chapter, in a section usually beginning with something like "But perhaps someone will say..."<sup>28</sup> Several times this figure accuses Climacus of plagiarism, in that Climacus pretends to "invent" a perspective on the Truth and how the Truth is to be learned which looks suspiciously like Christianity. The interlocutor compares Climacus to a man who charges a fee in the afternoon to see a ram that could be seen by anyone in the morning for free, grazing in the pasture.<sup>29</sup> Climacus is said not only be to a plagiarizer, but the "shabbiest of all plagiarizers," since the story he has told is one that known by every child.<sup>30</sup>

The accusation itself is not so interesting as is the response by Climacus, who unrepentantly confesses each time the charge is made, with words dripping with irony: "Maybe so, I hide my face in shame."<sup>31</sup> In

<sup>26</sup> *JP* 5:5827 / *JJ*:362 in *SKS* 18, 259.

<sup>27</sup> For my take on these see my *Passionate Reason*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 1992, pp. 18-25.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, *PF*, 21-22, 35-36, 46-48, 53-54, 66-71, 89-90, 105-110.

<sup>29</sup> *PF*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> *PF*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> *PF*, 21.

fact, Climacus is shameless, cheerfully admitting he has made allusions to authors without acknowledgement, arguing that his plagiarism is not as bad as others simply because it is so obvious and easily detected!<sup>32</sup> His “plagiarism” is of course essential to his point; his imagined “alternative” to the Socratic view of the Truth and how it is learned is simply the Christian orthodoxy that any catechized child would be familiar with. Every one of Climacus’ implied readers will know that Christianity is a revealed religion that stands or falls with the claim of Jesus of Nazareth to be the incarnate Son of God who became human to deal with the problem of human sin. All of the readers of the book already know that Christianity claims that Jesus is not simply a teacher with a new philosophical doctrine, but the individual who was “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”<sup>33</sup>

The extended irony of *Fragments* should in fact be clear even without the intervention of the interlocutor. It is hardly possible to miss the resemblance between the “invention” of Climacus and Christianity, and if anyone were so dense as not to see it, Climacus goes out of his way to make the point obvious by using many theologically loaded terms. Although he begins with philosophical language that might appear to fit his pseudo-invention, he quickly calls his hypothesized “Teacher” a “savior,” “deliverer,” and “one who makes atonement.”<sup>34</sup> His hypothesized “Disciple” is one who is in the grip of sin, and needs to be “converted,” a process that requires “repentance” and leads to “new birth.”<sup>35</sup> The irony is in fact inherent in the very project of “inventing” Christianity, since the defining characteristic of the “Thought-Project,” that which distinguishes it from the Socratic view, is the inability of human beings to conceive the idea on their own. In effect, Climacus has pretended to invent something that cannot be invented; if it exists at all, it is a gift from God.

### *Does the Irony of Fragments Undermine the Content?*

That *Fragments* is ironical through and through then can hardly be doubted. More needs to be said, however, about the way the irony works, and the effect of the irony on the content. I claimed above that

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<sup>32</sup> *PF*, 35, 53-54.

<sup>33</sup> John 14:6.

<sup>34</sup> *PF*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> *PF*, 18-19.

the irony in *Fragments* is not the “common” type of irony in which something is said seriously which is in fact foolish or ridiculous, but is instead the “rarer” kind, in which something serious is said in the form of jest. The evidence for this is implicit in the account of the irony just given.

An examination of the irony in *Fragments* shows very clearly the inadequacy of Quintilian’s classical account of rhetorical irony as involving a mode of speech whereby what is said is the opposite of what is meant. For many of the things Climacus says in *Fragments* are logical truths or else basic claims about Christianity that hardly anyone in the implied audience would think of denying. If the “Socratic” view of truth is defined as one in which the “moment” where one learns the truth is inessential, then logically it is indeed the case that any alternative to the Socratic view will have to be one in which the moment is indeed of essential importance. And this would appear to imply that prior to the moment the learner must be devoid of the truth. Climacus can hardly mean to assert the “opposite” of such logical platitudes.

Does Climacus say things that are not meant to be taken seriously? Without a doubt he does, and the textual clues that this is so are abundant. When Climacus claims to have “invented” his alternative to the Socratic view, we know that he does not wish us to take him seriously, because when the Interlocutor appears and makes the accusation that he is really just presenting Christianity, he cheerfully concedes that this is so. Of course the same point is made by both Climacus and Kierkegaard in their comments on the German review, both of which stress the idea that the “invention” is only “pretended,” and that the whole idea is a satire on modern philosophy.

This of course gives us a clue about against whom the satire is directed. Kierkegaard sees Hegelian philosophy as an attempt to defend Christianity against the critiques of the Enlightenment. The defense, however, takes the following form: Hegel in effect says that the content of Christianity is true; it is the religion of Absolute Spirit. However, that same truth is expressed more adequately in the form of philosophy. Thus, on Hegel’s view Christianity becomes a kind of intellectual doctrine that can be philosophically rationalized and clarified. From Kierkegaard’s point of view Christianity would be better off with honest enemies than such “friends,” and at least one meaning of the motto of *Fragments* (“Better well-hanged than badly married”) is surely that it would be better to reject Christianity and allow it to die a decent death than to save it by marrying it off to such a philosophical system. The “insolence” of modern philosophy lies in the

complacent assumption that it can be the “savior” of Christianity. However, as Climacus (ironically) asks, “is that not what philosophers are for – to make supernatural things ordinary and trivial?”<sup>36</sup>

*Fragments* is indeed permeated with irony, but the irony cannot consist in denying or undermining the claim that Christianity is a revealed religion which cannot be reduced to a set of doctrines to be proven or shown to be probable by human reason. Rather, the irony presupposes that the distinction between Christianity and any such doctrines is a proper one. The irony works precisely through the pretence that something that reason could not invent has been invented. For this pretence to work from a literary perspective, it must be true, as it surely is, that Christianity presents itself as a revealed faith that is distinct from any human philosophical doctrine. If the distinction between Christianity and any such doctrine is not valid, the joke loses its point.

We get more light on the “victim” of the irony by a closer look at the interlocutor. The interlocutor is knowledgeable and well-read, and clearly in one sense “knows” the claims that *Fragments* is ironically making. Despite this knowledge, the interlocutor appears to be a bit dim in terms of conceptual understanding. He claims near the end of Chapter Four to have immediately if only dimly grasped the “far-reaching implications” of Climacus’ hypothesis, though his response at the beginning of Chapter Five, where he quibbles as to whether or not it is legitimate to lump all the “later generations” into one category, shows that he has clearly missed the main point. Chapter Four has already argued that immediate contemporaneity is unimportant; the only thing important is that the learner receive “the Condition” directly from the god. The Interlocutor, to put it plainly, appears to be a knowledgeable fool, who claims in a blustering way to understand the consequences of a view he does not understand at all.

It seems plausible to think that the intended “victim” of the irony is someone like the interlocutor, someone in Christendom who is confused about the basic character of Christianity and its relation to human thought. By contrast, what we might call the intended audience, the people who “get” the irony, must be people who welcome a bracing reminder about what they already know, but may be tempted to forget. Perhaps these latter people have been confused by the various “logical transcriptions” of Christianity offered, not just by philosophers but by theologians as well. The ironical and humorous reminders Climacus offers about the basic character of Christian orthodoxy

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<sup>36</sup> *PF*, p. 53.

do not have to be seen as apologetic in character. As the “Moral” implies, an individual may understand the difference between the Socratic and Christian views and prefer the former. But at least such a person understands what genuine Christianity is and can have some clarity about it, whether he or she believes or is offended.

### *A Contemporary Analogy*

In order to show how the irony works in *Fragments*, I wish to risk giving a contemporary analogy. Of course the analogy ultimately fails; as Climacus himself insists when he tells his tale of the King who fell in love with the peasant, no human analogy can really adequately mirror the content of the Gospel. However, I want to give an example of how one might say something serious in the form of a jest, so as to get a better sense of how we do read *Fragments*.

To set the stage for my analogy, I need to make some remarks about the contemporary educational scene in the United States. Everyone recognizes that the universities in the U.S. exist in part for the transmission of knowledge. Faculty are hired to teach; students come to the universities to learn. The state legislatures who fund public universities do so in part because they are committed to an educated citizenry; the individuals who pay tuition to attend universities, public and private, do so because they wish to be come educated and attain the degrees that symbolize and certify that they have this status. If one looks at the mission statements of universities and the public statements of presidents and chancellors, teaching and learning are always said to be central to the missions of schools.

Despite these evident facts, however, it is widely recognized that in many of our research universities, teaching has extremely low importance. Faculty are hired, tenured, and promoted almost solely on the grounds of the accomplishments as researchers. Teaching is often relegated to graduate students. What is worse, the students who are taught by graduate students may in most cases be better off, since the graduate students may be more likely actually to care whether their students learn.

Suppose that someone who cares passionately about teaching wanted to write an essay that would encourage people in the contemporary university to take the responsibility of teaching more seriously. And let us suppose that the most effective means of doing this is to utilize irony, since we have a situation in which almost everyone acknowl-

edges in theory a principle that in actuality is ignored. One option would be to employ what Kierkegaard called the most common form of irony – to write something in a serious manner that is in fact foolishness. Someone taking this strategy might, for example, write an essay which proposes, in an apparently serious way, that the contemporary university could be improved by the simple expedient of abolishing the category of “student.” After all, if all the students were sent home, then faculty would be free to do their “real” work.

Suppose, however, that the person who wishes to defend the value of teaching wanted to use the “rarer” form of irony, to write something that is in fact serious in the form of a jest. Such a person might construct an essay along the following lines. The essay might announce, in a breath-taking voice, that the author has made an amazing discovery. There are people walking around the university called “students.” Furthermore, at least some of these people seem to have come to the university to learn things. Although the author knows it is a bold and far-out idea, he or she suggests that some of the professors might actually meet with some of these hitherto unnoticed people on campus and try to impart some of their own hard-won knowledge. Of course, the author will admit, it is a lot to expect that busy university professors would take time to do such a thing. However, who knows what the consequences of such a radical move might be? The students might actually become educated people; the professors, though one can hardly dare to hope for such a utopian outcome, might find satisfaction and meaning in helping to shape the lives of young people.

If we came across such an ironical essay, how should we understand it? We would surely misunderstand the essay if we thought the author to be suggesting that there were not in fact students on university campuses or that it would not in fact be a good idea for professors to meet with students and try to teach them about what they know. The irony consists, after all, in proposing, as if it were a new and shocking proposal, what everyone at the university already knows to be part of the responsibilities of a professor, an ideal to which everyone already gives lip service, but is in reality something to which the contemporary university sorely needs to be reminded of. The irony in such a case presupposes the validity of what is said. What is ironically undermined is not the value of teaching, but the hypocrisy that claims to value teaching but in fact regards teaching as a waste of time.

In a similar manner, when Climacus reminds us that Christianity is a revealed religion, and that the fact of God becoming incarnate is much more important than any philosophical teaching that might come from

the lips of the God who is incarnate, he is hardly telling his readers anything they do not already know. Any well-brought up child would know that to be a Christian is to be a follower of Jesus, understood not merely as a Jewish philosopher, but as the Son of God who takes away the sin of the world. Once one sees that Climacus is not really “inventing” anything, but reminding readers of what traditional Christian orthodoxy really is, then one can hardly miss the point. Climacus himself lets the cat out of the bag at the end by explicitly telling us that “if he ever writes a sequel” he will “give the problem its proper historical costume” and discuss Christianity, which is “the only historical phenomenon” that has ever invested history with this kind of eternal significance.<sup>37</sup> The irony cannot consist of denying or undermining these platitudes about Christianity, but rather in ironically undermining the stance of those who claim to be Christian and thus committed to such claims, but who in reality understand Christianity in a way that makes it to be something essentially different than what it is. “But to go beyond Socrates when one nevertheless says essentially the same as he, only not nearly so well – that at least is not Socratic.”<sup>38</sup>

Once we see this, then we must look at the “blunt readings” of Lowrie, Swenson, and Thulstrup in a somewhat different light. It is true that these commentators do not do full justice to the ironical character of *Philosophical Fragments*. Thulstrup, for example, cannot be right in denying that *Fragments* is genuinely pseudonymous. His argument on behalf of this claim is essentially that if we compare the content of *Fragments* with things Kierkegaard published under his own name, we will find “hardly any inconsistency.”<sup>39</sup> We can now see that this is a weak argument; of course we will not find Kierkegaard contradicting the truths of which he feels his contemporaries need reminding. However, the humorous and satirical voice we hear in the book is far from Kierkegaard’s own. Nor is this contradicted by the fact that Kierkegaard may have originally written the book intending to publish it under his own name, with the pseudonym being a later thought. For it is quite possible that he discovered or decided on reflection that the voice heard in the book was not his own voice, but one that required a pseudonym.

There is of course an irony that is inherent in the situation created by the reception of *Fragments* as a book of “dogmatic theology.” As

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<sup>37</sup> *PF*, 109.

<sup>38</sup> *PF*, 111.

<sup>39</sup> Thulstrup “Commentator’s Introduction,” p. lxxxv.

we have seen, there is a sense in which the mistake of reading the book in this manner is not wholly a mistake; the book does in fact embody what we might call some of the basic elements of Christian theology. However, that a book that Kierkegaard wrote as an ironical reminder to his readers of things they already knew now reads to many as if it were primarily an original contribution to theology is itself deeply ironical. Such a situation is an ironical comment on how deeply confused many are about the nature of what Kierkegaard himself called "Christian orthodoxy."

### *Stable and Unstable Irony*

John Lippitt has recently called attention to the importance of Wayne Booth's distinction between "stable" and "unstable" irony.<sup>40</sup> In the contemporary world the concept of irony has become very expansive. We speak of events as ironical, of "dramatic irony," and indeed some authors virtually make irony to be coextensive with literature.<sup>41</sup> Booth's discussion of stable and unstable irony restricts itself to examples of intentional irony, especially so-called verbal irony. Since my focus has been on a literary text, *Philosophical Fragments*, much of what Booth has to say about intentional irony has been relevant to my task, and the same is true for the distinction he draws between stable and unstable irony.

For Booth both these types of irony involve a "mask," in which the author poses a riddle by putting forward an affirmation that clearly must be rejected, or at least cannot be taken at face value. However, with unstable irony, no reconstruction of the author's position is possible, because the "universe of discourse" of the author is one that is "inherently absurd" and this implies that "all statements are subject to ironic undermining."<sup>42</sup> Stable irony, by contrast, is irony in which the author has or takes a position, and where the irony may function in such a way that the reader who "gets it" at least is offered the possibility of making that position his or her own. Stable irony is, then, irony that is endowed with a moral purposiveness. Lippitt argues, I believe cor-

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<sup>40</sup> See John Lippitt *Humor and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, New York: St. Martin's Press 2000, especially Chapter 8.

<sup>41</sup> For an excellent introduction to the various forms of irony, see D. C. Muecke *Irony*, London: Methuen and Co. 1970.

<sup>42</sup> Booth *A Rhetoric of Irony*, pp. 240-241.

rectly, that Booth's distinction roughly parallels the distinction drawn by Kierkegaard himself in *The Concept of Irony* between irony as "infinite absolute negativity" and that "controlled irony" which constitutes the "truth of irony."<sup>43</sup> We must ask ourselves about the relation of Kierkegaard to the Romantic ironists whom he sees as leading us to the abyss. Is irony the disciplinarian that frees us from immediacy and helps us see the spiritual significance of human life? Or is irony itself the final truth, the truth that all truths must ultimately dissolve in the fire?

I have in this paper argued that Kierkegaard himself used irony for his own spiritual purposes; the irony in *Fragments* is controlled, stable irony. One point in favor of my contention is that, paradoxically, seeing Kierkegaardian irony in this way makes the text more interesting. Conant's "ironical" reading flattens Kierkegaard's text, leading to situation similar to one that Hegel famously described as a night in which all cows are black. If everything in the Climacus readings is "nonsense," and the point that I am supposed to gain from the books is that they are saying what cannot be said, then the specifics of the discussions of contemporaneity, history, suffering, guilt, subjectivity, and truth all become less interesting. If it is all nonsense, then why waste time making sense of the distinctions and arguments? This is even more true if we follow Poole and take Kierkegaard as merely self-consciously illustrating what is true of "all texts." As Booth says, if all of literature is irony, then our appreciation of those specific literary forms we call "irony" becomes questionable.<sup>44</sup>

Of course my claim that seeing Kierkegaardian irony as stable, controlled irony makes the texts more interesting can be challenged. A Kierkegaard who gives us "an endless play of signifiers" is in many ways an aesthetically enchanting Kierkegaard. He is at the very least a Kierkegaard who cannot make us uncomfortable by challenging us with a definite moral and religious position. Perhaps part of the appeal of a Kierkegaard who presents us with "absolute, infinite, negativity" is precisely that such a Kierkegaard allows us to play with the texts as we see fit. Perhaps we think we can even have our cake and eat it too, if we follow the lead of Conant and combine a reading of the Climacus texts as "nonsense" with an edifying exhortation that moral and religious truths can only be lived and not thought. Of course it is true that for Kierkegaard, as for Climacus, God's incarnation in Christ is something human reason cannot understand, and

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<sup>43</sup> *CI*, 261, 324-329.

<sup>44</sup> Booth *A Rhetoric of Irony*, pp. 8-9.

God's gift of himself is not directed to our intellects as an intellectual puzzle to be contemplated and solved. Christ is not the object of knowledge but the object of faith. However, faith must have content, a content that we can understand so that we may build our lives around it. That content can and must be thought, as a task for life.

The Kierkegaard who gives us "mastered" or "controlled" irony in *Fragments* is a Kierkegaard who is a master of conceptual clarification as well as a master of irony and humor. He understands that the God who has revealed himself in history is a God who can be grasped in faith. The irony does not undermine but presupposes the claims of Christian revelation.