

The Parable As Mirror: An Examination of the Use of Parables in the Works of Kierkegaard

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THE PARABLE AS MIRROR: AN EXAMINATION OF THE USE OF
PARABLES IN THE WORKS OF KIERKEGAARD

by

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ABSTRACT
THE PARABLE AS MIRROR: AN EXAMINATION OF THE USE OF
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Marquette University, 2018

This dissertation focuses on an exploration of the use of parables in the works of Soren Kierkegaard. While some work has been done on Kierkegaard's poetic style, very little attention has been paid to his metaphors, despite their prevalent use in his works. Much of the scholarship instead treats his parables as mere examples of philosophical concepts. In this work, I argue that Kierkegaard's parables function primarily to cause the reader to see him or herself truly. The parables work like mirrors, reflecting our true selves back onto ourselves. In this way, the parables prompt Kierkegaard's readers to overcome the illusion of Christendom and to instead recognize the requirements that authentic Christianity places upon them.

My dissertation begins with an examination of the purpose that Kierkegaard saw for his authorship. By focusing on his later works, I argue that Kierkegaard primarily wanted to bring the religious forward in his readers. He thought that in order to accomplish this he needed to start with works describing the life that he thought most of his readers lived, a life of pleasure seeking, and to slowly move them towards the religious. I then present Kierkegaard's view of what Christianity essentially consists of, subjectivity, and of the style of communication that is tied to subjectivity. Kierkegaard claims that when communicating subjective truths that we must employ an indirect style. I go on to argue that parables very much fit into this style and that they work to cause tension on the part of the reader. The reader of the parable must choose between various competing interpretations that the parable presents, and in choosing how to interpret the parable, the reader reveals and discloses him or herself. I follow this up with an examination of a number of parables from different works of Kierkegaard, showing how they function in this manner. I end by arguing that Kierkegaard's parables are designed to function like mirrors, revealing ourselves to us.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	i
ABBREVIATIONS.....	iv
CHAPTER	
INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. Kierkegaard the Religious Critic.....	13
1.1 Everyone’s a Christian So No One’s a Christian.....	16
1.2 With All Your Power, What Would You Do?.....	34
1.3 Who Gets Saved From Tonight’s Elimination?.....	44
II. Kierkegaard the Illusionist.....	48
2.1 Is The Earth Not Round?.....	50
2.2 Speak if You Have Understanding.....	61
2.3 To Believe or Not To Believe.....	75
III. Kierkegaard the Poet.....	92
3.1 Soothing Through Poetry.....	94
3.2 Construct Additional Metaphors.....	105
3.3 The Power Level of Parables.....	110
3.4 Come Now David, Where Has Uriah Gone?.....	117
IV. Kierkegaard the Storyteller.....	124
4.1 Merman. MERMAN!.....	129
4.2 A Cinderella Story.....	140
4.3 I Obey the Letter of the Law, if Not the Spirit.....	148
V. Kierkegaard the Metaphorical Mirror.....	161

5.1	Nobody Expects the Merman Parable!.....	170
5.2	The Man in the Mirror.....	177
5.3	Through a Mirror, Darkly.....	186
5.4	Objects in Mirror are Closer Than They Appear.....	189
5.5	“I Deceived Her by Pretending I was a Deceiver”.....	196
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....		201

ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout this dissertation, I use a number of abbreviations to refer to Kierkegaard's works. Unless otherwise noted, the following abbreviations refer to the following works. Further information can be found in my bibliography.

CD = *Christian Discourses: The Crisis and a Crisis in the life of an Actress*

CUP = *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*

E/O = *Either/Or*

FT = *Fear and Trembling ; Repetition*

FSE = *For Self Examination ; Judge for Yourself*

PF = *Philosophical Fragments ; Johannes Climacus*

PIC = *Practice in Christianity*

SUD = *The Sickness Unto Death*

JP = *Journals and Papers*

POV = *The Point of View*

TD = *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*

UDVS = *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*

WOL = *Works of Love*

Introduction

Kierkegaard is often praised for his poetic writing style. Throughout his works, especially his pseudonymous ones, Kierkegaard often breaks from philosophical prose and instead uses extended metaphors, fairy tales, parables, and allegories. This jarring change, which occurs quite often, is rarely explained by the pseudonyms. If these parables are supposed to teach something to the reader, one would expect the teaching to be outlined by the author. My project will examine the place of the parable in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works in order to uncover why Kierkegaard uses them in a broad sense, but I will also show how some of the individual parables function within their respective works. In examining this issue, I will put forth an argument explaining why Kierkegaard must remain secretive about the purpose of the parables and how this secrecy plays an important role in Kierkegaard's authorship.

It's quite common for philosophers to use metaphors or analogies in their works. A good metaphor can help explain a complicated concept by referring the audience to a concept that is already understood. Aristotle's classic example of Achilles describes him as "rushing like a lion". This metaphor tells us much about the way that Achilles ran into battle. Though the description of his battle charge would not be complicated to describe without metaphor, the use of the lion metaphor explains the situation to the reader and thus simplifies the problem of understanding. The use of metaphor in this manner is quite commonplace, and indeed much of our language is inherently metaphorical. Yet, in these situations, the metaphor functions as an explanation that seeks to simplify the task of understanding. Metaphors also act as examples quite often. In order to explain a concept, one might refer to a metaphorical example as a way to elucidate the idea.

Despite the commonality of metaphors and analogies in philosophical works, parables are a little rarer.¹ We see parables in the works of Plato quite a bit, but the parabolic form never quite caught on for philosophy as a discipline. However, Kierkegaard uses parables so prolifically that Oden was able to select the best ones and publish an entire book just consisting of Kierkegaard's parables. This curiosity alone makes the question of Kierkegaard's parables worth investigating, but the issue becomes much more pronounced when one examines the problem of indirect communication. Kierkegaard, in many of his writings, was concerned with the way in which certain truths could be communicated. He claimed that there were some things that could not be communicated directly, but instead required indirect communication. Given that he finds this important, and that there are a number of clues throughout his works that he is trying to indirectly communicate with his readers, it is of much importance to recognize the effect and purpose of the parables that Kierkegaard has strewn throughout his works.

In order to see how these parables function in Kierkegaard's corpus, we will also need to examine the purpose that he saw for his authorship. In *The Point of View*, we see Kierkegaard looking back on his works and describing his goals as an author. He claims that he was trying to turn people into Christians. He doesn't do this by arguing for the truths of Christianity, but rather by trying to turn individuals inward and to cause each individual reader to seek redemption in Christ. If we are to examine the purpose of the parable in Kierkegaard's work, we must do so specifically with this viewpoint in mind. Given that Kierkegaard wants to make his readers Christians and that he doesn't intend to

¹ Though my project will provide a definition of parable, defining the exact limit of the parable versus the metaphor, per se, will be outside the bounds of my examination. When I reference parable, I will be broadly referring to an extended metaphor, or a very short story. I do not differentiate a parable from an allegory, a fairy tale, or a fable for the purposes of my project.

do so by convincing them via rational discourse, how does the parable function? It is meaningful for us to ask both why Kierkegaard brings in parables and whether or not those parables help to achieve his goal as an author.

Given that the vast majority of Kierkegaard's writings are in philosophical prose and not parable, what importance is there in the selection of parables that we find? How do they function within the individual works and how do they help Kierkegaard achieve his larger goals? This project will endeavor to answer these questions and to argue that Kierkegaard's parables hold a central importance when we examine the authorship from Kierkegaard's own point of view.

This project will argue that parables and story-telling were, for Kierkegaard, of central importance. Kierkegaard stated that one of his goals was to change individuals, and not merely convince them of certain philosophical truths (though he also did that). There appear to be some effects, if my argument is successful, both for Kierkegaard studies and for philosophy more broadly. As far as Kierkegaard studies are concerned, if the parables are really as valuable as the prose, then we need to give them equal consideration and study. We need to engage with the fields of hermeneutics and literary studies as much as with philosophy of religion if we are to be good Kierkegaardians. We cannot dismiss the parables as mere examples to prove the point of the prose but must recognize them as being unique tools used for a specific goal. If I am right, then any attempt to understand Kierkegaard that lacks an understanding of his parables will be incomplete.

Beyond the scope of Kierkegaard studies, I see even broader implications for the success of my thesis. There is an open question as to the purpose of philosophy, both in

the academic and general sense, in contemporary life. Academic philosophy seems more and more isolated from the general public and yet seemingly desires for the public to recognize its value. Articles in academic journals, conference proceedings, course offerings, and committee work seem to take up the majority of the time of most academic philosophers. Academic philosophy almost takes a Reaganomics approach hoping that philosophical insights will somehow trickle down into the general public. I think that this approach is wrong-headed and that, instead, Kierkegaard was on to something, though it seems he was ultimately unsuccessful with his own audience.

If we want philosophy to connect with the general public and have a marked effect on the lives of lay individuals, we might want to start telling stories. Our duty, as those who have left the cave in search of truth, must be to return to the cave and unbind those still there. But as Plato notes, we will be ridiculed upon our return. Kierkegaard hopes to have bridged this gap and provided a way to motivate, reorient, and change those who are reading our works, and he tries to do so with parable. Thus, in a day and age when academic departments are losing funding, when the humanities are seen are more and more irrelevant in the eyes of the government and the general public, we must change our tactics. If my argument about Kierkegaard is successful, and if Kierkegaard is right, we must start telling stories.

Chapter 1

This argument is broken into five chapters, the first four of which provide a piece of the puzzle, with the fifth chapter combining the pieces to form my argument. In Chapter one I will examine the purpose that Kierkegaard sees for his own authorship. In order to understand why Kierkegaard uses parables in his works, we need to understand

the overall intent for his works. In his journals and in *The Point of View* Kierkegaard explicitly expressed his reasons for writing. He was dismayed with the current state of Christianity in Denmark and thought that most Danes were only Christians by name. Thus, he sought to cultivate the religious in his audience, though this was no simple task. One could not take the approach of Martin Luther and declare all of Denmark to be lacking the truly Christian. Kierkegaard knew that such an approach would be problematic, saying, “If it is an illusion that all are Christians, and if something is to be done, it must be done indirectly, not by someone who loudly declares himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by someone who, better informed, even declares himself not to be a Christian.”² Kierkegaard was of the opinion that, as a Christian, approaching someone and rebuking them for their lack of a Christian religious life would only cause the rebuker to become an outcast. The public would ignore that individual, and the cause championed by that person would be lost. Thus, he planned to write a number of pseudonymous books by authors who claimed that they were not Christians, while at the same time publishing religious works under his own name. Kierkegaard envisioned three realms of existence, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. He saw that most individuals existed in the aesthetic realm of life, and thus his writings began there. Kierkegaard wrote in the aesthetic vein, slowly moving towards the ethical and finally the religious. Yet, while his writings began in the aesthetic, Kierkegaard wanted one thing kept in mind, “but above all do not forget one thing... that it is the religious that is to come forward.”³ Though his writings delve into a number of different issues, Kierkegaard planned that in all things the Christian religious was the final end.

2 POV 43

3 Ibid 46

Chapter 2

Following our discussion of the purpose that Kierkegaard sees for his authorship in Chapter one, Chapter two will focus on the concept of indirect communication. Given our knowledge of what Kierkegaard wants to do, we next examine how he does it. Indirect communication functions as a way to communicate certain things, such as the truth of Christianity that Kierkegaard is trying to spread. "Suppose someone wanted to communicate that the truth is not the truth but that the way is the truth, that is that the truth is only in the becoming, in the process of appropriation."⁴ If this is the case, if the truth is not an object, but rather the truth is the way in which one comes to the truth, then it must be communicated indirectly. If someone had climbed a mountain, and upon reaching the peak had the realization that the entire point of the climb was coming to understand that the actual journey was what truly mattered, that person cannot simply tell this to someone else. When the end is not the truth, but instead the journey to truth is the truth, communicating this to another deprives that individual of the possibility of making the journey in the first place. Thus, Kierkegaard envisions a way in which we can communicate these truths, and he calls it indirect communication. Indirect communication is a way in which one can communicate subjective truths, or truths of inwardness. "Objectively the emphasis is on **what** is said; subjectively the emphasis is on **how** it is said."^{5,6} For Kierkegaard, the only way in which one can communicate subjective truth is to focus not on what is said, but on how one says it. In

4 CUP 78

5 Ibid 202

6 Kierkegaard sees all truths split into two broad categories, objective and subjective truths. Objective truths are truths about the world, facts of existence. Subjective truths are truths related to the individual, or truths of inwardness.

communicating a message in certain ways, one can deprive the receiver of the possibility of understanding, internalizing, or appropriating the message. Thus, the focus of indirect communication is on how something is said, and not specifically on what is said.

By examining the way in which the concept of indirect communication comes into play in Kierkegaard's work, we can better understand why parables are significant, and how they fit into this approach. If Kierkegaard is trying to bring about a kind of inwardness in his readers in order to bring them to the religious, then he specifically wants to use indirect communication in order to do this. Indirect communication allows for the communication of possibilities. The audience can then inhabit these possibilities and consider them. By allowing for this process to occur, Kierkegaard creates a situation in which by engaging the communication at all, the audience is turned inward, and one in which this inward turn hopefully informs them of their untruth.

Chapter 3

Chapter three is going to examine the place that parables have in this grand scheme, with specific reference to the relationship that the parable has to the reader. Having established Kierkegaard's goal to turn individuals inward as well as the instrument to carry out that goal, indirect communication, we will next examine how parables act as a kind of indirect communication. Central to this process will be the concept of appropriation. For an individual to appropriate something they must grapple with its meaning and come to an understanding of it, but in such a way that this process is required in order to understand. One takes the meaning of the communication and makes it their own. In this way, the parable is clearly presenting the reader with both the opportunity for, and the requirement of, appropriation. However, as the knowledge is

obscured by the nature of the parable, the only way in which to do this is to engage the parable and to appropriate it. Were a parable to be followed by an explanation, as often happens, the parable would lose strength, as the personal appropriation would no longer be necessary. "Finally, the preacher must allow the parable to exercise its own power on the hearers and not be reduced to moral precepts or theological ideas."⁷ In this we can recognize that the parable possesses more than just the concept within it. The parable is not merely an idea hidden in a story, but rather it is a call to engage with an idea on a personal, inward level. The ability of the parable to be appropriated by the individual is one of the most important factors in the use of a parable versus a straightforward explanation. The knowledge and experience gained from this kind of understanding are much greater than that of an explanation or a moral teaching. The individual comes to terms with the teaching him or herself and thus has gained a deeper understanding of it than would be gained if the moral was simply explained to him or her. In his writings, Kierkegaard presents parables in a way that allows for this process to take place.

Being that indirect communication is to drive the receiver to action, we can understand specifically why Kierkegaard implements the use of parable in his writings. A parable is an invitation to interpretation. Parables are able to provide the receiver with a situation in which they must appropriate the text in order to understand it; they must become active in their relationship to the text. "Metaphor provides Kierkegaard with the dialectical tension and the middle ground - as a kind of no-man's-land - that his indirect communication requires of the reader to struggle with existence itself, to examine not only life but ideas in life that ethically instruct and prompt the reader to choose."⁸ The

7 Donahue 13

8 Lorentzen 62.

parable is a call to action, a call to choice. In this, the parable fulfills the requirements of an indirect communication. A parable does not plainly say what truth exists within it, instead the reader must come to understand this internally. Operating in this capacity, the parable functions as the perfect “how” of indirect communication by requiring appropriation on the part of the reader.

Chapter 4

Having established that the use of parables fits nicely into what Kierkegaard wants to accomplish as an author, along with an understanding of how the parable functions, it is only fitting to next examine some of Kierkegaard’s parables themselves. Kierkegaard saw his literature as guiding the reader through the stages of existence and thus wrote a number of pseudonymous books both from and for a certain point of view, specifically in relation to the different stages of existence. *Either/Or*, for instance, explored the aesthetic life versus the ethical life and tries to push the reader out of the aesthetic and towards the ethical. When we look at a text like *Fear and Trembling* we see the challenge of the ethical, especially when it might conflict with the religious. In *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Postscript* we finally see Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms make the transition from the ethical to the religious, and specifically to the Christian religious. In Chapter four, I will examine parables from these and other pseudonymous texts and investigate the work that the parables do in their respective positions.

If we examine the parable of Agnes and the Merman, for instance, we see a situation in which the merman is in the aesthetic, recognizes the ethical, and also faces the divine. The merman recognizes the ethical categories of his actions and repents. He understands that seducing Agnes and lying to her would be unethical and thus he halts his

plan of action. However, given the recognition of the ethical, the merman can now make another choice. He can either disclose himself to Agnes and tell her the truth of what he had planned, or he can remain closed to Agnes. Johannes de Silentio, the pseudonymous author of the book, does not inform the reader of which choice the merman makes. Instead, the parable is left open ended and we are only informed of the possibilities. The merman is given the options of the demonic and the religious, with Silentio clearly favoring the choice of the religious. This choice is not described as an easy one for the merman to make. Instead, the merman must choose through a kind of superhuman will. The story of Agnes and the merman highlights the passage from the aesthetic to the ethical and then focuses on the tension between the ethical and the religious. Given that *Fear and Trembling* was written after *Either/Or*, but before the *Postscript*, currently Kierkegaard sees his readers in this position. They are not yet ready for the religious but can recognize the struggle that the ethical and the religious experience when they come into contact. Here again we see the reader being led away from the aesthetic and towards the religious.

Throughout these parables, of which more will be explored than what was here mentioned, we see Kierkegaard building a road for his readers to follow. Kierkegaard starts with the despair that the aesthetic brings and moves from the aesthetic to the ethical life. He then recognizes the conflict between the ethical and the religious and nonetheless accepts faith and thus moves into the religious. Finally, he ends with parables of the practices that makes one truly Christian. The continual upward movement that we find in the authorship as a whole is mirrored in the parables that we find along the way. But these parables are not set up as mere examples for the reader, in order to promote greater

understanding. Instead they function as indirect communications meant to take hold of the reader and bring them on the upward journey.

Chapter 5

Remembering from Chapter one the claim that Kierkegaard is trying to turn us inward, we can now fully understand how parables fit into his philosophy. Given that Kierkegaard doesn't think that it is within his power to make his readers Christian, the parable cannot teach us anything new. We cannot be convinced by Kierkegaard that we are not Christians and that we are in need of salvation. Instead, we must have the condition to recognize the truth given to us by God. However, once possessing this condition, we may choose to ignore it or refuse to act on it. It is to block this possibility that we see the parable coming into use. Kierkegaard wishes to turn us inwards, to recollect that truth that had already been revealed to us. To this end, Kierkegaard's parables function as mirrors. The parable presents an image of a character or situation. As the reader strives to make sense of the parable, they seek to understand this situation or this image, and in seeking to gain this understanding, they can only rely on their own experiences. Thus, as they seek understanding of the parable, they must see themselves as the character or in the situation that the parable presents. By doing this, they open the possibility of facing the truth that Kierkegaard wants them to face, which is only a truth about themselves. In thinking about how the merman must make his choice, I must think of myself as a merman and in doing so I must imagine what it is like to admit fault in the face of a perfect creature. This type of imagination does not reveal anything to me about the merman or about some philosophical truth, instead it reveals something about myself.

This is the subjective truth that Kierkegaard wants to engender, truth about the self that can only be revealed using indirect communication.

Kierkegaard uses parables as mirrors, reflecting back upon us what we already know to be true but which we deny. In this sense Kierkegaard operates as Socrates does. He is the gadfly who wants to bring about recollection. Just as Socrates claims that he knows nothing, so too do we see Kierkegaard's pseudonyms make similar claims on a number of occasions regarding Christianity. Thus, we can see how the parable functions in Kierkegaard's works and also why it's important to carefully consider these parables. If Kierkegaard wants to make us Christians but cannot actually do so, then he must function as the teacher who is only able to cause his students to recollect the truth. In this regard we see indirect communication and the use of parables playing an important role. Kierkegaard uses parables as mirrors for his audience, slowly causing them to see the truth in themselves, and using this self-awareness to guide them from the aesthetic to the religious. The parable is able to do this in part because it does not address the reader, but instead invites the reader to participate, and as the reader participates he or she comes to see the truth for themselves.

Chapter 1: Kierkegaard the Religious Critic

If history were taught in the form of stories,
it would never be forgotten – Rudyard Kipling

We begin our study of parables in the works of Kierkegaard by first examining Kierkegaard's intentions concerning his authorship. In order for us to understand why Kierkegaard constantly employed parables in his writing and the function that those parables serve, we must have an understanding of the goals that have been set out for the authorship. Luckily for us, late in his career Kierkegaard published a number of works that addressed this issue.⁹ Thus we start out our study of parables by digging into these works and examining clues that Kierkegaard gives us concerning his intentions. Little of what I present in this chapter is a novel or original interpretation of Kierkegaard. The vast majority of what I present in this chapter has been covered in the scholarship to some extent. My main contribution here lies in that I am bringing together parts of the scholarship that are often not in conversation with one another. I'm working to both to frame the arguments and concepts that the rest of this project will be concerned with and rest upon, as well as to unify different works of scholarship and some of the later works of Kierkegaard, which are often overlooked by the scholarship at large. Most scholars focus on the early pseudonymous writings of Kierkegaard and while I will be examining those works, I want to put them into conversation with the later writings, specifically *The Point of View* and *For Self-examination*. In these works, we see Kierkegaard, maybe only in hindsight, lay out what his goals were for his authorship.¹⁰ Thus we must begin by

⁹ The works have been collected in *The Point of View* and *For Self-examination / Judge for Yourself*.

¹⁰ Tietjen spends considerable time arguing that we should trust the content of *The Point of View* versus scholars like Garff or Fenger who think it should be viewed with distrust. I find Tietjen's arguments

examining these goals, and with that approach framing our discussion, move on in later chapters to explore Kierkegaard's use of parables and how they relate to this goal.

Kierkegaard graciously informs us of his goals in *The Point of View* when he writes, "The content, then, of this little book is: what I in truth am as an author, that I am and was a religious author, that my whole authorship pertains to Christianity, to the issue: becoming a Christian, with direct and indirect polemical aim at that enormous illusion, Christendom, or the illusion that in such a country all are Christians of sorts."¹¹

Kierkegaard goes on to claim, "Because I am a religious author, it of course is on the whole a matter of indifference to me whether a so-called esthetic public has found or would be able to find some enjoyment through reading the esthetic works, or through reading the esthetic in the works, which is the incognito and the deception in the service of Christianity."¹² Though Kierkegaard lacks specificity here, we see that he is primarily concerned with Christianity and that he sees his writings as being in service to Christianity, centrally located around the problem of becoming a Christian.¹³ Though not all of his writings have overtly dealt with religious themes, Kierkegaard claims that this has all been a part of his deception. Regardless of the content of the individual works, Kierkegaard claims that, taken as a totality, they are concerned with the issue of becoming a Christian.

convincing and follow him in this respect. His argument centers around the claim that in order to dismiss *The Point of View*, we seemingly must adopt a deconstructionist approach for which there is very little justification.

¹¹ POV 23

¹² Ibid 24

¹³ For a wonderfully detailed examination of Kierkegaard's religious authorship, refer to Lane's *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Religious Authorship* in which he defines a religious authorship as, "Before God, to speak or write about God and the world (including religion and things religious), in a religious way, with a religious concern or interest, to a specific audience." Pg. 4. I share a similar methodological approach as does Lane, in that I want to view Kierkegaard's works through the lens that he provides with his late writings.

When looking at the question of intention, one might ask why the issue of becoming a Christian would need require an author to use, as Kierkegaard just described, deception and incognito. Why would Kierkegaard write in such a way that near the end of his authorship he has to clearly state what his intentions have been all along, having used this deception to obscure them until the very end? To answer this, let's look at an imagined discourse found in *For Self-examination* in which Kierkegaard describes a scene between Martin Luther and a generic Danish Christian who is a contemporary of Kierkegaard's.¹⁴ We start by assuming that Luther has risen from the grave and has lived in Kierkegaard's Denmark and learned their ways. Having done so, Luther asks Kierkegaard if Kierkegaard is a Christian. To this, Kierkegaard's response is, as it always is, that he is not a believer but rather that he is someone who has deep respect for true belief. Kierkegaard continues to imagine a conversation that Luther would have with an individual who did identify as a believer, an action that Kierkegaard thinks likely true of members of the general populace in Denmark at the time. Luther asks this individual how they suffer for Christianity. If they are indeed a believer, what have they sacrificed for their faith? To this challenge the common man responds that he can give plenty of assurances that he is indeed a believer. He goes on to demonstrate to Luther that he has a number of books that all describe faith very well, so we can rest comfortably in his self-assured faith. Luther is angered by this response and says, "I do believe this man is crazy. If it is true that you are able to describe faith, that merely shows that you are a poet, and if you do it well, that you are a good poet – anything but that you are a believer."¹⁵ This imagined exchange introduces us to some of the issues that Kierkegaard is considering

¹⁴ This occurs in FSE 17-18

¹⁵ FSE 18

when he claims that his writings are all aimed at becoming a Christian. He faces a situation in which most of his peers and countrymen identify as Christians. As we see, however, he has very serious doubts about whether they are true Christians. Given these doubts, Kierkegaard turns to the use of the incognito, deceptions, and indirect communications in order to bring about the truly Christian in his audience.¹⁶ Thus in order to understand why these methods were used, we must begin by examining that problem that Kierkegaard saw himself needing to fight against.

Section 1: Everyone's a Christian So No One's a Christian

Recognizing that Kierkegaard's intent is to bring the religious¹⁷ forward, one might assume that his audience are the Danes who refuse to acknowledge the truths of Christianity. After all, one cannot bring forward the religious in those who already possess it. However, Kierkegaard's target audience was indeed those who professed Christianity, but whom he thought failed to recognize what Christianity truly was. Specifically looking at the *Postscript*, Muench argues that in order to interpret Kierkegaard we must have an understanding of his audience.¹⁸ To this end Muench presents a case that Kierkegaard is specifically targeting those who make Christianity too easy. When we examine the language used in the *Postscript* when Climacus, the pseudonymous author of the *Postscript*, writes that he will "make something more

¹⁶ Sketching out what the truly Christian looks like would be a book in itself. Instead, what I endeavor to present is Kierkegaard's demonstration of what is not Christian. While this only gives us a negative understanding of the truly Christian, the purpose of this chapter is to outline and explain what Kierkegaard is working against and seeking to overcome.

¹⁷ By "religious" here and forthwith, I mean the specifically Christian religious that Kierkegaard is concerned with. He specifies different forms of the religious, separating Religiousness A (a religious approach that isn't distinctly Christian) from Religiousness B (a religious approach that is distinctly Christian) in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

¹⁸ Muench 430

difficult” and “So only one lack remains, even though not yet felt, the lack of difficulty” we find evidence for the claim that Kierkegaard wishes to make Christianity more difficult for his audience.¹⁹ Indeed, the majority of the *Postscript* demonstrates just how difficult Christianity is, and what it requires of each individual. Kierkegaard looks at the common Dane and sees individuals who regularly attend church services and have been told their entire life that they are Christians. In this kind of a social setting, Kierkegaard thinks that the majority of Danes consider themselves Christians. Yet Kierkegaard and Climacus want to demonstrate that Christianity requires much more than regular church attendance or the proper interpretation of doctrine.²⁰ Thus their goal is to make Christianity difficult, and their audience are those who find Christianity simple and straightforward.

Given this audience, Kierkegaard thinks that, from the viewpoint of the religious, most individuals are under a grand illusion. In *The Point of View*, when Kierkegaard is retrospectively explaining his authorship, he writes,

“Everyone who in earnest and also with some clarity of vision considers what is called Christendom, or the condition in a so-called Christian country, must without any doubt immediately have serious misgivings. What does it mean, after all, that all these thousands and thousands as a matter of course call themselves Christians! These many, many people, of whom by far the great majority, according to everything that can be discerned, have their lives in entirely different categories, something one can ascertain by the simplest observations! People who perhaps never once go to church, never think about God, never name his name except when they curse! People to whom it has never occurred that their lives should have some duty to God, people who either maintain that a certain civil impunity is the highest or do not find even this to be entirely necessary! Yet all these people, even those who insist that there is no God, they are all Christians, call themselves Christians, are recognized as Christians by the state, are buried as Christians by the Church, are discharged as Christians to eternity.”²¹

¹⁹ CUP 186

²⁰ An expansion of this project will be to fully explain what Kierkegaard’s Christianity is, but for now that question must be bracketed.

²¹ POV 41

Kierkegaard is surrounded by individuals who all consider themselves Christian, and who are all considered Christian by the state and the church. Simply by virtue of being Danish, one must be a Christian. The language that Kierkegaard uses here demonstrates his anger with this approach, and thus help us understand the specific problem that he wants to address. Denmark is functioning under a grand illusion, the illusion of Christendom.

In order to explain how exactly this illusion functions, and what it has done to Christendom in Kierkegaard's Denmark, let us first examine one of Kierkegaard's parables. In *For Self-examination*, Kierkegaard describes the situation of a lover who has just received a letter from his beloved.²² The letter is written in a language that the lover cannot understand and thus he needs to translate it before he can read it. The lover toils away at translating the letter, a process that he completes in its entirety before he actually reads the letter for its content. Having translated the letter, the lover realizes that it contains a wish on the part of his beloved for him to accomplish something. Upon reading of this wish, the lover sets off immediately and earnestly to complete his task. Eventually when the lovers meet, the beloved reveals that the lover must have mistranslated the letter, for the task that the lover completed was the wrong task. Kierkegaard asks if in this situation the lover would be upset with himself for acting the way that he did. Would he instead prefer to have taken a longer time translating, getting a second opinion and making sure that his syntax and word choice were correct? Kierkegaard claims that the lover would not have felt this way, but instead would be pleased with the fact that he complied with his beloved's wish immediately, even if he

²² FSE 26

didn't quite translate the wish properly. Kierkegaard goes on to describe how this relates to Biblical scripture. He thinks that we can approach scripture in a similar way that the lover approached the letter. We first need to translate but, given a translation, we have to make a choice. We choose to either act upon what we find in scripture, or we choose to seek precise knowledge of what scripture is communicating. Though Kierkegaard is careful not to disparage scholarship,²³ he argues that the correct way to approach scripture is as an individual who desires to fulfill the commands and wishes found in scripture. He writes, "If you understand only one single passage in all of Holy Scripture, well, then you must do that first of all, but you do not have to sit down and ponder the obscure passages."²⁴ Kierkegaard wants our response to the Bible to be one of action, and not one of study. We are not to be interpreters of the Word, we are to be doers of the Word.

While he is careful to mention that scholarship is a good thing, Kierkegaard warns even the scholar from falling into the trap of only being a translator. He sees the Bible as a document that has claims on the lives of its readers, and thus when we interact with the Bible it should always cause us to act. To the extent that isn't happening, Kierkegaard thinks that we aren't truly readers of the Bible, and are thus missing out on true Christianity. He writes, "If you are a scholar, remember that if you do not read God's Word in another way, it will turn out that after a lifetime of reading God's Word many hours every day, you nevertheless have never read – God's Word." Kierkegaard strongly cautions us away from a reading of scripture that sees us primarily as interpreters of the text, and not doers of the text. Instead he wants us to use scripture as a mirror for

²³ Ibid 28

²⁴ Ibid 29

ourselves. We should approach scripture in such a way that we look to see ourselves in it. We cannot merely look at the mirror, we have to see ourselves within it. In this way, scripture propels us to action. By seeing ourselves in the mirror of the Word, we cannot remain interpreters, for the Word has claims upon us and our actions, and thus we must act as the Word compels us.^{25, 26}

Kierkegaard sees himself as instead being surrounded by readers of the Word, and not doers. The illusion of Christendom seems made up both of the fact that everyone assumes that they are Christian, but also of the fact that Christianity has been altered into a mere set of doctrines. Everyone reads the Bible only as a scholar, and not as a true reader. In a short essay entitled *Armed Neutrality* Kierkegaard writes,

“I do not think that without exaggeration one can say that Christianity in our time has been completely abolished. No, Christianity still exists and in its truth but as a *teaching*, as a *doctrine*. What has been abolished and forgotten (and thus can be said without exaggeration), however, is being a Christian, what it means to be a Christian; or what has been lost, what seems to exist no longer, is the ideal picture of being a Christian.²⁷

Kierkegaard laments the attention that is being given to the doctrines of Christianity without any focus on what it means to be a Christian. His attack on those who concentrate on scholarship or translation without also acting on the commands of scripture is echoed here in his complaint that Christianity has become solely doctrine.

Kierkegaard's Christianity requires action, it requires a kind of existential re-ordering of

²⁵ Kierkegaard writes another parable to describe this point. Kierkegaard describes a land in which a royal decree is laid out over a country. However, for some reason, everyone begins only to interpret the decree. Scholarship and criticism arise and focus on the royal decree, and entire areas of study are built around the royal decree. But would this not anger the king, for he only desires for the decree to be followed? The full text can be found in FSE 33-34

²⁶ In Chapter 5 I will again examine the concept of the mirror and the way in which it acts on us as readers. Thus, for now, I'm going to bracket questions about the effectiveness of the mirror as a tool and questions about whether or not the reader always perceives themselves accurately in the mirror, as these will be addressed in Chapter 5

²⁷ POV 129-130

oneself.²⁸ However, this is not what we get from the Christianity that Kierkegaard is fighting against. Instead, doctrine is concerned with things like the proper interpretation of scripture, as the next parable I bring up will demonstrate. This approach, for Kierkegaard, is irrelevant to what Christianity truly requires of the individual.

Kierkegaard's concern with the focus on doctrine that he sees in his contemporary world is mirrored in another great parable of his. In *Judge For Yourself*, Kierkegaard tells the story of a theology student who, upon graduating, searches for a job far and wide. After a long search he is finally able to find one, though it is only a small appointment. Nonetheless he is happy with what he has found and looks forward to his new job. However, to his dismay, he eventually learns that he will be paid a smaller amount than he had initially thought. This upsets him greatly and he considers resigning the post. Yet, he sticks with it and eventually is led to give his first sermon. He chooses his text and gives a wonderful sermon on the verse, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.”²⁹ The pastor’s sermon is well received yet a question remains. Is there not some discrepancy between the pastor’s life and the verse that he is sermonizing? The pastor himself is very clearly not seeking the kingdom of God first and foremost, but is instead concerned with his salary. The response that Kierkegaard envisions the church fathers giving is, “Quite right, that is just the way he should preach; this is what is required of him. It all hinges on the doctrine and on its being proclaimed pure and unadulterated.”³⁰ Kierkegaard sees Christianity in his time as being solely focused on doctrine. It doesn’t matter if the pastor follows the doctrine, his actions outside of his

²⁸ This will be examined in more detail in Chapter 2.

²⁹ Matthew 6:33 NASB translation

³⁰ FSE 112

sermon are irrelevant. All that matters is that he gets the doctrine correct, and preaches it in the right way. As long as this is done, Christianity is preserved as it should be. Finding this whole approach problematic, Kierkegaard wishes to work against it. If all that you have to do to be a good Christian is agree with the official Church doctrine, regardless of what you believe or how you act, then it is quite easy for anyone to be a Christian. This valuation of doctrine over existential requirements is what causes the illusion of Christendom to fall over Kierkegaard's Denmark.

All of this paints a picture for us of what Kierkegaard thinks Christianity is not. Christianity is not Christendom. Christendom is overly concerned with tradition, public spectacle, formal organizations, and doctrine. Christendom wants to make sure that every person goes to church weekly and that they participate in the community and beliefs ascribed by the official church. Christendom thinks that it's more important for the individual to believe all the right things than for them to act in a certain way. From the standpoint of Christendom, it doesn't matter if you truly believe in Christ, as long as you do what the church tells you to do and were baptized, then you are good to go. It is this general approach to Christianity that Kierkegaard is fighting against. Given that this isn't what Kierkegaard thinks Christianity is, let us now take a quick detour into a description of what Kierkegaard is aimed at: true Christianity.

As will be explained in much greater detail in chapter two, Kierkegaard thinks that there are two different approaches to truth, the subjective and the objective. The objective is concerned with knowledge and facts, while the subjective is concerned with the relationship that the individual has to the truth. For Kierkegaard, both are necessary parts of true Christianity. We must be passionate in our approach to the truth (subjective)

but must also make claims that are objectively true, such as that Christ is God, or that we are sinners. We cannot possess the objective truth but lack the subjective approach, for to do so might land us somewhere close to Christendom. Such an approach is only concerned with getting the answers correct, but not at all with transforming the individual. At the same time, we can't take a purely subjective approach, for true Christianity requires us to worship Christ and to follow his commands, and not merely to act on our passions. So both the objective and subjective are needed. However, Kierkegaard claims multiple times in *Postscript* that Christianity is essentially subjective. Though we need to make sure that we are worshipping the correct God, the most important factor is that we are worshipping with passion and commitment. Thus, in understanding what Christianity is for Kierkegaard, our first recognition is that Christianity is focused around a changed individual. Christianity is not as much about the content of our beliefs as it is about our direct relationship with the divine.

Kierkegaard envisions human existence as fitting into one of three stages. The first stage is the aesthetic, and he thinks that the majority of human beings are in this stage. The aesthetic stage is characterized by immediate pleasure. Individuals in this stage are concerned with doing the most pleasurable thing as often as they can. All of their goals in life are built around pleasure, and everything is done for that sole purpose. The next stage is the ethical, which is marked by meaningful choice. The ethical stage is where human beings make choices according to certain universal principles. These principles, such as, "murder is wrong" guide our actions and form the basis for all of our desires and wills. Beyond the ethical, we find the religious, which Kierkegaard then separates further into two categories, Religiousness A and Religiousness B.

Religiousness A is characterized by Kierkegaard as a religiousness of immanence. It is generally accompanied by a sense of guilt before the divine. However, Religiousness A is not distinctly Christian, and thus Climacus, for instance, characterizes Socrates as having existed within Religiousness A. Where the ethical provides us with rules to live by, Religiousness A is a recognition of something beyond those rules of morality, but something which we cannot necessarily achieve or know. Thus, we feel a sense of guilt before it, as we recognize our lack even if we don't quite know what we are lacking. In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus identifies a type of offense that comes with Religiousness A.³¹ He writes, "that is not related to Christ as Christ (the God-man) but to him simply as an individual human being who comes into collision with an established order."³² This type of offense stems from an individual having come into conflict with the existing way of doing things and pushing against it. This type of offense is not essentially Christian, as it can occur in any situation in which an individual rebels against the established order. For instance, Westphal notes that Socrates fighting against the old guard of Athens would fulfill this requirement. So we see Religiousness A as being a proto-Christianity, if you will. It comes into being by recognizing something beyond the ethical, and feeling guilt in the face of that thing, but it doesn't yet recognize Christ as God.

Religiousness B, on the other hand, is the distinctly Christian religiousness. Religiousness B is transcendent in nature and recognizes Christ as God. When this recognition occurs, the individual sense of guilt is transformed into a sense of sin. Instead

³¹ This analysis of the types of offense as being tied to the types of Religiousness comes from Westphal 535-537.

³² PIC 85

of being conscious of some lack, we become acutely conscious of our sin in the face of God. This consciousness also breaks, for us, any connection that we might have thought we had to the divine. In becoming conscious of sin we recognize that we are wholly other from God. Westphal identifies a second kind of offense that accompanies Religiousness B. This offense stems from, as Anti-Climacus puts it, “loftiness, that an individual human being speaks or acts as if he were God, declares himself to be God.”³³ As we move from Religiousness A to B, we recognize that we are not the divine, and that we are wholly different from the divine, and take offense. Religiousness B is thus the distinctly Christian religiousness and that which Kierkegaard wants to drive his audience toward.

Westphal goes on to recognize a third type of religiousness, though one not named by Kierkegaard. Westphal refers to this as Religiousness C, and it stems from his analysis of the three types of offense. The first type comes as we enter into Religiousness A, the second type as we enter into B, and thus he claims that the third type must come as we enter into another form of religiousness, that of C. He claims that the third type of offense comes from the recognition that God became a man, and a lowly one at that. Christ was a human who suffered and bled, who was poor and lowly. This type of offense comes as we enter into Religiousness C, which is characterized by the requirement to act Christ-like, and very specifically, to have self-giving (agape) love for all of our neighbors. Thus, though Climacus never seems to outright recognize it as such, the attempt to imitate Christ, the fulfillment of Religiousness C, seems to be the goal that Kierkegaard is driving towards. For this reason he finds the current state of Christendom problematic and wishes to move his audience away from it, as Christendom is concerned

³³ PIC 94

with passively believing what you've been instructed to believe and not imitating Christ and being a doer of the Word.

Recognizing the illusion of Christendom, Kierkegaard wishes to remove it. But how does one go about removing an illusion that affects nearly every single individual? Kierkegaard presents us with one option, writing,

“Every once in a while a pastor makes a little fuss in the pulpit about there being something not quite right with all these many Christians – but all those who hear him and who are present there, consequently all those he is speaking *to*, are Christians, and of course he is not speaking to those he is speaking *about*. This is most appropriately called simulated motion. -Every once in a while a religious enthusiast appears. He makes an assault on Christendom; he makes a big noise, denounces nearly all as not being Christians – and he accomplishes nothing. He does not take into account that an illusion is not so easy to remove.”³⁴

The direct approach is one that Kierkegaard does not find advisable. On one hand we might end up preaching to the choir when we tell a group of Christians that there is something wrong with Christianity. Those who hear our message will assume that we are talking about some other group of Christians, perhaps some new heretical approach, or some group from another society. Thus our message falls on deaf ears, for there is an assumed difference in those we are talking to and those we are talking about. Our other direct option of trying to remove the illusion is to confront everyone and denounce them as not being Christians. But as Kierkegaard mentions, this fails to take into account the strength of the illusion. If I consider my Christianity as something that is central to my identity, in the same way that I consider my nationality central to my identity, how might one tell me that that I am not actually a Christian? It would be as if Kierkegaard were to say to one of his countrymen, “You are not Danish.” The Dane might respond, “But of course I am Danish, I was born in Denmark, I speak Danish, and I pay taxes to Denmark,

³⁴ POV 42

besides that I have lived here my whole life and so have my parents. How am I not Danish?”³⁵ The direct approach in which those who consider themselves Christians are denounced will result only in those individuals dismissing the individual denouncing them. They will consider him or her a religious extremist, one who is mentally unstable, and thus one who should not be listened to. It might even go further as to solidify them in their illusion, certain that their beliefs must be true.

Thus Kierkegaard envisions a number of considerations that the individual who wishes to remove the illusion must constantly keep in mind. He first mentions that we cannot remove the illusion directly, but rather that only by approaching the problem indirectly can any progress be made.³⁶ Kierkegaard ties this indirect approach to patience. The individual who wants to remove the illusion of Christendom must act patiently, for lacking patience will lead someone to make a direct attack. Given that Kierkegaard describes this indirect strategy as “approach[ing] from behind” we can envision this as an almost sneaky approach.³⁷ In order to be indirect one must approach the target in such a way that they are not aware. It takes time to do this as one must be very careful with their movements. Kierkegaard writes, “Generally speaking, there is nothing that requires as gentle a treatment as the removal of an illusion.”³⁸ We might think of a doctor trying to give a vaccine to a young child, distracting them while gently administering something painful. Thus, Kierkegaard finds patience to be necessary to the indirect approach. To this end, Kierkegaard claims that the religious author must start by becoming popular. In

³⁵ One could imagine Antony Flew invoking the “No true Scotsman” fallacy in this type of situation.

³⁶ POV 43

³⁷ Ibid 43

³⁸ Ibid 43

order to accomplish this, one must publish a book in the aesthetic vein.³⁹ Having done this, our author must continue in their writings to slowly move their audience towards a religious goal. Kierkegaard's strategy revolves around this deception. The reader thinks that the author is an aesthete, a lifestyle that the reader shares. Thus the reader engages the author, convinced that they are like-minded. However, over time the author slowly nudges the reader towards the religious, but in a way that the reader does not overtly notice. If the change takes too long, the reader will think that the author has merely changed their mind and is no longer an aesthete, and if the change happens too suddenly then the reader will dismiss the author and move on. Thus the religious author who wishes to strip the illusion from their reader must start with a deception, and with patience slowly bring the religious forward.

Kierkegaard was cognizant of the treachery that was involved with his plan to remove the illusion of Christendom.⁴⁰ As was mentioned, such a course of action was quite difficult and Kierkegaard imagined that if approached in any other manner, his project would end with the public merely dismissing him.⁴¹ No one wants to be told that they are indeed not a Christian when they consider themselves to be a Christian. Mooney argues that this is partially due to the fact that no neutral standpoint exists for one's own self.⁴² I cannot analyze whether or not a deeply held belief is authentic from a neutral or abstract standpoint, because such a belief is central to who I am. Thus, in order to overcome the illusion, Kierkegaard turned to deception. To that end, Kierkegaard

³⁹ For Kierkegaard, the aesthetic is the immediate. Thus an aesthetic publication is one that provides immediate gratification or pleasure in the eyes of the reader.

⁴⁰ FSE 140

⁴¹ Given our historical knowledge of the relationship between Christianity and Denmark both during Kierkegaard's life and afterwards, it's safe to assume that Kierkegaard was ultimately unsuccessful in attaining his goals to the extent that they relate to Denmark.

⁴² Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*. 266

conceals his true goals from his contemporary audience.

This deception begins with the use of pseudonyms. The majority of Kierkegaard's work was published pseudonymously. These pseudonyms took up a number of various positions. As was noted, Kierkegaard thinks that a successful religious author needs to start with an aesthetic work, and he did with *Either/Or*. His pseudonymous works then slowly turned towards the religious across a number of texts. However, one important thing to note is that none of the pseudonyms ever called themselves Christians. Instead, they were always individuals who very much admired Christianity and who only sought to more fully understand it. Kierkegaard declares, "If it is an illusion that all are Christians, and if something is to be done, it must be done indirectly, not by someone who loudly declares himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by someone who, better informed, even declares himself not to be a Christian."⁴³ If I declare myself a great Christian who has access to the true teachings of Christ, which declare that you are doing things entirely wrong, your reaction is likely to be a negative one. You will dismiss me or think me a heretic or zealot. So instead, I should try to approach you as a non-Christian who is merely interested in Christianity. This kind of an approach will leave you open to exploring the questions without getting defensive concerning them. We see Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms make this movement a number of times. When writing under his own name, Kierkegaard constantly disavows that he is a good Christian. He instead refers to himself as someone who knows what Christianity is; he claims no spiritual superiority, only intellectual superiority.⁴⁴ Also in the *Postscript*, *Fear and Trembling*, *Practice in Christianity*, and many other works, we see Kierkegaard's pseudonyms claim that he is

⁴³ POV 43

⁴⁴ Ibid 15, 129

not a Christian nor a religious authority. Here we see Kierkegaard's pseudonyms doing something akin to Socrates in that they claim to not be a Christian just as Socrates claims to not know the answers to the questions that he's asking.⁴⁵ Given his explanations concerning the need for an indirect approach, we can only assume that Kierkegaard takes this kind of an approach because he is trying to accomplish the very specific goal of bringing the religious forward.

Part of this grand deception of Kierkegaard's involved an attempt to convince the public that he could not have been the author of the pseudonymous works. He had a very strict publishing strategy in which he would publish pseudonymous works at the same time as works that he would list himself as the author. In this way, he hoped to dissuade individuals who thought that he might be publishing the pseudonymous works by arguing that he could not have written two books at once. He writes, "With my left hand I passed *Either/Or* out into the world, with my right hand *Two Upbuilding Discourses*; but they all or almost all took the left with their right."⁴⁶ Kierkegaard published *Either/Or* and *Two Upbuilding Discourses* within 3 months of each other, and published *Repetition, Fear and Trembling*, and *Three Upbuilding Discourses* all on the same day. He continued a schedule of that sort throughout his career, publishing multiple works on the same day or within days of each other to throw off suspicion that he was the author. These actions are not merely for some sense of artistic fulfillment on Kierkegaard's part, but when we take into account his claims about what the successful religious author needs to do, we see how Kierkegaard's publishing are aimed at the religious. If Kierkegaard claims himself as the author, or is suspected of being the author, the public will ignore his message. They

⁴⁵ The connection between Kierkegaard and Socrates will be explored more in the next section.

⁴⁶ POV 36

will find some reason to dismiss him because of his personal life or something else. But when the author is unknown, one has to contend with the work itself. So Kierkegaard removes himself from the picture, and has his pseudonyms instead make the case for Christianity, but make sure to do so from the standpoint of one who is not a Christian.

Beyond just his publishing strategy, Kierkegaard also tried to act day to day in a manner that would not arouse suspicion. He describes how this was intentional when, describing himself, he writes,

“Here was a religious author, but one who began as an esthetic author, and this first part was the incognito, was the deception. Very early and very thoroughly initiated into the secret that the world wants to be deceived, I was unable at that time to choose to pursue this strategy. Quite the opposite, it was a matter of deceiving inversely on the largest possible scale, of using all my familiarity with people and their weaknesses and their obtusities – not in order to profit from them but in order to annihilate myself, to weaken the impression of myself. The secret of the deception that indulges the world, which wants to be deceived, consists partly in forming a clique and all that goes with it, in joining one or two of those mutual admiration societies whose members assist each other by word and pen for the sake of worldly gain, and partly in hiding from the human throng, never being seen, in order in this way to produce an effect on the imagination. Therefore the very opposite had to be done. I had to exist and safeguard an existence in absolute isolation, but I also had to make a point of being seen at every time of the day, living, so to speak, on the street, associating myself with every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the most casual situations. This is the truth's way of deceiving, the ever-sure way to weaken the impression of oneself in the world, furthermore certainly also the way of self-renunciation taken by men quite different from me in order to make people aware.”⁴⁷

Here we see Kierkegaard describing the deception that he is employing. But beyond the literary deception, he has to extend the deception into his life. Kierkegaard was well known for going on daily walks throughout Copenhagen.⁴⁸ In this passage we see the method to his madness. Kierkegaard argued that a successful religious author must start with aesthetic works and slowly lead to the religious, and also that in order for the

⁴⁷ POV 58

⁴⁸ Poole 165-174 has a discussion of the nature of Kierkegaard's walks through Copenhagen.

religious to come forward, the author cannot claim to be a good religious individual. Thus Kierkegaard needed to make himself into a nobody so that his works could stand on their own. His strategy of double publishing and his daily walks seem to be a part of this. He made it a point to be seen on his walks throughout the city and to engage with everyone whom he saw, a skill for which he was quite well known. All of this seems to be for the purpose of deception. It's easy for us to imagine the public dismissing Kierkegaard's works once they found out who the author was. If you know that it's Kierkegaard who is challenging your religious beliefs, then you can find an excuse to disregard him. Maybe you think of his failed engagement with his Regine Olsen as good reason to dismiss him, or you laugh at the fact that Kierkegaard was, in all likelihood, a hunchback. Whatever your reason, you can find flaws in the human that provide enough of a psychological reason for you to dismiss the work. Yet, if the work has no real human individual attached to it, you can only contend with the ideas found within it. His daily life was warped in service to the goal of the religious author. In all that he did, both in writing and in daily action, we see Kierkegaard wholly concerned with removing the illusion of Christendom from Denmark.

In a short essay entitled *On My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard lays out this process from start to finish. He begins by mentioning that his works, taken as a totality, can only be understood religiously,⁴⁹ a claim that he echoes in other writings.⁵⁰ By this, Kierkegaard seems to mean that his writings as a whole only make sense when we approach them as being aimed at what he considers the truly religious, which is a specific variety of Christianity. Given his commitment to also bringing about the truly religious in

⁴⁹ POV 6

⁵⁰ POV 34-35

his audience, we can see this as being part of the interpretive apparatus that is required of us. Understanding that the writings are of this religious nature allows us to recognize how they are a vast deception. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings work to deceive the reader into the truth.⁵¹ But how exactly does the deception function, and over what is Kierkegaard deceiving his audience? He gives us some clues at the end of the short essay. He writes, "Here again, the movement is: to arrive at the simple; the movement is: from the public to 'the single individual.' In other words, there is in a religious sense no public but only individuals, because the religious is earnestness, and earnestness is: the single individual."⁵² There are a few ways to read this passage. Those who are interested in reading Kierkegaard's personal life into his philosophy, an approach that I don't think is entirely problematic, but which I find fruitless if it is the primary concern, generally read "the single individual" as referring to Regine Olsen, Kierkegaard's ex-fiancée. However, I think that interpreting "the single individual" as a reference to Kierkegaard's audience is much more fitting when we examine Kierkegaard's overall views concerning his authorship. Though he may well be referring to Regine in whole or in part, if we are to take his other claims in *The Point of View* seriously, then we must recognize that at least in part, Kierkegaard is addressing his Danish countrymen who consider themselves Christian but who lack what Kierkegaard thinks is truly Christian. In this passage Kierkegaard claims to want to separate the individual from the public at large, a public which was under the illusion of Christendom. In order to have the best chance at removing this illusion from the individual, the individual must be isolated, for otherwise

⁵¹ We also see Kierkegaard refer to the maieutic; he compares himself to the Socratic midwife, the person who brings the truth forward but who is not actually supplying it. POV 7

⁵² POV 10

the illusion will be perpetuated by the individual's peers. By separating the individual, Kierkegaard can then remove the illusion by re-revealing Christianity to the individual. While the individual might still deceive themselves and thus perpetuate the illusion, removing the external influence provides Kierkegaard with the best possible chance at removing the illusion.

In Mackey's examination of Kierkegaard's works, he distinguishes between the possibility of a doctrinal goal in which Kierkegaard is looking to get the church to take a specific stance on a theological issue and a poetic or existential goal in which Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms are working to re-reveal Christianity to a public who already assumed themselves to be Christians. Mackey's work is primarily concerned with arguing that we need to interpret Kierkegaard first and foremost as a poet and thus we have to conclude that the poetic goal is of central importance.⁵³ Kierkegaard is not looking to convert pagans to Christianity, but rather to remove the illusion of Christendom from those who already consider themselves Christian. He is looking to make Christianity difficult to a populace who thinks it a simple matter of believing the correct doctrines. His goal is to re-reveal Christianity in all of its awe and terror to the isolated individual, therefore forcing them to reconcile the two worldviews: what Kierkegaard considers the illusion of Christendom and what he considers the truly Christian.

Section 2: With All Your Power, What Would You Do?

In examining Kierkegaard's goals and constraints for his authorship, we inevitably run into the question of what Kierkegaard actually thinks he can do about the problem. If

⁵³ Mackey 244

Kierkegaard is to remove the illusion of Christendom, then he must think that at least some individuals who identify as Christian are not actually true Christians.⁵⁴ Thus his goal seems aimed at converting these contemporaries of his to Christianity. This goal runs into a specific problem that Kierkegaard identifies as the problem of the teacher and learner, harkening us back to the paradox that we find in the *Meno*.⁵⁵ Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author of *Philosophical Fragments*, begins his book by reminding us of the paradox that Meno brings up in his dialogue with Socrates. Socrates claimed that he did not know what virtue was, and thus could not answer Meno's question as to whether virtue could be taught. Despite not knowing virtue, Socrates engages Meno on the topic until Meno gives up in exasperation. He goes on to ask Socrates how Socrates would search for virtue or recognize the correct answer if Socrates knows nothing of virtue. Kierkegaard is dealing with a very similar problem. Meno's paradox essentially boils down to the question of learning. How does one learn something? For seemingly if we know nothing about a subject, we cannot recognize the truth. So how does one gain the truth? For Kierkegaard this question is directly related to the truth of Christianity. If one knows nothing of Christianity, how does one look for it? If the divine truth of God has not been revealed to someone, how could they learn it? This is an important question for us to engage, for it directly speaks to the purpose that Kierkegaard sees for his authorship. If one can gain the truth through learning, then Kierkegaard only needs to become the teacher. He needs to instruct his contemporaries

⁵⁴ We have seen, thus far, some indications of what Christianity isn't. True Christianity, for Kierkegaard, is not doctrine, nor does it relate to social custom. We have seen this much in the parables that Kierkegaard uses as criticisms of Danish Christendom. As will be explored in further detail in the next chapter, Kierkegaard relates Christianity specifically to the subjective and indirect approach and thus we get a glimpse of what authentic Christianity looks like. However, it is nonetheless outside the bounds of this project to fully delineate authentic and inauthentic Christianity in the works of Kierkegaard.

⁵⁵ This comes up in 80d of the *Meno*.

and then they can know the truth. But if the truth cannot be gained through learning, what purpose can Kierkegaard's authorship serve?

Climacus examines this situation from start to finish. We start with ignorance, for we do not yet know the truth. “The seeker [of truth] up until that moment must not have possessed the truth, not even in the form of ignorance.”⁵⁶ Our initial state is one in which not merely do we not know the truth, but we don't know that we don't know. We lack the Socratic wisdom of minimally being aware of our ignorance. This is also precisely the position that Kierkegaard finds his audience in. Not only are his countrymen not true Christians, they also do not know that they are not true Christians. They are under the illusion of Christendom which has convinced them that they are all Christians. If you are aware of your ignorance then you are only a seeker of the truth, but this is not the position of Kierkegaard's contemporaries. For this reason, he refers to the default form of existence as “untruth”. So the question that we must ask is this: How does one reveal the truth to someone who is untruth?

Climacus goes on to phrase the question in terms of a teacher and a learner. The learner is untruth and the task of the teacher is to bring the truth to the learner. So what must the teacher do? Climacus starts with Socrates' response in the *Meno*, that of recollection. Can the teacher cause the learner to recollect? In this situation, since the learner is untruth, the only thing that the learner can recollect is untruth. Thus Climacus finds that the teacher can cause the learner to recollect her untruth. However, recollecting your untruth does not provide you with a pathway to find the truth. Instead, it only makes you aware that you lack the truth. You still don't know what you are looking for, you

⁵⁶ PF 13

merely know that you do not have it. In causing this recollection, the teacher isn't actually giving you any amount of knowledge, but instead is turning you inwards, and it is this inwardness that brings forward your awareness of your untruth. So in this situation, the teacher isn't actually accomplishing much, for the teacher is only acting as the occasion of recollection, not the occasion of truth. The teacher is not teaching truth to the learner, rather, he is only propelling her to recollect.

Once the learner is aware of her untruth, how does she gain the truth? Climacus writes, "Now, if the learner is to obtain the truth, the teacher must first bring it to him, but not only that. Along with it, he must provide him with the condition for understanding it."⁵⁷ As untruth, you don't yet possess the ability to even understand the truth, for you only know untruth. The truth is wholly foreign to you and thus you must first gain what Climacus calls the condition. The condition refers to the capability to recognize the truth. If you lack the condition, then even if the truth were given to you, you could not recognize it. Therefore, Climacus writes, "Ultimately, all instruction depends on the presence of the condition; if it is lacking, then a teacher is capable of nothing, because in the second case, the teacher, before beginning to teach, must transform, not reform, the learner."⁵⁸ The condition is not something that can be taught, for it is a capability to understand and recognize, and a capability is not the kind of thing that can be passed from teacher to learner. Instead, the learner must be transformed; something about their human constitution must change. They must become a different kind of creature, one who possesses a new capability. For Climacus, no human teacher could cause this transformation, and thus he labels this teacher a god. Only the god could transform the

⁵⁷ Ibid 14

⁵⁸ Ibid 14

learner in such a way that she now possesses the condition. How exactly this process occurs is not something that Climacus endeavors to explain, but given the description that we find, the transformation of the individual appears to be miraculous in nature.

So the god transforms the learner and gives her the condition. Once possessing the condition, she can learn the truth, but doing so is not merely an intellectual matter for as will be explained in the next chapter, Kierkegaard thinks of Christianity as a way of existing and not merely a set of beliefs. Climacus goes on to name the state of untruth, sin. With this we can see the full picture that he is painting. Humans who are in sin do not even recognize themselves as sinners, much less do they understand the truth of Christianity. Thus the first step that must be taken is for the sinners to recognize themselves as sinners. They must accept their untruth. Having done that, they must also possess the condition. The condition has to be given by God, it is not something that can be sought out and achieved through hard work. Only God can transform the sinners into creatures who can recognize truth. Once the sinners recognize their state of sin and they possess the condition, then they can begin to learn the truth of Christianity. Since this process is not something that can be achieved solely by the sinners, Climacus is thus disallowing any possibility of earning one's salvation. For in order to earn one's salvation, one must assumedly do good, yet if one does not possess the condition, then one lacks the ability to even understand what good is, much less do it. Salvation, and the truth of Christianity, only come to us through divine grace.

Thus we see that Kierkegaard cannot act as the teacher, for only the god can be the teacher that Climacus describes. In this situation, how can Kierkegaard function? He provides us with some clues when we return to *The Point of View*.

“A person may have the good fortune of doing a great deal for another, may have the good fortune of leading him to the place to which he desires to lead him, and to hold to what in essence is continually under discussion here, may have the good fortune of helping that person to become a Christian. But this is not in my power.”⁵⁹

Kierkegaard seems very aware that he cannot cause a conversion. He cannot make others Christian, for he cannot provide anyone with the condition. Again we return to Meno’s problem in that if Kierkegaard speaks to those without the condition, they cannot understand him, and if he speaks to those with the condition, he is wasting his time for they already have access to the truth. In this situation, Kierkegaard's possibilities seem very limited. Either he functions as the teacher who causes the learner to recollect their untruth or he addresses himself to the learners who possess the condition and he functions merely as a teacher who wishes to disseminate knowledge to his students in the same manner that every teacher does. In the first case, Climacus thinks that the teachers job is insufficient, as the teacher is not actually teaching anything to the learner. Instead the learner is traveling down a path of self-discovery, and at best all that the teacher can do is help to start them on that path. If this is Kierkegaard's plan for his authorship, then his goals are rather mundane. This doesn't match up with what he's claimed to want out of his authorship. In the second case, Kierkegaard would be functioning only as a standard teacher. He would be ministering to those who already possess the condition and his function would be to help them understand the truth in a greater sense. This more closely matches his claims, but still does not directly addresses the goals that he has laid out for his authorship. So if Kierkegaard operates as neither of these functions, what part does he play in reference to the problem of the teacher and the learner?

⁵⁹ POV 50

It's telling, I think, that Climacus constantly refers back to Socrates, and even devotes some time to the concept of Socrates as the midwife. Climacus has maintained that the teacher cannot provide the truth, nor can the teacher transform the learner, and in this way I think that the midwife analogy is apt. The midwife cannot give birth, she can only deliver the child, and here I think we find Kierkegaard's role, as he writes, "between one human being and another to deliver is the highest; giving birth indeed belongs to the god."⁶⁰ Kierkegaard's role is not to provide the truth, nor to give the individual the condition, for neither are things that he can accomplish. Instead, he is here to help deliver the truth. The truth that he is going to deliver is one that will be more fully explored in chapter five, but suffice to say, Kierkegaard is helping us to birth the truth about ourselves. He wants us to see ourselves truly and clearly. This truth, that we are sinners in need of a savior, can only be given to us by God, and thus Kierkegaard is not providing this. Instead he is helping us to receive it, to make sure that we do not turn away or that we are not unduly harmed in the process. The midwife's job is to safeguard the health of the mother while bringing the child into the world. Kierkegaard is not trying to merely teach, for such an approach would be overly concerned with knowledge. Instead he is trying to bring the truth out of us, the recognition of what we truly are.⁶¹

Climacus later remarks that the teacher is the occasion for the learner to understand herself. The teacher is not giving truth to the learner, but instead he is only functioning as a vehicle for the learner's self-discovery. This matches the line of thinking

⁶⁰ PF 11

⁶¹ This truth is a separate thing from the truth of Christianity. The truth of Christianity must entail the truth of the self, as we might call it, that Kierkegaard is helping us to birth, but the truth of the self does not entail the truth of Christianity. Thus, Kierkegaard is helping us to see ourselves, though doing this already requires the condition, the ability to recognize untruth.

that we find in *The Point of View* concerning the job of the teacher and the helper. Kierkegaard writes that the individual who wants to help anyone must first humble himself. “But all true helping begins with a humbling. The helper must first humble himself under the person he wants to help and thereby understand that to help is not to dominate but to serve.”⁶² This aligns with what path that we see Kierkegaard's authorship taking. He thinks that most individuals live an aesthetic existence and thus he begins his authorship with an aesthetic work. Over time he slowly tries to bring the religious forward, but he only does this first after claiming that he is not a Christian, and also after starting where his audience already is. “To be a teacher is not to say: This is the way it is, nor is it to assign lessons and the like. No, to be a teacher is truly to be the learner. Instruction begins with this, that you, the teacher, learn from the learner, place yourself in what he has understood and how he has understood it.”⁶³ When we combine the ideas that the teacher must learn from the learner, that the teacher must humble himself beneath the learner, and that Kierkegaard's goal is to move his audience from the aesthetic mode of existence to the religious, an image of the teacher comes forth. The teacher is not the pastor who preaches from the pulpit. The teacher, for Kierkegaard, is the individual who seeks to understand the learner and be humbled before her. This act of humbling allows the teacher to connect with the learner and thus communicate on a level that the learner understands. Kierkegaard seems to have this in mind when he claims that he needs to start with the aesthetic, with the pleasure seeker. An individual who only seeks pleasure in life will not understand the appeal of a strictly religious life, for such a thing lacks pleasure. The pleasure seeker and the religious individual live in incommensurable

⁶² POV 45

⁶³ Ibid 46

paradigms. So in order to prompt the movement of the pleasure seeker towards the religious, one must first become a pleasure seeker and speak in terms that the pleasure seeker understands. This is what it is to be a teacher for Kierkegaard, and we can see this not only in the structure of his authorship but also with the relatively narrow role that he sees himself playing in the grand scheme of things. He is not the individual who shows a sinner their sins, or who shows them the truth of Christianity. Instead, he is the teacher who humbles himself before his audience and helps deliver the truth as a midwife, specifically to an individual who possesses the condition.

How exactly does this midwifery occur?⁶⁴ Kierkegaard identifies what his authorship has been trying to accomplish when he writes, “[I have] worked to arouse restlessness oriented toward inward deepening.”⁶⁵ Kierkegaard, functioning as the midwife, cannot actually communicate truth to his audience. So instead he sees his function as being the agent of inwardness. He works to turn his audience inward, in this hoping that they will see themselves in a true sense. If I am under the illusion of Christendom and you wish for me to become a true Christian, two things seemingly must happen. First, I must throw off the illusion, and second I must accept Christianity. Kierkegaard readily acknowledges that he cannot bring about the second of those occurrences. Thus he is aimed at the first. You cannot simply tell me that I am under the illusion of Christendom, nor can you make me see it. In order for me to overcome the illusion, I have to first recognize it. Thus, when Kierkegaard wishes to engender inwardness, he is driving towards the only thing that can overcome the illusion, the single

⁶⁴ For a great discussion of Kierkegaard and Socratic midwifery, see Daise’s *Kierkegaard’s Socratic Art* in which Daise examines the concept of teaching and learning that we find in the *Meno* and how Kierkegaard’s concept of indirect communication is similar and dissimilar to Socrates’ approach.

⁶⁵ FSE 20

individual. The individual needs to turn inward and examine themselves in order to recognize that there is a contradiction between the belief that they are a good Christian and their actions which betray what Kierkegaard thinks is the truly Christian. Only when this occurs can the individual move past the illusion and thus enter into the possibility of true Christianity.

These two actions, the removal of the illusion and the acceptance of Christianity must happen in an ordered fashion. I cannot truly accept Christianity while I am under the illusion of Christendom. Thus, Kierkegaard's goal is the removal of the illusion.

However, when we examine the acceptance of Christianity we realize that there is actually specific content to Christianity that I must relate to properly. So, Kierkegaard's diatribe against doctrine doesn't stem from the fact that doctrine is meaningless when it comes to Christianity, but rather that doctrine should only come into play after the illusion has been removed. Because of this, Kierkegaard often discusses Christian doctrine and the truth of Christianity. The nature of God and Christianity, the nature of our relationship with God, the possibility of salvation, and our consciousness of sin, among many other things, are all relevant and important topics for Kierkegaard.⁶⁶

However, only the individual who has turned from untruth and is trying to properly orient themselves towards Christianity has concern for things of this sort as they relate to the content and doctrine of Christianity. The problem that has arisen is that instead of orienting ourselves properly and then examining the content so that we can be oriented towards the correct thing, we have skipped the step of orientation. Thus, the illusion of Christendom tells us that we don't need to exist in a certain way, we just have to have the

⁶⁶ Given that my dissertation is going to focus on Kierkegaard's attempt to get individuals to properly orient themselves, I will not be examining any of these questions in detail.

correct object of belief. As will be explored in the next chapter, this runs afoul of the idea that Christianity is essentially subjective for Kierkegaard.

With his primary goal being to overcome the illusion of Christendom, and thus engender inwardness in his audience, Kierkegaard's plan of action ends up being quite different from the that of the church during his time. He writes,

“For a long time the strategy employed was to utilize everything to get as many as possible, everyone is possible, to accept Christianity – but then not to be so very scrupulous about whether what one got them to accept actually was Christianity. My strategy was with the help of God to utilize everything to make clear what in truth Christianity's requirement is.”⁶⁷

By presenting those who think they are Christian with the requirements of true Christianity, Kierkegaard is hoping that they will reject the illusion. This is not easily accomplished though, and thus we see Kierkegaard engaging in what he refers to as the vast deception, the use of pseudonyms, his daily walks, his publishing schedule, and the way in which he addresses his audience as one who is not a Christian but who is merely interested in what Christianity truly looks like. What we've examined thus far demonstrates that Kierkegaard's hope for his authorship is that it will challenge the individual to think and judge for themselves as to whether or not the illusion of Christendom that they are under is true Christianity. Thus Kierkegaard wants to turn them inward, for he cannot accomplish this realization for them.

Section 3: Who Gets Saved from Tonight's Elimination?

The claim that Kierkegaard is trying to re-introduce Christianity to his countrymen who are under the illusion of Christendom can lead us to also question the breadth of applicability of Kierkegaard's works. As I've argued, Kierkegaard sees himself

⁶⁷ POV 16

as the midwife, the author who can push the individual to turn inward and see themselves, as if in a mirror. But to whom does this apply? If God is providing the condition, something that Kierkegaard cannot do, who exactly has the condition? If the condition is limited to a certain number of individuals then Kierkegaard's target audience can only be those people, for he wants the religious to come forward, and the condition is a prerequisite for the religious.

The question of theological universalism comes into play here. The doctrine of theological universalism states that all persons will eventually experience salvation. If Kierkegaard were to accept this approach, then his writings would serve to hasten the salvation of some, perhaps. However, I concur with Mulder that there is good reason to believe that Kierkegaard rejects the doctrine of universalism. Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Climacus, describes faith as a decision. If faith, and thus salvation, require an act on the part of the individual, then it is always possible for the individual to reject God, even if God has provided them with the condition, for faith requires that act of willing. This is the line of thought that Ferreira takes when examining different models of Kierkegaardian faith. As Ferreira writes, “a model in which our eyes are opened but our free activity is still needed, a model which is neither a deliberate decision nor totally passive and inexplicable.”⁶⁸ Ferreira argues that for Kierkegaard faith is not something that you can accomplish by yourself, and simultaneously something that requires your free activity. As was shown earlier, only God can reform the individual and thus convert her from untruth to truth in ignorance. This conversion allows for the learner to recognize that they lack the truth and they also now possess the ability to understand the truth when

⁶⁸ Ferreira, *Kierkegaardian Faith* 74

they come across it. Thus we see that God is required for salvation. The learner cannot understand the truth and thus cannot save herself until God gives her the condition.

At the same time, the learner plays an important part in their reception of the truth. There is some amount of free will that is involved in faith. Ferreira analyzes the language that Climacus uses when describing the situation for the Socratic, the original problem of learning that we find in the *Meno*, versus the situation of faith. In both instances, Climacus refers to “willing” as a salient feature in overcoming ignorance. However, Ferreira points out that when we look at the Socratic, Climacus says that we need to will in order to understand the truth even if we already have the truth. On this account of things, will doesn't seem to imply a deliberate decision, but instead a kind of focus. For this reason, Ferreira argues that the “decision” of the individual when it comes to the possession of faith is not a purely volitional act. God has already revealed the truth and provided the learner with the condition. Yet, in order to fully understand the truth, to appropriate it, we must actively attend, concentrate, and focus on it.⁶⁹ This is the act of willing, it is a shift in focus and perspective. So the will of the learner is not to save themselves, or to accept the salvation of God, but instead to attend to the truth that has been revealed to them in such a way that they bring it inward and become changed individuals.

When we consider that this act of will is one that Kierkegaard finds necessary, we can see the purpose that his authorship might serve. If he is a universalist then the authorship serves no necessary function, for all will eventually be reconciled with God. Instead, Kierkegaard seeks to affect those who already possess the condition and to

⁶⁹ In chapter 2 I will endeavor to explain the differences between understanding and appropriating, though I will use the slightly different language of the objective and subjective approaches to truth.

reorient their attention inwards, thus nudging their will towards the kind of focus and perspective that is needed for faith.⁷⁰ This is not something that he can strictly cause, but he hopes to influence his readers by drawing them inward, by creating a mirror for their soul.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the purpose behind Kierkegaard's writings. I've argued that Kierkegaard wants to strip away the illusion of Christendom for his audience and that he sees this as an important step in individuals being able to move towards Christianity. I've shown that Kierkegaard cannot bring individuals to Christianity himself, for such a thing can only be accomplished by God, and instead that he tries to function as a philosophical-religious midwife. He works to properly orient us by bringing about inwardness. This understanding of his goal as an author helps to frame what comes in chapter two, which is an examination of Kierkegaard's communication style. In order for us to fully analyze Kierkegaard's use of parables, we must first know what he's trying to accomplish as an author, as well as what principles guide his writing and communication style.

⁷⁰ One could argue that he's merely fulfilling the commandment to spread the Gospel, but that approach seems to ignore his meticulous approach towards his authorship, and specifically ignores his own claims about the purpose of his authorship.

Chapter 2: Kierkegaard the Illusionist

“Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.” – Genesis 11:6

In this chapter, I will be trying to accomplish two different goals. First, an understanding of indirect communication is necessary in order to examine the concept of parable that will happen in later chapters, and thus I will work to develop such an understanding. Secondly, a significant portion of this chapter will function as a literature review, as there is very little literature on parables in Kierkegaard, but quite a bit on indirect communication. Therefore, much of this chapter will proceed as explication through literature review. I will oftentimes present an author’s view, followed by criticism or support of mine, usually culminating in some kind of synthesis that presents a full understanding of the different concepts that I engage.

If we accept that Kierkegaard’s goals are religious in nature, we next must ask how he intends to accomplish those goals. I have already argued that Kierkegaard recognizes his inability to turn people into Christians and thus that he is aimed at turning individuals inward so that they can recognize the truth that God has already revealed to them. While Kierkegaard spends a lot of time in both his pseudonymous and his named works discussing Christian doctrine, he doesn’t seem to think that an explication of doctrine is going to accomplish his goal, for reasons outlined in the last chapter. Instead, he employs the use of indirect communication, which I will endeavor to explain in this chapter.

In order to fully appreciate Kierkegaard’s doctrine of indirect communication, we must first explore the approaches to truth that Johannes Climacus, one of Kierkegaard’s

pseudonyms, writes about in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Climacus envisions two different approaches to truth, objective and subjective. Both of these approaches can be taken towards the same object, but they will give different outcomes. Climacus argues that the objective approach and the subjective approach are paired with different forms of communication. He links indirect communication with the subjective approach and this chapter will begin by exploring this connection. Climacus is of the opinion that Christianity is ultimately subjective and thus that communicating Christianity requires indirect communication. This is in line with the argument that I put together in the last chapter, that Kierkegaard did not want to focus on Christian doctrine, but instead on inwardness. Doctrine would be the kind of thing that is connected to direct communication, for it is objective and factual, in a sense. By focusing on indirect communication and subjectivity, we see Kierkegaard moving Christianity into the realm of the individual, away from the objective and thus focusing on inwardness.

Examining Kierkegaard's doctrine of indirect communication leads us into a few questions surrounding interpretation. Kierkegaard admits that indirect communication is needed for the religious approach and I've argued that, above all, he was a religious author, and thus Kierkegaard himself needed to employ the indirect method. His pseudonyms tip us off to this on a number of occasions. For instance, *Fear and Trembling* begins with an epigraph that describes an incident of indirect communication.⁷¹ Given these cues, it is reasonable for us to assume that some of Kierkegaard's works don't intend to communicate exactly what is written on the page,

⁷¹ The epigraph refers to a story in which a ruler wanted to get a message to his son, but he didn't trust the messenger. Thus, instead of giving the messenger a clear message, he performed a certain action and told the messenger to describe his actions to his son. The son understood the message, but the messenger did not.

and instead are an attempt to indirectly communicate with his audience. This situation leads some scholars to take a suspicious approach to interpretations of Kierkegaard, as it seems difficult for us to be sure if Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms are communicating directly or indirectly, in jest or in earnestness. In this chapter I will examine some arguments to determine whether or not we can trust the writings of Kierkegaard and meaningfully interpret them. While it is clear that Kierkegaard employs indirect communication throughout his works, and thus puts his readers in a kind of interpretive limbo, I will argue that ultimately we can interpret Kierkegaard's works by using indirect communication as an interpretive lens.

Section 1: Is the Earth Not Round?

In order to understand the subjective approach and the style of communication that is required of it, let's first examine the objective approach. Kierkegaard, through his pseudonyms, doesn't spend a lot of time specifically describing objectivity, for the objective approach should be familiar to most individuals. When we commonly think of "truth" we think of truth in the objective sense -- that is, truth as something that is independent of human beings. When we claim that mathematical truths are objective, we traditionally mean that the mathematical truth will remain regardless of who is perceiving it or if there is anyone at all to perceive it.⁷² Kierkegaard points towards this standard view of truth and knowledge when he writes, "The way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something... the truth also become indifferent, and that is precisely

⁷² I am not intending here to make a claim about mathematical realism or anti-realism, just merely claiming that such a truth is not dependent on any human being.

its objective validity.”⁷³ The objective approach is concerned primarily with facts that are independent of human beings. Indeed, as Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, notes, the indifference of objective truth towards the individual is precisely why we call it objective. Objective truth and knowledge are independent of human existence, and it is this independence that gives them the stability that we desire. We want mathematical truths to be objective, for their objectivity gives them dependability, in that they rely on nothing other than the nature of the universe.

Climacus notes that a certain kind of communication must be paired with objectivity. He refers to this type of communication as direct communication. Direct communication takes the form of a message that ignores both the communicator and communicatee and their subjective outlooks on life. Instead, a direct communication looks to clearly transmit information from one source to another. For example, if I were to tell someone that today was Sunday, I would be directly communicating to that person, in all likelihood. The context is very important here, as direct communication ideally occurs in a vacuum of sorts. Had I been telling someone that today was Sunday in a covert effort to get them to go to church, I would not be directly communicating. However, if a stranger asked me what day it was and I responded that it was Sunday, I would be directly communicating with that person. Direct communication has no other agenda beyond what it communicates directly. Climacus uses the example of the objective approach to God. “Let us take the knowledge of God as an example. Objectively, what is reflected upon is that this is the true God.”⁷⁴ Objectively, our

⁷³ CUP 193

⁷⁴ Ibid 199

concern with God is that we have the correct God, that scripture is accurate, and that our beliefs correctly correlate with the beliefs that God intends us to have. How an individual relates to the truth of God, or how that truth affects them are not of concern to the objective approach. The style of communication that is used needs to reflect the concerns of the communication. Thus, a direct communication of a religious nature will look to set out doctrine. In order to directly communicate the objective truth of God to you, I need to tell you all about God's existence, God's nature, God's moral laws, and any relevant history of the one true religion. However, at no point am I trying to motivate you to do anything beyond accepting a certain proposition as true. In this sense, we might imagine the religious studies professor as inhabiting the sphere of direct communication whereas the priest or pastor would ideally inhabit the sphere of indirect communication. The religious studies professor is trying to demonstrate to you the tenets of a certain religion, outline its arguments and its history. You might be taught about the founders of the religion or the different sects that grew and waned over time. However, at no point is it incumbent upon the professor to make you an adherent of said religion. A course in comparative religion is not designed to make you religious, it is designed to directly impart knowledge about religions to you. And how does one best communicate this kind of knowledge? By plainly laying out the facts. Direct communication functions in this basic manner, that it sticks to objective and factual information and tries to communicate it as clearly as possible.

Unfortunately, for Kierkegaard, the objective approach doesn't fully encapsulate everything that we want out of knowledge and truth. The objective approach is concerned with factual knowledge and direct communication, and thus is unable to communicate

something that might relate to or be dependent upon an individual. Climacus gives us the following situation,

“Suppose, then, that someone wanted to communicate the following conviction: truth is inwardness, objectively there is no truth, but the appropriation is the truth. Suppose he had enough zeal and enthusiasm to get it said, because when people heard it they would be saved. Suppose he said it on every occasion and moved not only those who sweat easily but also the tough people – what then? Then there would certainly be some laborers who had been standing idle in the marketplace and only upon hearing this call would go forth to work in the vineyard – to proclaim this teaching to all people. And what then? Then he would have contradicted himself even more.”⁷⁵

The application of inwardness is not contained within the objective approach and thus I cannot communicate it directly. Inwardness and appropriation relate to one’s ability to apply ideas to their own lives and become changed individuals. An explanation of the concept of inwardness would fall under the objective approach, but ostensibly, one’s desire for inwardness is not mere knowledge of a concept, but instead is a desire that drives one to engender inwardness for oneself. The communication of that kind of practical application falls outside the realm of the objective, for it will both depend upon and be different for each individual. Thus, the limit of the objective approach demonstrates the need for a different kind of knowledge.

The objective approach also is unable to fulfill the promise that it holds concerning reliability. We like objective knowledge and objective truth because they are not dependent upon any individual and thus are reliable and constant. Climacus draws this into question with a wonderful little parable about a lunatic. Someone is able to escape from an insane asylum and decides to head to the nearby town. However, this lunatic is sane enough to realize that everyone will recognize him as belonging in the

⁷⁵ Ibid 77

insane asylum and thus he will be returned. So, he decides to that he will demonstrate his sanity to everyone by stating something that is objectively true. He takes a ball and puts it in his coat tails, and with every step that he takes, the ball hits him and he announces, “Boom! The earth is round.” Climacus writes, “But is the earth not round? Does the madhouse demand yet another sacrifice on account of this assumption, as in those days when everyone assumed it to be as flat as a pancake? Or is he lunatic, the man who hopes to prove that he is not lunatic by stating a truth universally accepted and universally regarded as objective?”⁷⁶ The insane man’s inability to recognize the proper way in which he should relate to an objective truth is what demonstrates his insanity. The lunatic is indeed correct that the earth is round, but by failing to recognize the proper place for that truth and the proper way that we should relate to that truth, he demonstrates his insanity. Such a truth belongs in a geology or astronomy classroom and it should help inform us in our scientific understanding of the world. It does not, contrary to the lunatic’s assumption, demonstrate that one is not insane. Yet, the claim of insanity is precisely what the objective approach makes of the subjective approach. “But the objective way is of the opinion that it has a security that the subjective way does not have. It is of the opinion that it avoids a danger that lies in wait for the subjective way, and at its maximum that danger is madness. In a solely subjective definition of truth, lunacy and truth are ultimately indistinguishable, because they may both have inwardness.”⁷⁷ The objective approach likes to point out that the solely subjective approach is identical to madness, for truth just becomes whatever anyone says it is. However, the parable tries to point out that a solely objective approach does something

⁷⁶ Ibid 195

⁷⁷ Ibid 194

similar to us, for only through the subjective approach to truth are we able to properly relate to the objective and thus avoid the madhouse. It is for these reasons that both approaches to truth are necessary for Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard sees nothing wrong with the study of Christian doctrine; his issue stems from the transformation of Christianity into merely a set of doctrines. In that sense, we must strive to keep Christianity from becoming something that is only objective, and instead need to focus on the subjective approach to Christianity. The objective does not give us what Kierkegaard wants; it does not make us Christians. Instead, we have to adopt a subjective approach if we want to properly relate to the objective truth in the way that the escaped lunatic was unable to.

Recognizing the value and importance of the subjective approach is paramount specifically because Climacus thinks that Christianity is essentially subjective. He gives a short example to argue this conclusion:

“If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God, the house of the true God, and prays, but prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol – where, then, is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God although he is worshipping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshipping an idol.”⁷⁸

For Climacus, the passionate approach to God is the correct one, even if something is amiss objectively. In the situation that he describes we have one individual who has the correct objectivity but is lacking subjectivity. Climacus concludes that this individual is idolatrous. The view of subjectivity that we get from Climacus is one of intense inwardness and appropriation, as we see in his example.⁷⁹ The individual whose eyes are

⁷⁸ Ibid 201

⁷⁹ Appropriation, for Kierkegaard, is the act by which one interacts with something and in doing so, shapes

resting on the idol, though it is an idol, has nonetheless appropriated the idea of his idol. He has been changed, both in person and in action, as demonstrated by the fact that his prayer is full of passion. Thus, the proper approach to Christianity is one full of “the passion of infinity.” Climacus wants us to approach God as individuals looking to be changed, fully desiring God and humbling ourselves before God. This radical kind of appropriation is what Climacus sees as the essence of Christianity as well as the essence of subjectivity, which is why we must approach Christianity subjectively. Christianity for Climacus consists of an individual standing before God and being conscious of their sin and guilt.⁸⁰ Accomplishing this requires us to humble ourselves before God and be transformed. This kind of action is not the mere acceptance of the doctrine of sin, but instead a kind of re-orienting of the self. If Kierkegaard wants to bring forth the Christian in his audience, then teaching them the correct doctrine will not suffice, for Christianity is a re-orienting of the self, not a mere agreement with doctrine. Thus, with Kierkegaard’s religious goals in mind, we recognize that Kierkegaard must engender subjectivity.

Climacus further demonstrates the need for the subjective approach when he directly compares it to the objective approach. “To objective reflection, truth becomes something objective, an object, and the point is to disregard the subject. To subjective reflection, truth becomes appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the point is to immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity.”⁸¹ The goal of Christianity is not to demonstrate something factual. Instead, Christianity is aimed at making disciples, making individuals into certain kinds of people. This is the problem for the objective approach,

it to oneself, taking it inward and making it apart of oneself.

⁸⁰ This is developed by Climacus in CUP 581-586.

⁸¹ Ibid 192

for the objective approach wants to rid us of the person, as the individual only gets in the way of the objective. Thus, Christianity has a need for the subjective. Climacus highlights this when he writes, “The way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something. The way to the objective truth goes away from the subject.”⁸² Kierkegaard’s Christianity is built on this subjective approach, on putting the single individual before God. It is for this reason that he must employ the style of communication that is ultimately tied to the subjective approach to truth, indirect communication.

However, it is important to remember that for Climacus and Kierkegaard, the objective approach isn’t meaningless or unimportant, nor is it separated from the subjective approach. Kierkegaard spends a great deal of time explaining objective truths that relate to Christianity. Ideally, we should be subjectively oriented towards these objective truths. It’s true that Climacus claims that the subjective is more important than the objective when it comes to Christianity, but that’s not to say that the objective is irrelevant. Rather, we should be subjectively oriented towards the objective truth. This overlap of subjectivity and objectivity is somewhat paradoxical, as we are taking two uniquely different approaches to truth simultaneously, but Kierkegaard refers to Christianity as a paradox, and so is right at home with such a claim.

The recognition that the truth of Christianity requires the subjective approach immediately puts upon us the idea that the truth of Christianity also requires indirect communication. Climacus also comes to this conclusion in the Postscript as soon as he establishes that truth, specifically Christian truth, is subjectivity. He writes,

⁸² Ibid 193

“When I had comprehended this, it also became clear to me that if I wanted to communicate anything about this, the main point must be that my presentation would be made in an *indirect* form. That is, if inwardness is truth, results are nothing but junk with which we should not bother one another, and wanting to communicate results is an unnatural association of one person with another, inasmuch as every human being is spirit and truth is the self-activity of appropriation, which a result hinders.”⁸³

If the truth of Christianity is ultimately subjectivity, inwardness, and appropriation as Climacus claims, the only way that such a truth could be communicated would be through indirect communication. Thus, if Kierkegaard desires to not only teach his readers about true Christianity, but also wants to make them into Christians, he must employ indirect communication in his works.

The necessity of indirect communication for Kierkegaard also fits into the teacher/learner problem that was discussed in the previous chapter. Lane writes, “Indirect communication is required because the teacher is not The Teacher (only God can do this) but a fellow pupil (something the pupil must also know).”⁸⁴ God does not need to indirectly communicate, for God has the power to change the heart of an individual. Kierkegaard does not possess such a power, to his dismay I’m sure. Viewed from the standpoint of God as The Teacher, both Kierkegaard and his audience are learners. Given this kind of epistemic equality, Kierkegaard can only bring about change through the use of indirect communication, through trying to bring inwardness to his readers. Kierkegaard needs to engender the kind of inwardness and appropriation (subjectivity) that will be needed for the individual to be willing to put in the effort required for salvation.⁸⁵ The teacher is the one who brings objectivity, who increases knowledge. As a

⁸³ Ibid 242

⁸⁴ Lane 110

⁸⁵ As I established in chapter one, for Kierkegaard the goal is always the religious, of which the ultimate end is salvation. This project is not primarily concerned with soteriology, and thus I won’t be focusing

fellow pupil, Kierkegaard can only act towards increasing our motivations and our ability to apply what The Teacher has taught us.

The necessity of indirect communication also arises when we examine what Strawser calls “the problem of language.” Strawser quotes Kierkegaard at length in drawing his conclusions.

In a rich draft of Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard concisely states what he more gradually develops in the text.

Immediately, then, everything is true; but can consciousness not remain in this immediacy? If this immediacy and that of animals were identical, then the question of consciousness would be canceled; but the consequence of that would be that a human being was an animal or that a human being was inarticulate. That which therefore cancels immediacy is language, if a person could not speak, he or she would remain in immediacy.

This, he thought, could be expressed thusly: immediacy is reality, language is ideality, as I speak I produce the contradiction. Thus, when I want to express sense perception, the contradiction is there, for what I say is something rather different than what I want to say. I cannot express reality in language, since to characterize it I use ideality, which is a contradiction, an untruth.

The possibility of doubt, then lies in the duplicity of consciousness (KW VII 255; JP III 2320; PIV B 14:6).

Here Kierkegaard broaches the problem of language, and his analysis may be interpreted as providing grounds for the rejection of a purely phenomenological language.^{86,87}

This problem of language provides the grounds for the necessity of indirect communication. Language cannot perfectly communicate reality, for reality is immediate while language is not. Direct communication has no hidden information; everything that is being communicated is laid out before the reader. Indirect communication, on the other

on what Kierkegaard thinks is required for salvation beyond what I’ve already established in chapter one. However, we must always remember that the ultimate goal of Kierkegaard’s work is for the religious to come forward.

⁸⁶ Michael Strawser 77.

⁸⁷ I ran into this text not by reading Strawser’s work, but by finding it in Daise, who provides the entirety of this quote as well.

hand, uses language, but does so not to impart a specific idea like direct communication does, but instead to present a certain possibility to the reader. Thus, if Kierkegaard is trying to communicate a human reality, he has to do so indirectly. This approach helps to engender immediacy because the reader is prompted to make a choice with respect to the possibility that has been presented. The language itself still cannot perfectly represent reality, but it can push the reader to exist in reality, by presenting him or her with a choice.

This ties in with other claims that Kierkegaard makes regarding possibility and actuality. Kierkegaard, as Climacus, writes, “But existence-actuality cannot be communicated, and the subjective thinker has his own actuality in his own ethical existence. If actuality is to be understood by a third party, it must be understood as possibility, and a communicator who is conscious of this will therefore see to it, precisely in order to be oriented to existence, that his existence-communication is in the form of possibility.”⁸⁸ Climacus recognizes here that existence-actuality cannot be communicated, though he doesn’t get into the problem of language here. Instead, he parses out the approach that needs to be taken by the individual who wants to communicate actuality. This kind of existence-communication, the communication of the idea of a type of personal existence, must be done as a possibility, as a hypothetical option that the reader can pursue. This framing lends itself to indirect communication as the ideal approach. If we are bringing forth an existence-communication as a message to be indirectly communicated, we should offer it up not as a brute fact of existence, for that would be a direct communication. Instead, we offer it up as a possibility, as a

⁸⁸ CUP 358

hypothetical, and thus offer it indirectly. By saying that Isaac could have replied in such and such manner, and that if he did such and such would be the consequences, we offer up a possible type of existence, one that invites the reader towards inwardness. Reading about this possible woman causes the reader to think about what it's like to exist as this possible woman, and thus inwardness and appropriation are achieved. In this way, when we examine the concept of language itself and how it relates to Kierkegaard's Christian goals, we recognize the need for indirect communication. This section has examined the difference between the objective and subjective approaches and tied those approaches to direct and indirect communication respectively. Having done so, I argued for the necessity of indirect communication, but have yet to address a more basic question: what is indirect communication?

Section 2: Speak if You Have Understanding

In contemporary philosophical literature, direct communication is the standard, as the purpose of the literature is to communicate a specific idea. Direct communication values clarity, a virtue of good philosophical prose. In this sense, what direct communication is working to accomplish is the dissemination of knowledge. You read Kant so that you can know about a priori intuitions, or Heidegger so that you can know about Dasein. So, direct communication is concerned with the transfer of information from one person or source to another. Ideally, nothing is lost in translation for a direct communication. Kierkegaard breaks the process down, writing, "When I think of communication, I think of four things: (1) Object (2) Communicator (3) Receiver (4) Communication."⁸⁹ If someone is using direct communication then the communicator

⁸⁹ Paperir VIII-2 B 83

and the receiver should possess the same object. If I directly communicate to you that gravity is one of the four fundamental forces of the universe, both you and I should possess the same piece of knowledge. Thus, it should not matter who the communicator or receivers are if the communication is direct and if the object is the type of thing that can be directly communicated (as we have seen, Kierkegaard thinks that the essential truth of Christianity does not fit this mold).

Kierkegaard strives to separate the two forms of communication by clarifying the content that suits each style of communication. He writes, "All communication of knowledge is direct communication. All communication of capability is indirect communication."⁹⁰ As Daise notes, this gives us a distinction between knowing and doing.⁹¹ Direct communication is linked to knowledge, information, facts, those types of content that we consider objective. Indirect communication, on the other hand, is linked to human capability. Capability here doesn't refer to what we as humans could achieve in some grand sense, but rather to the potential for human action. Indirect communication gives us possibilities, potentialities. This drives our actions as we see the possible things we can do and the possible people we can be. Thus, indirect communication is not merely trying to communicate an inert capability, but it is trying to activate one that already lies dormant within us. The communication of an existence-possibility, for instance, is not to inform the receiver of a possible way to be, but rather to motivate the receiver to try to exist as such. Thus, by inhabiting the existence-possibility, the individual has been moved to act by the indirect communication. So, while direct communication only gives us information which makes no necessary claims upon our existence or our actions,

⁹⁰ CUP 83

⁹¹ Daise 17

indirect communication makes claims on both.

Sometimes the distinction between direct and indirect communication is claimed to be their relationship to interpretation. Direct communication seems to close interpretation. If I directly communicate something to you, I'm trying to give you information clearly and precisely. To that end, interpretation can get in the way, for if my communication invites interpretation, then the content might change between the communicator and the receiver. However, Daise argues against this approach, demonstrating that it isn't the relation to interpretation that delineates direct communication from indirect communication. Referring to the one of the epigraphs that end the Exordiums in *Fear and Trembling*, Daise writes,

“The form of what we identify as a piece of indirect communication may be identical to a piece of direct communication. ‘When the child must be weaned, the mother blackens her breast’ may be a piece of indirect communication (an invitation to consider one’s relationship to a dependent person) or it may be a report of child-rearing practice. In one context, interpretation as factual presentation would be ludicrous; in another context, it would not. So it could not be the form that makes the difference.”⁹²

Though we might think of indirect communication as being something that invites interpretation, Daise argues that there seems to be no way to perfectly distinguish indirect communication from direct communication in that sense. Unless we are directed to interpret in a non-factual manner, we would not know whether interpretation should be open or closed, we can only make more or less informed guesses. The command to interpret factually would also run into the same problem though, and thus does not offer a useful solution to the problem. In certain contexts, interpreting non-factually might be sensible, but at no point do we have perfect access to the contextual situatedness of any

⁹² Ibid 30

statement. So Daise argues that we can't use the form of the communication to perfectly distinguish whether it is direct or indirect, as the form itself can work both ways.⁹³ In chapter three we will be examining the form of parable and arguing that it works well as a vehicle for indirect communication. However, the presence of a parable itself does not indicate that the communication is necessarily indirect. Maybe the common parable of the tortoise and the hare is just trying to communicate to us the relative speeds of tortoises and rabbits. Thus Daise argues that it is not possible to judge the style of communication based only on the form that the communication takes.

So how exactly can we identify something as an indirect communication versus a direct one? Daise cannot identify a singular principle which helps us do so and likens this distinction to the challenging prospect of distinguishing art and non-art. However, he does offer some possible clues that we might look for. He takes the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex* as a story about ignoring the hidden powers of the universe and an example of indirect communication. "The same kind of point might be made in a sermon or a lecture, and we would not be inclined to regard the sermon or lecture as a work of art. What is the difference?"⁹⁴ He points to the idea that the audience is "left to figure out" *Oedipus Rex* for themselves. The lecture tells one precisely what to think and tries to communicate the message as clearly as possible. But in the tragedy, there is not a clear message; it's not even obvious that there is a message at all. Daise continues with this idea, writing, "The dramatic works presents a possible world in which the audience might locate itself and which is such that the audience may feel more or less empathy towards each other,

⁹³ Form here refers to the overarching categorization that we might put a communication into, for example, a parable, fairy tale, or action movie.

⁹⁴ Ibid 31

themselves, and their circumstances, but there is typically no authoritative editorial voice that calls for a specific response.”^{95,96} The lack of an authoritative voice seems to point us in the direction of indirect communication, Daise argues. While it doesn’t provide a kind of litmus test, it does provide some evidence. The authoritative voice need not be an individual, either. Any kind of regulative ideal can function as an authoritative voice. So, in looking for something that counts as an indirect communication, Daise argues that we can find clues in texts that lack authoritative voices, and thus function as a kind of art in which the individual is left to decide for themselves both what it means and how to respond.⁹⁷

Kierkegaard, writing as Anti-Climacus in *Practice in Christianity*, seems to also take up the approach that choice is an important part of indirect communication. In a section entitled, “To Deny Direct Communication is to Require Faith,” Climacus writes, “There is no direct communication and no direct reception: there is a choice.”⁹⁸ And a little bit later, “Faith is a choice, certainly not direct reception – and the recipient is the one who is disclosed, whether he will believe or be offended.”⁹⁹ There are two important claims here. First, direct communication is antithetical to faith. This matches what was shown earlier in that direct communication is related to the objective approach, and Kierkegaard thinks that authentic Christianity requires the subjective. Here we see that taken a little further in that it’s not only authentic Christianity that doesn’t coincide with direct communication, but faith as a concept. The reason for this is the second important

⁹⁵ Ibid 31

⁹⁶ Daise seems to equate figuring out for oneself with the lack of an authoritative voice.

⁹⁷ Though all communications ultimately leave the decision of meaning and response to the receiver, indirect communications seem to do so intentionally.

⁹⁸ PIC 140

⁹⁹ Ibid 141

claim. Faith and direct communication are opposed to one another because faith requires choice. Direct communication tries to deny choice, and the point of direct communication and the objective approach is to remove the subjective from the situation. When examining indirect communication, however, choice becomes a central component. Indirect communication wants to engender choice in the receiver so that appropriation and inwardness can come forward. How exactly this process works is not something that Kierkegaard spells out for us, but is something that I will discuss in the next chapter when examining how parables function as forms of indirect communication. Nonetheless, we have a few distinct markers of indirect communication even if we do not possess a perfect test. If a communication both lacks an authoritative voice and presents us with possibilities that are designed to make us choose, we likely are dealing with an indirect communication.

In one of his later works, writing as Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard sheds a little light on the concept of indirect communication. Anti-Climacus writes,

“Indirect communication can be an art of communication in redoubling the communication; the art consists in making oneself, the communicator, into a nobody, purely objective, and then continually placing the qualitative opposites in a unity. This is what some pseudonymous writers are accustomed to calling the double-reflection of the communication. For example, it is indirect communication to place jest and earnestness together in such a way that the composite is a dialectical knot – and then to be a nobody oneself. If anyone wants to have anything to do with this kind of communication, he will have to untie the knot himself.”¹⁰⁰

Here we see Anti-Climacus putting forward two aspects of indirect communication. The first aspect consists of creating something relatively opaque, for instance putting jest and earnestness together. This opacity stems from the opposite natures that jest and

¹⁰⁰ PIC 133

earnestness possess. The second aspect is to then disappear, as an author, so that the context of the writing is missing. In this type of a situation the receiver is left with two options, either to ignore the passage or to untie the knot. Thus, the successful indirect communication seeks to draw the receiver towards the untying. Anti-Climacus also goes on to describe a second way in which indirect communication can appear. He writes,

“But indirect communication can also appear in another way, through the relation between the communication and the communicator. The communicator is present here, whereas in the first instance he was left out, yet, please note, by way of a negative reflection. But our age actually knows no other kind of communication than that mediocre method of dialecticizing. What it means to exist has been completely forgotten. Any communication concerning existing requires a communicator: in other words, the communicator is the reduplication of the communication; to exist in what one understands is to reduplicate. But this communication still cannot be called indirect communication just because there is a communicator who himself exists in what he communicates. If, however, the communicator himself is dialectically defined and his own being is based on reflection, then all direct communication is impossible.”¹⁰¹

This second kind of indirect communication is the communication of something that is a part of the communicator. Poole explains this quite well when he writes,

“Reduplication is different in kind from doubled reflection. Doubled reflection implies a gap between the author who writes and the work that he is writing. It indicated a dialectical relationship between them and emphasizes the fact that the communicator is not, except in a joking sense, present in what he writes. Reduplication is, however, quite different and implies that the communicator and the communication are one and the same... to reduplicate is to exist in what one understands.”¹⁰²

And later,

“What was noncommitted becomes committed; what was aesthetic and ironic becomes exposed and dangerous; what was merely intellectual becomes lived.”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ PIC 134

¹⁰² Poole 257

¹⁰³ Ibid 257

Anti-Climacus remarks that the God-man, Jesus Christ, used this kind of communication. Christ is trying to communicate his existence to his followers, but he cannot merely directly state, “I am the Lord your God” and communicate it in such a manner. That type of communication might functionally work for an impersonal conception of God, but not for the God-man, the Christ. The God-man is already defined in existence for his followers know him. They know him as a human being who eats and sleeps and talks to them. Thus, for him to state that he is God causes a contradiction, for one seemingly cannot be both human and God. This dialectical relationship, therefore is necessarily a part of his communications and thus he cannot communicate directly. This, as Anti-Climacus says, forces a choice on those around him: to believe or not to believe. With Kierkegaard’s words in mind, and in order to better understand them, let us examine the approaches to indirect communication that different scholars give us.

Poole points to a single quote of Kierkegaard’s as the central statement of what indirect communication is. “Inwardness cannot be communicated directly, because expressing it directly is externality (oriented outwardly, not inwardly), and expressing inwardness directly is no proof at all that it is there (the direct outpouring of feeling is no proof at all that one has it, but the tension of the contrastive form is the dynamometer of inwardness).”¹⁰⁴ Thus Poole looks at indirect communication as creating a kind of tension that causes inwardness. Again, this does not help us identify an indirect communication as such, but it does help us recognize the fruits of its labor. Poole goes on to identify two ways in which indirect communication creates this kind of a tension. The first is a tension that the author puts into the work itself. Poole describes this as a kind of “aesthetic”

¹⁰⁴ CUP 260

tension.¹⁰⁵ The idea here is that the author creates a work the meaning of which the receiver is unable to discern. There is a kind of play or doubleness in effect that obstructs the receiver from directly apprehending the meaning of the work. Using Kierkegaard's terminology, Poole refers to this as double reflection. "It is, in few words, a question of aesthetics, a manipulation of model away from meaning, a holding apart signifier and signified."¹⁰⁶ So the first kind of tension that we see occurs when the communication itself is intentionally made opaque by the communicator. This correlates with the first aspect of the first kind of indirect communication that was mentioned just above. When we add to this the absence of an author, and thus the absence of an authoritative voice, we get the first kind of indirect communication, that which comes forward in double reflection.

Daise takes a different approach. He examines indirect communication as a communication of capability, as was mentioned above. If direct communication communicates factual knowledge and indirect communication communicates human capability, then we seem to have a working definition in hand. Daise argues that we shouldn't read this as being the imparting of an ability. When we speak of communicating capability, we might mean that the receiver is gaining access to some ability that they did not previously possess. Daise thinks that this would be a mistaken approach, citing Kierkegaard's papers, "The ethical must be communicated as an art, because everyone knows it."¹⁰⁷ This would imply that the receiver already possesses what the communicator is trying to communicate. In that sense the receiver is not gaining some

¹⁰⁵ Poole 159

¹⁰⁶ Ibid 159

¹⁰⁷ Papirer VIII-2 B, 81, 13

new ability as we might imagine the communication of capability would imply. Instead, Daise claims, “I have been led away from talking about communication of capability as aiming at inducement of action to talking about it as inducement to adopting some sense of oneself, from which some unspecified conduct would flow.”¹⁰⁸ Daise’s point is that indirect communication doesn’t give us anything new, but rather that it re-orient us towards a certain capability that we already possessed. For instance, one might have learned a musical instrument as a child and then forgotten their musical abilities. To communicate capability in this situation wouldn’t be to somehow make that individual good at playing the piano; instead it would be to bring forward the piano player already present in the individual and thus bring forth a skill that was already present by re-orienting the individual. This might remind us of Socrates’ theory of recollection that gets put forward in the *Meno*, where learning is simply remembering things that our soul already knows so that Socrates merely needs to ask the right questions to prompt recollection. With indirect communication, the communicator needs not to impart new information or new abilities to the receiver, but instead needs to turn the receiver towards that which they already possess. Mackey also takes this approach, writing, “The success of an indirect communication depends upon its capability to awaken in the recipient an awareness that the possibilities it objectifies – alluring, exciting, or frightening – are his own.”¹⁰⁹

This all leads Daise to conclude that Kierkegaard wants indirect communication to lead his readers into a kind of freedom. He writes,

“If the communicator is successful, the receiver acts without first reflecting. Kierkegaardian indirect communication, or rather, indirect communication as

¹⁰⁸ Daise 20

¹⁰⁹ Mackey 293

used by Kierkegaard, aims at shaping the world in such a way that each recipient of the communication is fundamentally free to choose to shape the world as one sees fit. In fact, if the effort is successful, the receiver comes to see that one *must* choose.”¹¹⁰

While I follow Daise’s construction of the concept of indirect communication up to this point, he seems mistaken in his understanding of its goals. Kierkegaard spells out on a number of occasions what he wants his writing to accomplish and thus while it is true that Kierkegaard wants to force his audience to choose, he is not merely interested in this choice for its own sake. Rather, the choice that Kierkegaard wants to put in front of his readers is that of authentic Christianity. Kierkegaard does not want the receiver “to see that one must choose,” but rather for the receiver to actually choose. He is not aimed at a kind of epistemic positioning on the part of the receiver, but instead at a crisis of the will. His goal isn’t fundamental freedom but fear and trembling before God. Thus, while I follow much of Daise’s work on constructing an understanding of indirect communication as a concept, I break with him on his application of that concept to Kierkegaard’s own works and goals.

In addition, Daise’s earlier argument against the form being the recognizable aspect of the indirect communication seemed to neglect the position of the author. Daise neglected the authorial aspect of double reflection, the situation in which the author is “a nobody.” So Daise seems to be correct in that the form itself is insufficient, for a changing context could make something direct in one situation and indirect in another. However, he fails to take into account the possibility of communicating something in such a way that its context is manipulated. As I described in the previous chapter, Kierkegaard went to great lengths to try to ensure that no one would know him as the

¹¹⁰ Daise 25-26

author of his pseudonymous works. Besides publishing them under a different name, he held to a specific publishing schedule and spent time out in public doing his best to assuage any suspicions. This is the second aspect of double reflection. When the author is separated from the work, the work loses much of its context. If I know nothing about Johannes Climacus, I should not assume his intentions for writing or necessarily connect him with any school of thought. Instead, I have to let the words on the page do all of the speaking. Lacking context, the receiver is unable to identify a communication as direct or indirect, which itself makes the case for its being an indirect communication in that it will then elicit, if successful, a capability from the receiver: the ability to appropriate. This kind of inwardness and appropriation is precisely what Kierkegaard defines as being paradigmatic of the indirect and subjective approach on a number of occasions.

An issue that Poole has, as we will come to see, is that in his overall analysis of Kierkegaard, he only seems to take the second kind of indirect communication, redoubling, seriously. As I examine in the next section, Poole's entire interpretive apparatus is built on an examination of Kierkegaard's personal life and thus Poole seeks to locate the works of Kierkegaard in his life situations. By doing so, Poole is certainly looking for reduplication, the communication of something that for the writer is a lived existence. Finding the connections between Kierkegaard's works and his love of Regine Olsen, or his spat with the *Corsair* can do much to enrich our understanding of his works, but it certainly should not define our entire understanding of his works. Poole ends up interpreting the redoubling aspect of Kierkegaard's works too intensely and in doing so seems to neglect the double reflective aspects, that is, the parts of Kierkegaard's works for which an authoritative voice is absent and thus the reader is having to untie the knot

made from jest and earnestness for him or herself. It is this aspect of Kierkegaard's works that I will primarily engage throughout this work.

As I worked to establish in Chapter One, Christianity does not function as a set of doctrines for Kierkegaard, but rather as something individual, as a certain kind of existence. As Climacus writes, "Christianity is not a doctrine but an existence-contradiction and an existence-communication."¹¹¹ As several of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms have suggested, direct communication cannot communicate an existence, for doing so requires inwardness, which is the realm of indirect communication.¹¹² For this reason, numerous scholars recognize the necessity of indirect communication for Christianity. Lane sets this up by examining the function of something like apologetics for Kierkegaard. If the goal is to persuade others of the truth of authentic Christianity, Lane argues that apologetics is rather meaningless.¹¹³ Lane writes, "Kierkegaard seems to say that it is either useless to argue for faith (because the argument will not bring faith) or unnecessary for one who has faith. The Kierkegaardian argument against the kind of position held by Evans is that it seems to want to put a net under the venture of faith – to get rid of the risk."¹¹⁴ Apologetics wants to reassure our reason that Christianity is an acceptable venture, but that seems to deny the paradox of faith. Faith and Christianity, as characterized by Kierkegaard, exist as paradoxes that require risk on the part of the believer to be accepted. In *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham is portrayed as the paradigm of faith because he believes that Isaac will not be taken from him, despite having no good

¹¹¹ CUP 379-380

¹¹² This can be understood as being unable to communicate what it is to exist in a certain way. I cannot directly communicate to you what it is to be me, for understanding what it is to exist as Russell Hamer requires inwardness.

¹¹³ Lane argues this in contrast to Evans, who examines much of Kierkegaard's works through the lens of rational Christian apologetics.

¹¹⁴ Lane 89

reason to believe so. Reason would dictate that Isaac will be sacrificed, for God has commanded it, yet Abraham believes otherwise and nonetheless obeys God. Faith for Kierkegaard is not necessarily antithetical to reason, but it certainly goes beyond reason. To this end, apologetics does not provide an individual with faith, for apologetics only speaks to our reason. Apologetics would function as a kind of direct communication, a setting forward of arguments that are designed to be logically valid and sound in order to convince someone of their truth.

But this is not Kierkegaard's Christianity, for Christianity requires the communication of an existence. This is not to imply that Christianity lacks intellectual content. Climacus writes, "Furthermore, to say that Christianity is empty of content because it is not a doctrine is only chicanery."¹¹⁵ Christianity for Climacus functions not as a set of doctrines, but it nonetheless has intellectual content. Daise describes this as a situation in which Christianity functions as a kind of regulative ideal.¹¹⁶ Authentic Christianity makes claims upon our individual existence that require us to *be* a certain kind of thing. Thus, Christianity requires us to exist in a specific way. This approach gives Christianity content, for there exist regulations and directives that guide us. However, the function of these regulations and directives is not for us to understand, but for us to act. Therefore, while there is intellectual content, the content is there for the purpose of action, of redirecting our individual existence. If Christianity functions in this manner, indirect communication is a necessity in order to bring about this regulative ideal.

¹¹⁵ Ibid 380

¹¹⁶ Daise 82

Section 3: To Believe or Not To Believe

Understanding the necessity of indirect communication leaves us with two things: a recognition of the relationship between Christianity and certain kinds of communication, and an awareness of the fact that, given his admitted goals, Kierkegaard is committed to the use of indirect communication in his own works, for he is trying to bring about authentic Christianity in his audience. Accepting that at least some of Kierkegaard's written works are intended to be indirect communications leaves us, as scholars, in a tricky situation in that the scholarly reading of a work is usually a disinterested reading. To that extent, the scholar struggles to recognize indirect communication by its effect on the reader because the scholar is striving to be unaffected. If we interpret everything as indirect communication, then we cannot even take seriously Kierkegaard's doctrine of indirect communication, for if such a thing is being communicated indirectly to us, its purpose is to change us as individuals and not to inform us of some piece of knowledge. If we reject any of it as indirect communication, then Kierkegaard seems completely unable to accomplish his stated goals. This leads us to the question of whether or not we can take Kierkegaard seriously. Maybe his whole authorship consists of jokes made at the expense of Danish Hegelians. Given that we cannot identify indirect communication based solely on its form, as Daise argued above, we are left in interpretative limbo. It is precisely this limbo that has driven Poole to argue that Kierkegaard's works cannot be interpreted. In response to this, Tietjen has attempted to develop a hermeneutics of trust when it comes to Kierkegaard's authorship. In this section, I'm going to examine both approaches so that we can seek to understand the interpretive stance that we must take towards Kierkegaard's works, given that they are at

least on occasion indirect communications meant to reorient us towards Christianity on an individual level.

In his book, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, Poole presents his argument for why we cannot come up with a definitive interpretation of Kierkegaard's works. Overall he claims that Kierkegaard's ironic style, his use of pseudonyms, and his indirect communication, make it so that we can't tell what Kierkegaard himself thinks. Instead, we can only come up with disjointed views about certain small bits of text, but no grand overarching understanding of Kierkegaard as an author. Poole points to a number of reasons for this. First, we have Kierkegaard's use of irony. Examining Kierkegaard's dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, Poole writes,

“To revert, then, to the opening problem, which is the sense in which traditional readings of the dissertation have always seemed in the end to run up against some kind of fundamental unsayability in their task, might it not turn out to be the case that the reason for their discomfiture lies in the fact that *The Concept of Irony* is a piece of writing? It is not, in the usual academic sense, a piece of research, a piece of explanation, or a piece of careful exposition that shows the candidate has mastered all primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. It is a piece of *writing*. That, of course, was what the examiners were not expecting. And since it is a piece of writing, *The Concept of Irony* takes great pleasure in subverting the assumptions in the reader's mind.”¹¹⁷

“The Hegelian layout of the dissertation was meant to fox the original academic examiners, and it has succeeded in foxing most academic readers ever since. The work is about irony. True, the subtitle reads: “with Constant Reference to Socrates.” Nevertheless, the work itself is *about* irony, and, given the Romantic context in which both writer and readers of the 1841 dissertation were confined (Schlegel, Schleiermacher), it is surely to be expected that a work so titled will itself be ironic.”¹¹⁸

Poole examines Kierkegaard's work and finds it full of irony, which is ironic given its topic. Poole argues that instead of an explanation of irony and how irony worked for

¹¹⁷ Poole 48

¹¹⁸ Ibid 49

Socrates, Kierkegaard has entire sections that seem to be nonsense, or which create such a spectacle that no one can disagree with them without looking foolish. Thus, Poole thinks that Kierkegaard's dissertation is not itself a work of philosophy, but a work of ironic writing. If this is the case, then seemingly we cannot come up with a solid interpretation of what Kierkegaard is doing. It is unclear if sometimes Kierkegaard is defining irony in earnest or if he is doing so in jest. Some of his sections might represent his authentic approach, but others might represent a subversion of the Hegelian approach of his readers. If the work were philosophical at heart, then we should be able to use the bits of irony that show up here and there to assist our understanding of the concepts that are being explicated. However, Poole argues that it is clearly not a piece of philosophy, but a piece of writing, that is, something designed and written entirely for the purpose of playing with his readers. Poole writes, "The difficulty involved in coming to the plain sense of *The Concept of Irony* is that Kierkegaard has taken a great deal of trouble to make sure that there is no plain sense to be had."¹¹⁹ From Poole's point of view, Kierkegaard does this intentionally. Kierkegaard did not get along very well with some of his dissertation readers and was openly disdainful of their Hegelian approaches, and thus Poole's claim is that he wrote a dissertation that is impossible to interpret, as a final prank to pull on them, in a sense.

The issue of irony is not limited to Kierkegaard's dissertation, however. While the dissertation is certainly an extreme example, we run into the problem of interpretation whenever we encounter irony, as Muench pointed out above. Even when we examine works like *Fragments* or *Postscript*, we see plenty of irony afloat. So, we are constantly,

¹¹⁹ Ibid 47

as readers, in the position of having to determine what is irony and what is not, and how far to take the irony. If we try to read Kierkegaard as an honest writer, we will end up accepting as true claims that he intended to only be ironical. If we approach Kierkegaard with distrust, then we will take claims as irony that he intended truthfully. This leaves the reader in the unfortunate position of never knowing exactly what Kierkegaard is trying to communicate, and thus unable to interpret with any semblance of precision.

This inability to determine authorial intent extends beyond irony as well. Poole examines Quidam's Diary, a section in *Stages on Life's Way*. Poole claims that the Diary is both "tasteless and boring" and that the first person to translate it into English, Walter Lowrie, shared similar sentiments. However, Poole claims that to thus assume that the Diary lacks useful content or that it fails as a piece of writing, is to assume normative authorial intent. Usually, philosophical authors want to persuade their audience of the same position that they hold and are writing about. However, in reference to Quidam's Diary, Poole writes,

"There was no place to write from, there was nothing to be remembered, without pain, of the past, and there was nothing to look forward to. The engagement to Regine was broken off. The plan to convince her that he was a trifler had to continue its hopeless path. There was nothing to do except kill time, and filling the page with the flow of consciousness is the best way to do that. The consciousness is, yes, not very attractive, but then the book was not written to place the author in an attractive light, but rather to fuel the rumor that Magister Kierkegaard was unattractive and insensitive. Lowrie is attesting rather to the success of Kierkegaard's writing plan than of its failure."¹²⁰

Poole maintains that it was Kierkegaard's goal to produce a work that was boring, meaningless, and that painted Kierkegaard himself in a poor light. Kierkegaard intended to characterize himself in an unattractive manner so that he would appear so to Regine

¹²⁰ Ibid 109

Olsen, his ex-fiancée. When life issues such as these can enter into an author's works, it causes an added layer of interpretation. Is Kierkegaard writing for Regine? Did he happen to have a poorly written book? Is it intentionally poorly written? The audience cannot absolutely determine the answers to these questions. Lacking a methodology or framework with which to approach the work, Poole argues that we cannot provide a singular authoritative interpretation, for the work itself eludes such an interpretation. Thus, we run into issues relating to authorial intent both in situations in which Kierkegaard employs the use of irony as well as situations in which Kierkegaard is publishing for reasons related to his personal life versus his philosophical interests. Since there is often no way to determine if something is or is not irony, or if Kierkegaard is writing for personal reasons or not, Poole claims that we are left in interpretation purgatory, unable to advance.

Poole adds in a third problem with interpretation; Kierkegaard published many of his works pseudonymously. On a number of occasions, Kierkegaard stresses that the viewpoints of his pseudonyms should not be confused with his own viewpoints.¹²¹ So when we examine the pseudonymous works, we are faced with a seeming inability to attribute any of the claims to Kierkegaard himself. Poole examines the language that's used and claims that the pseudonymous works are not merely a matter of assigning a fake name to a book, but that they are written in entirely different voices. He writes, "Yet it is not the voice of Soren Kierkegaard himself. To check that out, one has only to compare his *First and Last Declaration* with the *Appendix for an Understanding with the Reader* with which Johannes Climacus signs off. The two tones are incompatible, dissimilar to

¹²¹ We see comments along these lines for instance on POV 17, 24, and 31.

the point of alienation. No, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is not by Soren Kierkegaard himself as Walter Lowrie informs us.”¹²² By looking at the word choice, the tone, and the language used, Poole argues that the pseudonyms are quite clearly different individuals writing from different viewpoints. Thus, Poole claims that we cannot mistake Climacus for Kierkegaard because Climacus does not write like Kierkegaard, nor does he always present viewpoints that Kierkegaard would agree with. Instead, when Kierkegaard writes as Climacus, he seems to be adopting an entire identity and one that is dissimilar to his own. Poole goes on to claim that this problem has partly arisen because we read multiple texts that are all translated by the same individual who has adopted certain conventions when translating. The conventions tend to remain consistent across works, which oftentimes obscures the unique tones of each work and each pseudonym. Poole instead wants us to read the pseudonyms as Kierkegaard asked us to, as possibilities. Poole claims that reading the pseudonyms as possibilities complicates our ability to interpret Kierkegaard, as the possibilities all become something like thought experiments. We might be able to interpret a work within itself, but lacking any kind of authorial intent or authoritative voice, Poole thinks that we have to make do entirely with the text itself and the context that it provides. We are still unable to draw on or compare with any of the other pseudonymous works to help us understand. Thus, our third interpretive problem lies with the pseudonyms.

The fourth, and final problem that Poole examines when trying to interpret Kierkegaard’s works relates to his doctrine of indirect communication and his personal life. As has been mentioned, part of Kierkegaard’s plan involved the distance from the

¹²² Ibid 143

texts that he intentionally created for himself as the author. By spending time around town, by looking like a “trifler”, by publishing according to a very specific plan, Kierkegaard worked to problematize any kind of authorial voice in his pseudonymous works. As was mentioned above, indirect communication seems to require the lack of an authoritative voice, and as Kierkegaard mentioned in *Practice in Christianity*, the author needs to “be a nobody”. However, when the *Corsair* affair happens, Kierkegaard is no longer afforded this luxury. The *Corsair* affair consisted of a rather public interaction between Kierkegaard and a weekly satirical publication named *The Corsair*. Kierkegaard wrote some articles attacking the *Corsair* and inviting them to attack him in response. Instead of engaging him on an intellectual or witty level, as he seemingly had hoped, the *Corsair* published a number of caricatures of Kierkegaard. These comics significantly altered Kierkegaard’s public life, making him a constant object of ridicule. He eventually refused to spend much time in public and took trips out into the countryside just so that he could leave his house without being harassed.¹²³ All of this leaves us with a predicament: Kierkegaard can no longer be a nobody. Poole argues that the *Corsair* affair thrust Kierkegaard into the public spotlight in such a way that he could no longer play the games that created distance between himself and his pseudonyms. If indirect communication requires, as he claims in *Practice in Christianity*, the authors nonexistence in relationship to the text, then Kierkegaard’s indirect approach becomes problematized by the *Corsair* affair. Indeed, much of Kierkegaard scholarship currently focuses on the connection between Kierkegaard’s personal life and his writings. Thus, Kierkegaard seemingly cannot indirectly communicate with us, for he is not a nobody

¹²³ This is chronicled in much greater detail in Poole 188-199.

with relationship to his writings.

All of this leads Poole to conclude that Kierkegaard's works cannot be interpreted in any meaningful manner. Given these multiple problems, Poole claims that Kierkegaard merely wants to invite us to participate, to interpret. Poole continues this line of thought, claiming that these interpretations are entirely subjective, as Kierkegaard has structured his writings so that no definitive interpretation can come forward. Thus, Poole thinks that we can only engage the text and can move no further. Poole argues that this is intentional on the part of Kierkegaard and that thus we cannot even look to Kierkegaard's journals or personal writings for clues as to how we should interpret his pseudonymous works. Instead, we are left only in an interpretive haze, unable to produce a workable interpretation of the works but simultaneously invited to continually interpret. Poole claims, "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."¹²⁴

Poole's work is useful for us in that it takes very seriously Kierkegaard's claim that we should not mix up Kierkegaard with his pseudonyms. Poole's approach helps us recognize the distance between the different pseudonyms and between the pseudonyms and Kierkegaard. Poole does a good job demonstrating the multitude of ways that a straightforward reading of Kierkegaard's works is problematic and why we have to take the doctrine of indirect communication into account at all times when we are trying to interpret Kierkegaard. That said, Poole also takes things too far on a number of occasions. His conclusion is that no good interpretations of Kierkegaard are possible, but

¹²⁴ Poole 7

this seems far too extreme given his evidence. Certainly there will be doubt in our interpretations, and it is unlikely that we can ever truly know what Kierkegaard thought, but that does not prevent us, as scholars, from coming up with better or worse interpretations of Kierkegaard's various concepts and works, pseudonymous or otherwise. The absence of a perfectly definitive reading of an author does not imply that our readings and interpretations will be entirely subjective. Interestingly enough, while Poole consistently claims that we do not have access to the real Kierkegaard, he claims multiple times to have just that. Poole argues, on a number of occasions, that Kierkegaard is intending to write works that defy interpretation and thus cannot be meaningfully mined for philosophical content. So, Poole is claiming that we cannot know the mind of Kierkegaard, and he circularly builds his argument on his own ideas about the mind of Kierkegaard. It is against this overarching approach to Kierkegaard's works that we see Tietjen respond. In his approach, we see Tietjen raise a number of these criticisms, working to establish that the doctrine of indirect communication does not prevent us from meaningfully interpreting Kierkegaard.

Tietjen works against Poole's reading of Kierkegaard, and specifically against his claim that we cannot interpret Kierkegaard. Tietjen claims that much of Poole's work is based on faulty reasoning. Looking at Poole's overall project Tietjen writes,

“[Poole's] reasoning rests largely on a false dilemma: *either* take seriously Kierkegaard's use of indirect communication, commonly taken to include devices such as irony and pseudonymity, *or* read him 'on religious grounds,' as edifying or as having a serious message to convey through the pseudonyms. Poole claims that those who look for edifying purpose in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous literature read him bluntly; though in the end I contend that it is Poole's reading that is blunt given its narrow understanding of what constitutes an indirect communication.”¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Tietjen 18

Tietjen thinks that Poole takes an overly narrow view of the ways in which we can read Kierkegaard. Much of Poole's attack on definitive interpretations was based on Kierkegaard's use of indirect communication in his writings, but Tietjen argues that Poole doesn't fully understand the doctrine of indirect communication. As Poole claims that other philosophers have read Kierkegaard bluntly, as if he is any other regular philosopher, Tietjen seems to attack Poole claiming that he is reading Kierkegaard bluntly by treating him in the way that a literary critic would and deconstructing the authorship. Tietjen claims that this reading runs contrary to much of what Kierkegaard is doing. We see Kierkegaard clarifying what an authentic Christian is while he simultaneously tries to motivate that authenticity in his readers.¹²⁶ But this would mean that Kierkegaard has at least some specific goals and clear doctrines, something that Poole argues against. Thus, Tietjen's task is twofold: first to break apart Poole's reading of Kierkegaard and demonstrate that it is problematic, and second to build up an interpretive methodology that allows us to understand Kierkegaard's works.

Poole, in an essay, argues that examining a few stories written by William James can help us understand how we should read Kierkegaard.¹²⁷ In one story a novelist claims that a secret message is hidden throughout his works. Poole takes this as inspiration for how we should read Kierkegaard's works, *Fear and Trembling*, to be specific. Tietjen examines two different ideas that Poole derives from this situation. First, the hidden message could not be revealed by the novelist, and second, no message can ever be legitimately derived from a work of literature. However, Tietjen points out that Poole

¹²⁶ A brief outline of this was given in chapter 1, though a full explanation of it would be the entire subject of a different project than the one I am attempting here, and thus I must broadly bracket this.

¹²⁷ This occurs in Roger Poole, "Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading: How to Read and Why"

does not examine *Fear and Trembling* in order to discover if there exists a hidden message. Instead he assumes that one is already there.¹²⁸ This assumption is something that ends up being somewhat endemic to Poole's work, in Tietjen's opinion. As Tietjen later notes, "it is questionable whether one may appropriately collect a smattering of quotations from a text, assemble them, and draw inferences from them."¹²⁹ Poole provides no evidence that a secret message exists in *Fear and Trembling* and instead gives us an interpretive lens first. Once we have the lens he then examines the text to see how certain quotes and sections might lend towards some kind of hidden message.

Tietjen recognizes the possibility of a more charitable reading of Poole that might come from the phrase written by Climacus, "subjectivity is truth." Thus, the charitable reading of Poole is that he is pointing out how there is probably an idea that Kierkegaard is trying to indirectly communicate to us and referring to such a thing as a hidden message. However, Tietjen rejects this charitable reading noting that Poole never even hints that his reading of Kierkegaard might be this more charitable version. However, I think that Tietjen is reading Poole a little too uncharitably. Even if we recognize that Poole shouldn't be given the charitable reading that Tietjen puts forward, we don't have to agree with the uncharitable reading of Poole that Tietjen takes. Instead, it seems like Poole is trying to build an interpretive framework that begins with Kierkegaard's own admonitions not to confuse the opinions of the pseudonyms with his own opinions. Thus, we could read Poole as not building up a definitive interpretive framework as much as offering an alternative possibility to the standard reading of Kierkegaard. Nonetheless, Tietjen does offer a useful criticism of Poole for lacking evidence and for seemingly just

¹²⁸ Tietjen 24

¹²⁹ Ibid 26

taking snippets and quotes of Kierkegaard and assembling them.

Tietjen also critiques Poole's approach to Kierkegaard's pseudonyms. Poole argues that the pseudonyms present a serious problem for interpretation in that we are never able to consider anything pseudonymous as representing Kierkegaard's own views.

Tietjen thinks that Poole takes this too far, writing,

“Poole's cautioning against conflating concepts across thought-worlds and pseudonyms is sound, but he presses the point too strongly. Per Kierkegaard's request, one should keep the pseudonyms (and their concepts) apart as well as keep them apart from him. That is to say, the pseudonyms, their respective thought-worlds, and the concepts that belong to them should be understood as distinct. But one can acknowledge such distinctions and still affirm the possibility of conversation between them.”¹³⁰

Tietjen argues that Poole pushes things too far. Even if we keep the pseudonyms distinct in their positions, concepts, and worlds, we can still compare them and put them into conversation with one another. Though the pseudonymous authors of *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness Unto Death* are different, they both refer to the demonic and thus we can examine the differing conceptions that they have and whether or not anything can be put together from them. Doing so doesn't commit us to conflating the two concepts, nor does it commit us to assuming that the concepts are ones Kierkegaard supports. It does, however, allow us to form some kind of interpretation with respect to the pseudonyms and to the concepts themselves. Maybe by examining Climacus versus Anti-Climacus and their respective works, we come to understand tensions that exist between certain concepts. This overall practice can at least guide us towards some overall view of what Kierkegaard is doing and what he's communicating.

Having criticized Poole for going too far in his recognition of the roles of the

¹³⁰ Ibid 31

pseudonyms and of indirect communication, Tietjen puts forward his positive claims, specifically examining what indirect communication is and how it works. This project helps him develop his own interpretive apparatus, though I will not be examining that apparatus in this project, as my central goals lie with the concept of indirect communication and how it functions in Kierkegaard's works. He writes, "Therefore, according to the lectures, indirect communication does not in the first-place concern literary devices like pseudonymity or irony. Rather, the salient factor of indirect communication involves what Kierkegaard calls a 'communication of capability,' as opposed to a 'communication of knowledge.'"¹³¹ Tietjen looks at indirect communication as the same kind of communication of capability that was mentioned above but in doing so works to undermine Poole's position. If indirect communication is primarily the communication of capability, then focusing on things like pseudonymity and irony is problematic, for it is not the form of the communication that is significant, but rather the ends of the communication. Things like pseudonymity and irony might help us reach these ends, and seemingly Kierkegaard employs them for that reason, but they alone are not the focus, rather it is the bringing forth of the capability. Indeed, most of the problems that cause Poole to advocate for his position stem from his misunderstanding of the doctrine of indirect communication, claims Tietjen. So, for Tietjen, neither the use of irony, pseudonymity, Kierkegaard's personal life, nor the inability to determine authorial intent impede our ability to interpret, for none of these are necessary for Kierkegaard's goals as a religious author seeking to indirectly communicate with his audience. Instead they only function as some of the tools that Kierkegaard employs to bring about

¹³¹ Ibid 54

capabilities, but they do not in and of themselves have any inherent value. While they might make interpretation more difficult on occasion, and they certainly do, they do not create a system under which we are unable to interpret Kierkegaard.

Tietjen also attacks Poole for arguing that Kierkegaard is intentionally leading us into a place where interpretation is impossible. Quoting Poole, Tietjen writes,

“The first pertains to a desire on the part of Kierkegaard to lure his reader alongside himself into an inescapable labyrinth. ‘The reader has to be gathered in as a potential ally, seduced and intrigued by the typographical and rhetorical waylayings of the text, and then involved in a kind of detective work, up to that point where (under ideal conditions) there is no unadorned instruction of doctrine or objective fact to be had, but only *the mutually shared experience of perplexity*.’”¹³²

Tietjen is critical of this approach, thinking it unnecessary to believe that Kierkegaard’s works cannot be interpreted and thus that they exist only to leave us in an interpretive haze. However, while Poole takes the issue too far, there is something to be said for Kierkegaard intending to leave his audience in the labyrinth. Tietjen seems right with respect to interpretation, in that his previous criticisms of Poole have demonstrated that there are meaningful ways that we can interpret Kierkegaard. This pushes us away from the idea that all that we are left with is some experience of perplexity when it comes to interpretation.

Despite this, there does seem to be some value in an experience of perplexity, in being lost in the labyrinth. As has been explained earlier in this chapter, Kierkegaard again and again stresses how subjectivity is truth in reference to Christianity and thus how subjectivity was his goal and the goal of indirect communication. What is subjectivity? Inwardness and appropriation. If I am lost in the labyrinth, what am I to do?

¹³² Ibid 19, Poole’s citation comes from *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication* 9-10, emphasis Tietjen’s.

I must search; I must struggle to escape. This process will necessarily involve some level of appropriation. Either I abandon the text, and thus the labyrinth altogether, or I appropriate the text as I fight to bring forth meaning from it. So, in this sense, the labyrinth serves a purpose. Kierkegaard is not setting us in a labyrinth as a practical joke, but rather because he is trying to engender inwardness in his audience. Thus, forcing his audience to actively engage with the text, he is able to put us into a situation where we either adopt subjectivity or disengage entirely. To the extent that he is successful, he needs us to engage, an issue that I will be addressing next chapter, but minimally the labyrinth is the perfect setup for indirect communication. If Kierkegaard wishes to bring forth a capability of mine, what better way than to make me active as a reader? If I must, on a personal level, participate with the text, then I am already being subjective in the way that Kierkegaard desires and the only thing that is left for him to do is to bring forth the capabilities that he thinks are necessary for authentic Christianity, or even just to re-orient those capabilities that might already be active.

So, we see that a good middle ground exists between Tietjen's and Poole's approaches to Kierkegaard. Poole oversteps himself when he claims that nothing can be interpreted, but he does help us understand that there are interpretive limits when it comes to Kierkegaard. We need to very seriously consider the use of irony, misdirection, pseudonymity, and literary elements when we examine and interpret Kierkegaard's works. At the same time, Kierkegaard's doctrine of indirect communication is aimed at bringing forth a capability in the receiver and doing so might require some misdirection or deception. To that end, we cannot always trust Kierkegaard or his pseudonyms. Thus, our goal is to understand the use of indirect communication in Kierkegaard's works by

examining clear instances of indirect communication. Up until this point, I've developed a line of reasoning that points to the goal of this type of communication: bringing forth authentic Christianity in individuals. Moving forward I'm going to look at the parts of Kierkegaard's works that seem to function as a kind of motivation for the individual by looking at sections that aim to elicit something from the reader. Many of the pseudonyms often refer to themselves as poets, and Kierkegaard referred to himself in such a way as well. These poetic sections, I will argue, fulfill the goals that Kierkegaard has laid out in his doctrine of indirect communication. Thus, we need to examine the poetic side of Kierkegaard to both recognize how this style of writing functions as a tool of indirect communication and to get closer to our examination of parables and the way in which they function in Kierkegaard's authorship.

Conclusion

This chapter accomplished two primary goals. First, I argued for the necessity of indirect communication in Kierkegaard's works. Given the argument that I make in chapter one about Kierkegaard's goals, I here demonstrate that Kierkegaard needs to use indirect communication if he is indeed going to bring the religious forward. While there is something of a dearth of scholarship on Kierkegaard's parables, there is a fair amount of scholarship concerning his doctrine of indirect communication, and thus the second accomplishment of this chapter was to provide something of a literature review of the available scholarship on this issue. Thus, overall we have so far moved from an understanding of what Kierkegaard intends for his works to accomplish to an understanding of the tools that he finds necessary to achieve that goal. This all leads us towards an analysis of parables themselves, as I will present in the next chapter. If we

know that Kierkegaard wants to bring the religious forward, and we recognize that indirect communication is an important part of that, we can now turn to the real topic at hand: parables. How exactly do parables function as pieces of indirect communication towards Kierkegaard's stated goals?

Chapter 3: Kierkegaard the Poet

“If the story-tellers could ha’ got decency and good morals from true stories, who’d have troubled to invent parables?” – Thomas Hardy

A, the pseudonymous author of part one of *Either/Or*, begins the book by examining the existence of a poet. He writes, “What is a poet? An unhappy person who conceals profound anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that as sighs and cries pass over them they sound like beautiful music.”¹³³ A is referring, as he notes, to a torture instrument that would convert the screams of the tortured into music that sounded like the bellows of bulls. Poetry here is portrayed as something that transforms anguish into what is then perceived as beauty. He also claims that he would rather be a pig farmer only understood by pigs than a poet who is misunderstood by others. This image of the poet is certainly not a romantic one, yet we see both Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms refer to themselves as poets on a number of occasions. Something about the poetic mode of writing seems to transfix these authors such that they keep returning to it and transmuting their suffering into works of art. While Kierkegaard certainly had a number of personal sufferings in his life, I ultimately want to disagree with A’s claim, and I think that Kierkegaard does as well, that all poetry stems from suffering. Instead, I will argue that Kierkegaard uses the poetic mode, specifically parables, as rhetorical tools that will ideally cause his readers to make a choice that will lead to self-knowledge.

This chapter is going to explore the poetic side of Kierkegaard’s writings. I will begin with an examination of the poetic in Kierkegaard and the connections that the poetic mode has to indirect communication and the religious goal that Kierkegaard has in

¹³³ EO1 19

mind for his works. Though the aesthetic mode of existence, typified by A's views, often engages in poetic discourse, we will see that Kierkegaard has a much larger view of the poetic than the view that A puts forward. Indeed, Kierkegaard comes to view the poetic as a necessity for the religious, drawing connections to both appropriation and the distinction between actuality and possibility. As the poetic moves between these realms and concepts, I will argue that a poetic mode of communication is both dangerous in a way similar to what Plato saw, in that poetry may simply lead us to a world of imagination that separates us from our concrete existence and understanding of truth, as well as helpful in that it can cause us to recognize other possibilities that we can actualize.

Having examined the poetic in Kierkegaard I will then move to a discussion of metaphor as a mode of poetic discourse. I will examine some hermeneutic approaches to metaphor that help us understand Kierkegaard's use of metaphor and parable. Specifically, I will argue that we can best understand Kierkegaard's metaphors as producing a kind of tension between two possible interpretations that gives way to a synthesis provided by the reader.

Moving from an understanding of what a parable is, I will then explore the unique effects that a parable has and the ways in which these relate to Kierkegaard's stated goals. Specifically, I will be examining the ways in which parables can bring about a change in the reader by bringing about a kind of sameness of vision in the parable and the reader. I will end this chapter with a classic example from literature, and one that Kierkegaard mentions both in published works and in his journals, the Biblical story of Nathan and David. The prophet Nathan uses a parable to reveal truth to David and it causes a drastic

change in David's understanding of his own actions. I will explore this story as a kind of paradigmatic example of how parable can function and use it to set up the next stage of this project which will inspect a number of Kierkegaard's parables and consider the specific uses that they have in his works.

This chapter builds off what was argued in my previous two chapters.

Kierkegaard has a specific goal in mind as an author, and that goal is to bring forward the religious in his audience. In order to accomplish this goal, Kierkegaard claims that he must use indirect communication, and as was explained in chapter two, part of that involves presenting his readers with existence-possibilities. This chapter works with that idea, examining what form these possibilities might take, and working to develop a general Kierkegaardian approach to metaphor and parable. This chapter will thus move us from an understanding of the poetic in Kierkegaard to an understanding of metaphor and parable in general, setting us up for chapter four where we will examine Kierkegaard's use of parables.

Section 1: Soothesaying Through Poetry

Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms often viewed themselves as poets with poetic goals. While Kierkegaard, later in his career, outlines precisely what his goals were all along, when we examine his diaries and the thoughts of some of his pseudonyms from earlier in his career there is already the inclusion of the poetic. On one hand, Kierkegaard identifies his goal as bringing people to authentic Christianity, that is, as a religious goal. At the same time, Walsh notes that "A survey of journal references to himself as poet reveals that he identifies himself with this role far more frequently in the period of the later religious writings than in earlier years. Again and again he declares in the later

journals that he is essentially a poet. In several entries he describes himself more specifically as a ‘poet of the religious’ and even more narrowly as a ‘Christian poet and thinker’.”¹³⁴ So in addition to A identifying himself as a poet, Climacus implying that he is a poet, and numerous other occasions in the pseudonymous works, we also have Kierkegaard himself identifying as a religious poet.¹³⁵ In an appendix to *The Point of View for my Work as an Author* entitled “Armed Neutrality” Kierkegaard writes,

“The one who presents this picture [of Christendom] must himself first and foremost humble himself under it, confess that he, even though he himself is struggling within himself to approach this picture, is very far from being that. He must confess that he actually relates himself only poetically or *qua* poet to the *presentation* of this picture, while he (which is his difference from the ordinary conception of a poet) in his own person relates himself Christianly to the *presented* picture, and that only as a poet is he ahead in presenting the picture.”¹³⁶

Kierkegaard recognizes the necessity of the poetic approach as a tool in order to bring about his religious end. As discussed in Chapter 1, presenting an image of Christianity from a standpoint of superiority will cause many to reject the image.¹³⁷ This rejection isn’t due to a problem in the image, but rather a problem in positioning the standpoint of the author. Thus, Kierkegaard thinks that we need to position ourselves religiously below the image. I must humble myself beneath the picture of Christianity that I put forward, recognizing and readily admitting that I fall short of it. When considered by someone viewing the image, I will not appear to be arguing for or stating my religious superiority, I will be either an equal to the other person or someone lesser. I will not be declaring myself better than others, instead I just happen to be filled with poetic inspiration. I have

¹³⁴ Walsh, “Kierkegaard: Poet of the Religious” in Pattison 4

¹³⁵ PF 35

¹³⁶ POV 133

¹³⁷ What I mean by this is the presentation of the entirety of Christianity, both the subjective and objective, as a singular thing.

been gifted with a talent for words that has allowed me to communicate the truth. If I were claiming to be religiously superior, then those who are turned away from my claims would specifically reject my religious claims. But if I merely claim to be a poet writing out of inspiration, then the rejection that I might face won't necessarily be of my religious ideas, but rather of my poetic mode. By taking the poetic approach and identifying himself primarily as a poet, even a religious poet, and thus someone lacking both religious and moral superiority, Kierkegaard is trying to put forward an image of Christianity that will not be easily rejected. Therefore, the poetic approach is very much a part of Kierkegaard's religious goal.

Part of the reason for this also stems from Kierkegaard's ideas about the kinds of creatures that we are. As was discussed previously, Kierkegaard views us as essentially subjective thinking things,¹³⁸ and he thus must employ the indirect approach when trying to communicate certain things to us. He writes,

“And just as it is a mediocre existence when the adult cuts away all communication with childhood and is a fragmentary adult, so is it a poor existence when a thinker, who is indeed also an existing person, has given up on imagination and feeling, which is just as lunatic as giving up on the understanding. And yet this is what people seem to want. They oust and dismiss poetry as a surmounted element because poetry corresponds most closely to imagination. In a scientific-scholarly process, it may be all right to classify it as a surmounted element, but in existence it holds true that as long as there is a human being who wants to claim a human existence, he must preserve poetry, and all his thinking must not disturb for him the enchantment of poetry but rather enhance it... The true is not superior to the good and the beautiful, but the true and the good and the beautiful belong essentially to every human existence and are united for an existing person not in thinking them but in existing.”¹³⁹

We see Climacus here describe two different approaches to life. First, we have the thinking person who employs a scientific process and second, we have an existing person

¹³⁸ This refers to the discussion in Chapter 2.

¹³⁹ CUP 348

who wants to preserve poetry. We must engage with the poetic approach because we are existing creatures and not merely thinking creatures. For us, the beautiful and the true need to coalesce into one. Mackey refers to this idea when he writes, “in Kierkegaard philosophy becomes poetry.”¹⁴⁰ Our existence can never be surmounted and thus we must always take the state of human existence into account when we examine our style of communication. In Chapter 2 I examined how the religious message often requires indirect communication due to its content. Here, we have Kierkegaard looking at the problem from the other end, not of the message or the communicator, but of the receiver. The receiver puts limitations on the modes of communication that will be successful due to the very nature of the receiver’s existence. This is again a push away from the thinking approach, something that Kierkegaard refers to here as a “scientific-scholarly process.” The goal is not merely to find the truth or to think something that is true, but rather to exist in what is true. Thus, with our goal being a certain kind of existence, we must employ the types of communication that are connected to the kinds of existing creatures that we are. For Kierkegaard, this is the transformation of philosophy into poetry. It is not merely that we are using poetry as an effective tool, though Kierkegaard certainly seems to indicate that on occasion, as noted above. Instead, philosophical thought becomes united with the poetic mode and with poetry itself.

Before fully endorsing the poetic mode of communication as fulfilling Kierkegaard’s goals, I want to turn to some work done by Sylvia Walsh. Walsh finds a number of concerns that Kierkegaard has about the poetic, and thus we must examine these potential problems before we can move forward with an argument about the value

¹⁴⁰ Mackey 266

of parable in Kierkegaard's works. Walsh notes that we are faced with a limitation when we argue for ethical or religious principles, that of our own life experience. She writes, "From an ethical-religious standpoint, one may not communicate more than what one's own life conforms to. If one seeks to communicate something higher, therefore, it must be made clear that the presentation is a poetic one."¹⁴¹ Walsh's contention here is that the presentation of something in the poetic mode is only an imaginative one, a presentation of a possibility. To that extent, the poetic mode allows us to explore ideas of which we have no personal experience. Thus, the poetic mode lets someone who claims to have no unique religious or moral experience make claims about what a certain religion should look like. This can occur when we don't make such claims as scholars but rather as poets. We see this at work in Kierkegaard's earlier pseudonymous works where the pseudonym is very clearly lower than the ideal that is being presented. In some later works, like those by Anti-Climacus, we see the pseudonyms explicitly mention that they are poets so as to avoid confusion.¹⁴² In both situations, the religious ideas must be presented poetically, for the author cannot claim, for practical reasons already mentioned as well as in truth, that their life conforms with the stringent religious principles that are being put forward. The poetic mode can explore ideas as possibilities, and thus even if I am not religious, I can think about what the religious should be like as a poet. However, a scholar can only approach the religious with the necessary authority to define exactly what Christianity is and how it functions. Thus, the religious communication should be poetic if it is to propel the reader and not merely exist as an argument about what authentic Christianity looks like.

¹⁴¹ Walsh, "Kierkegaard: Poet of the Religious" in Pattison 19

¹⁴² Ibid 19

Walsh also notes a number of smaller problems that Kierkegaard has with the poetic. One of the reasons that Plato disliked poetry and did not want it in his ideal state was because poetry was false. It was distanced by an order of magnitude from reality and would thus represent a kind of deception. Walsh argues that Kierkegaard, in his quest for the religious, must contend with this possibility of deception. If Kierkegaard is using poetry as a kind of deception, then poetry starts to look like sophistry, and this is a problem that Kierkegaard considers. “Have I, after all (however much I should like to have someone share my point of view), the right to use my art in order to win over a person?”¹⁴³ Kierkegaard here struggles with the ethical question as to whether deception is acceptable. His ultimate goal is the religious, but he has to take into account the reason for which his readers choose the religious.¹⁴⁴ Seemingly his audience must choose the religious for the right reasons and not, for instance, because Kierkegaard’s beautiful language has made them think that the religious will be full of pleasure and thus appeal to the pleasure seeker in them. A true turn to the religious requires a recognition of certain religious concepts like that of sin, that one is bringing to bear on oneself. Beyond concern over the ethics of his methods, Kierkegaard also harbors further concerns about the efficacy of them.

Walsh gives a full explanation of multiple dangers that Kierkegaard or some of his pseudonyms think that poetry holds, which I will here represent very briefly.^{145,146}

One of the first problems is that poetry is ideal, it lives in the realm of possibility.

¹⁴³ JP 1:253

¹⁴⁴ Cf Lane 103

¹⁴⁵ Walsh gives a full explanation of nine different dangers that poetry holds in *Living Poetically* 168-181

¹⁴⁶ The term “poetry” here is primarily used to denote the poetic mode, and not what we might generally refer to as poetry. So, in this situation, poetry, drama, parable, and narrative would all fit under “poetry,” for instance.

Because of this poetry is oftentimes indifferent to actuality. The poetic does not need a world (as A would put it) of nisses and trolls to actually exist, it only needs such a world to be imaginable in order to bring the reader into that possibility. Because of this detachment from actuality poetry carries the danger of driving the reader away from the concrete and losing them in the possible. This carries a real danger for the religious goal of Kierkegaard, for he wants to bring Christianity to bear on the concrete individual, and not on the individual lost in possibility. To that individual, a world of sin can be imagined, and we can think through the possible outcomes, and why such a world might need a savior, but in the end, none of it matters for it is all a thought experiment. Thus, poetry carries the danger of drawing us away from the actual world. In a similar vein, since poetry can lead us away from actuality, it can also pull us out of the ethical, for it is only immediate. Therefore, Walsh claims that poetry offers us immediacy in the form of fantasy or imagination and in doing so can remove us from the realm of the ethical and the relationships that are a part of that realm. We cannot be dialectical with something that is only immediate, nor can we make meaningful choice in such a world of immediacy.

In examining the problems that might lie with the poetic approach, Walsh also outlines what exactly she thinks is needed for the good version of the poetic that Kierkegaard is working towards. By examining some of Kierkegaard's criticisms of Hans Christian Andersen, Walsh claims that something Andersen lacks, and that Kierkegaard thus desires out of poetry, is a positive life view.¹⁴⁷ The poet must be able to reach beyond a fragmentary view of life or of a single experience and instead present a

¹⁴⁷ Walsh 37

substantial view of existence such that anyone reading the work of the poet can orient their life towards what the poet is presenting. Kierkegaard wants poetry to serve a specific function, that of bringing individuals closer to the religious, and thus poetry needs to be instructive towards the religious goals that Kierkegaard has in mind. Walsh also contends that the poetic requires reflection as a necessary ingredient in order for it to be of use. Poetry cannot be immediate, which the pleasure-seeking life is composed of according to A, for if it is then the reader can never move beyond the aesthetic realm. Thus, for Walsh, in order for poetry to be ethically or religiously instructive, it must be imbued with, and thus inspire, reflection. In this way poetry and the poetic can overcome the danger of pulling the reader into immediacy and thus away from the ethical. With reflection as an ingredient of the poetic, Walsh argues that we no longer have to worry about poetry driving the reader into immediacy.

Lastly, Walsh makes a distinction between the imagination and the fantastic for Kierkegaard.¹⁴⁸ Most poetry drives us towards the fantastic, which isn't rooted in actuality and which leads away from the self. "In fantasy, the self does not become itself but rather loses itself in infinitude, gradually becoming volatilized in an inhuman state of abstraction... When the imagination or a capacity dependent upon it becomes fantastic in this manner, the self can be said to be in despair, the despair of infinitude."¹⁴⁹ The imagination, by contrast, is centered around oneself as an existing creature and thus always returns to the concrete. We can think of the imagination as the faculty which allows us to entertain possibilities, and the fantastic, as Walsh describes, as the imagination run wild. Imagination, though it is entertaining possibilities, is remaining

¹⁴⁸ Walsh 231

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 231

grounded in our concrete existence, whereas the fantastic loses this connection with our concreteness and instead runs wild, intoxicated with possibility. Thus, our poetry needs to engage the imagination but avoid the fantastic.¹⁵⁰ As we move back to Kierkegaard, I think it is good for us to keep in mind what I've outlined from Walsh above. Walsh's work helps us recognize categories like imagination when we examine Kierkegaard's parables and his poetic style overall.

One of the reasons that Kierkegaard wants to engage the imagination is that he wants to put possibilities before us such that we can then actualize them. Here are two sections where Climacus addresses this issue directly, and I am quoting them at length.

“But existence-actuality cannot be communicated, and the subjective thinker has his own actuality in his own ethical existence. If actuality is to be understood by a third party, it must be understood as possibility, and a communicator who is conscious of this will therefore see to it, precisely in order to be oriented towards existence, that his existence-communication is in the form of possibility. A production in the form of possibility places existing in it as close to the recipient as it is possible between one human being and another. Let me elucidate this once again. One would think that, by telling a reader that this person and that person *actually* have done this and that (something great and remarkable), one would place the reader closer to wanting to do the same, to wanting to exist in the same, than by merely presenting it as possible. Apart from what was pointed out in its proper place, that the reader can understand the communication only by dissolving the *esse* of actuality into *posse*, since otherwise he only *imagines* that he understands, apart from this, the fact that this person and that person actually have done this and that can just as well have a delaying as a motivating effect. The reader merely transforms the person who is being discussed (aided by his being an *actual* person) into the rare exceptions; he admires him and says: But I am too insignificant to do anything like that.”¹⁵¹

What is great with regard to the universal must therefore not be presented as an object for admiration, but as a *requirement*. In the form of possibility, the presentation becomes a requirement. Instead of presenting the good in the form of actuality, as is ordinarily done, that this person and that person have actually lived

¹⁵⁰ I have here only provided a very brief overview of what Walsh puts together regarding the poetic, and while there is certainly a rich conversation to be had about the differences between imagination and fantasy, for instance, such a conversation will have to be bracketed in this project both for the sake of brevity and in order that I might progress to the core concepts that this project seeks to address.

¹⁵¹ CUP 358

and have actually done this, and thus transforming the reader into an observer, an admirer, an appraiser, it should be presented in the form of possibility. Then whether or not the reader wants to exist in it is placed as close as possible to him.¹⁵²

The problem with presenting something as actually existing is that it too easily turns the reader into a mere observer. I can watch a professional athlete perform an incredible feat and think to myself, “Wow, I could never be that good.” The presentation as actuality can turn us into admirers, but Kierkegaard doesn’t want admirers of Christianity, he wants authentic Christians. Thus, Kierkegaard must present possibilities to his readers. When an actuality is presented, I am immediately made aware that it is possible for a human being to achieve such a thing, but I am also made aware very explicitly of the differences between myself and the person who just achieved what was made actual. I can look at the athlete and recognize that I am not strong or fast enough to do what they did. But when something is presented only as a possibility, I can tap into my imagination and then place myself within the possibility to see if it can be actualized. There is nothing for me to admire in a possibility, nor is there any way for me to excuse myself from action when I examine a possibility, for I do not yet know if I possess the ability to actualize what is being presented as possible. So, I am left with only two choices, to test myself against the possibility and try to actualize it, or to reject the possibility altogether as being unworthy of my time.

When looking at this question of possibility, I think it’s useful to turn to Mackey’s thoughts considering Kierkegaard’s poetic approach. Mackey, making a similar claim to the one that I made in chapter one about how Kierkegaard’s goal is to engender awareness, writes, “That in a way is the purpose of every poet: not to tell the truth, nor

¹⁵² Ibid 358-359

yet to insinuate fabulous lies, but to make men aware of the options so that the emergence of truth within the individual is not hindered by the conceit of knowledge or the tangle of error.”¹⁵³ The poet, and therefore Kierkegaard, to the extent that he considers himself a religious poet, is trying not to present a truth to the reader, but instead to present possibilities to the reader such that the reader can freely pursue the truth subjectively. Yet, Kierkegaard seems to want to take things a step further than Mackey implies. As we will come to see, Kierkegaard’s goal is not to merely to present possibilities, but to do so in such a way that the reader is prompted to choose for herself. This too ties back into Kierkegaard’s claims concerning indirect communication and appropriation. Climacus writes,

“Inwardness cannot be communicated directly, because expressing it directly is externality (oriented outwardly, not inwardly), and expressing inwardness directly is no proof at all that it is there... but there is inwardness when what is said belongs to the recipient as if it were his own – and now it is indeed his own. To communicate in that way is the most beautiful triumph of resigned inwardness.”¹⁵⁴

Inwardness and appropriation are achieved via the use of possibilities that the poetic carries. When something is presented as a possibility the reader must turn inward and appropriate the idea if they want to engage it at all. Because of this, if Kierkegaard ultimately wants to engender inwardness, as Climacus seems to desire, then he must take a poetic approach so that he can present possibility to the reader. Having recognized the necessity of the poetic approach to Kierkegaard’s overall goals as an author, let us next examine the most common and striking forms of the poetic that Kierkegaard employs in his writings: metaphor and parable.

¹⁵³ Mackey 291

¹⁵⁴ CUP 260

Section 2: Construct Additional Metaphors

One of the common ways that we see Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms bring forward these kinds of possibilities is through their use of metaphor and parable. To examine this, I first want to return to a quotation from Anti-Climacus that I brought up in chapter 2. “For example, it is indirect communication to place jest and earnestness together in such a way that the composite is a dialectical knot – and then to be a nobody oneself. If anyone wants to have anything to do with this kind of communication, he will have to untie the knot himself.”¹⁵⁵ I had used this to help explain the concept of indirect communication, something that I think this quote does well. But, given that metaphor and parable qualify as forms of indirect communication, I’d like to bring it in here as well. This dialectical knot of jest and earnestness causes the receiver to have to untie the knot for themselves. It is unclear to the receiver if the communication is a matter of jest, if it is earnest, or if it is some combination of the two that is producing an entirely new third option. Thus, the receiver of the communication is faced with this challenge. They need to uncover the meaning of the communication, but the communication is offering them a number of different possibilities.

Given that Kierkegaard wants to bring forward possibility such that it might provoke inwardness, we see a connection between this dialectical knot and his poetic concerns. So, when we ask why Kierkegaard often broke into metaphor and parable throughout his writings, I think we can trace a clear connection back to his concept of indirect communication, and therefore back to his religious goal. Metaphors and parables produce the same kind of effect that we see Kierkegaard describe with his dialectical

¹⁵⁵ PIC 133

knot. The dialectical knot presents us with competing possibilities. The receiver, upon recognizing the possibilities must, if she is to seek any level of understanding, resolve the competition in some manner. So, we can see this dialectical knot as producing a kind of tension between multiple possibilities. When I run into a metaphor, I am faced with multiple possibilities of meaning, and it is up to me to decide on one of them as an avenue forward. If I encounter a passage that claims, “Man is a puppet” as I am reading through a text, I encounter the tension caused by possibility. Man is very clearly not a literal puppet, for I am made of flesh and bone instead of fabric. So, must I interpret things metaphorically? Metaphorically, this might be referring to my lack of free will, or maybe a hyperbolic statement about my quality of life. Regardless of the interpretation that I decide on, the metaphor presents me with this kind of tension. Lorentzen, one of the few scholars who has worked on Kierkegaard’s use of metaphor, makes a similar claim. He writes, “Metaphor provides Kierkegaard with the dialectical tension and the middle ground – as a kind of no-man’s land – that his indirect communication requires of the reader to struggle with existence itself, to examine not only life but ideas in life that ethically instruct and prompt the reader to choose.”¹⁵⁶

Given this concern with tension as a central concept in Kierkegaard’s use of metaphor, I want to bring in another theorist who also examines the use of tension in metaphor: Ricoeur. Ricoeur focuses on the way that the reader interacts with and comes to understand metaphor. Ricoeur claims that we come to identify metaphors by finding a kind of confusion in the language being used. “So metaphor appears as an answer to a certain inconsistency of the statement interpreted literally.”¹⁵⁷ When taking a literal

¹⁵⁶ Lorentzen 62

¹⁵⁷ Ricoeur 78

reading of “Man is a puppet,” confusion would ensue for human beings are not inanimate dolls with strings attached. This inconsistency is what makes us aware that the statement is probably metaphorical. In this vein, Ricoeur also argues that we must approach whole statements as metaphorical and not merely single words. It’s not that “puppet” is a term being used metaphorically, but instead that the entire proposition “Man is a puppet” is metaphorical. Giving us this ability to identify metaphors, Ricoeur presents his overall approach, for which he uses the term “tension.” Ricoeur writes,

“Now substitution is a sterile operation, but in metaphor, on the contrary, the tension between the words and especially the tension between two interpretations, one literal and one metaphorical, in the whole sentence, gives rise to a veritable creation of meaning of which rhetoric perceived only the end result. In a theory of tension... a new signification emerges which deals with the whole statement. In this respect, metaphor is an instantaneous creation.”¹⁵⁸

Tension theory approaches metaphorical statements as statements that create new meaning. The tension between the possible interpretations of the text gives rise to a new understanding, a “creation” as Ricoeur calls it.

For Ricoeur, this tension stems from the existence of two possible interpretations, a literal interpretation and a metaphorical interpretation. These two interpretations aren’t at odds with one another, but instead they complement one another. The literal and the metaphorical mutually inform each other, the literal helping me understand the metaphorical and vice versa. Thus, when we take both interpretations as a totality, a new meaning is created. This new meaning is neither the metaphorical or the literal, but rather is the tension of the two. For Ricoeur, this breaks from a history in which the literal interpretation is often ignored in favor of the metaphorical. Instead, Ricoeur claims that the literal is an important part of what the metaphor does.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid 79

I think that Ricoeur's understanding of tension is helpful for us when we turn back to Kierkegaard's use of metaphor. As I will explain in the next chapter, Kierkegaard also wants to take into account the literal. The structure of his metaphors and parables, the characters that he uses, their places and locations and words, are all valuable in helping us understand what Kierkegaard is trying to do as an author. Yet, Ricoeur wants tension to derive from two possible but complimentary interpretation, literal and metaphorical. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, seems to want some kind of competition between interpretations. I think that this is a minor point, but one worth considering. Where for Ricoeur the literal and the metaphorical work together to produce a new creation of meaning, for Kierkegaard the possibilities that the metaphor presents are in conflict with one another, though this conflict might have the same kind of resolution that we find in Ricoeur. The dialectical knot presents us with two competing possibilities, jest or earnestness. The earnest interpretation does not help me understand the jesting interpretation, nor vice versa. They are not analogues of each other in the way that the metaphorical and the literal are for Ricoeur. Yet, in the end, they might have the same kind of dialectical synthesis that Ricoeur sees in the literal and the metaphorical. For Kierkegaard, the goal of the poetic is to cause inwardness through the introduction of possibilities. Thus, when I am presented with the competing possibilities that a metaphor introduces, I must consider their likelihood. Does this metaphor lend more towards jest or towards earnestness? Does it lend more towards literal or metaphorical? But, if the metaphor doesn't clearly lend itself to one interpretation over the other, then I am forced to make something out of it. I must figure out how to maintain both jest and earnestness in a meaningful way such that the metaphor still makes sense. This occurrence brings

about inwardness and appropriation. Where for Ricoeur the metaphor creates new meaning, for Kierkegaard the creation stems from the individual.

Given this understanding of how metaphor works for Kierkegaard, I'd like to briefly cover how this also extends to parables. Kierkegaard often gives us colorful metaphors, but we also find a large number of longer form parables. But how do we distinguish a parable from a metaphor or from a short story? There doesn't seem to be any single demarcating feature that we can use to pinpoint something as a parable. Ricoeur notes this difficulty, writing, "To call a certain narrative a parable is to say that the story *refers to* something other than what it told... how does the narrative itself start the interpretive process which makes it into a parable?"¹⁵⁹ Parables have the same metaphorical aspect to interpretation that metaphors do, which for Ricoeur brings about the same kind of tension between literal and metaphorical. But a parable is a narrative of some sort. Thus, Ricoeur concludes that, "The parable has been tentatively defined as the mode of discourse which applies to a *narrative form* a metaphoric process."¹⁶⁰ A parable does the same thing that a metaphor does, it just does it in a narrative form. For Ricoeur, just as we posit meaning of the entire metaphor and not just one phrase of the metaphor, so too do we posit meaning of the entire parable, and not just one character or action.

Yet, there might also be a number of structural signifiers that can at least clue us in to the possibility of a parable. Donahue, in his work on Biblical parables, finds that parables are often marked by some traits, though the list that he comes up with, adapted from Rudolf Bultmann, present neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for a parable. Instead, they are more like markers that indicate the possibility of a parable. Donahue

¹⁵⁹ Ibid 30-31

¹⁶⁰ Ricoeur 88

finds that we usually have a concise narrative in which large groups of people are treated as a single individual and in which you rarely have more than two individuals interacting at the same time. He also claims that parables rarely give the reader access into the minds of the characters, and instead that all motivations and thoughts are portrayed through characters' actions or speeches. He notes that parables are also often characterized by repetition of actions and situations, as well as a lack of a full conclusion, and thus with issues left unresolved.¹⁶¹

So, we see that parables and metaphors fit very well both into the description of the poetic that Kierkegaard gives us as well as with his desire for indirect communication. Parables and metaphors present a kind of choice to the reader by giving them the dialectical knot that must be untied. The parable possesses a kind of tension that prompts the reader to unravel the knot, and in doing so, the parable causes inwardness and appropriation. As we move forward, I will endeavor to explain exactly how parables are able to not only provide this tension to the reader, but how they go further and prompt us to choose.

Section 3: The Power Level of Parables

Parables present to us an interesting literary tool mostly because of the effect that they have on the reader. Parables are able not only to provide a creative imagining of a certain person or place, but also to present real choices to the reader. When working through a parable the reader is invited to participate in the parable. Reading through the parable of the workers in the vineyard, we are invited to wonder as to why the lord pays

¹⁶¹ Donahue 21

all of his laborers the same amount regardless of the work that they have done.¹⁶² TeSelle, a theologian who primarily works with metaphor, uses this idea to claim, “A parable of Jesus is not, then, only an interesting story; it is a call to decision.”¹⁶³ The parable calls to the reader and invites them to seek understanding. We must understand how or why the lord acts as he does when his actions seem unfair. This understanding of ours then prompts a further decision, for the parable is trying to describe to us the Kingdom of God. So, we must decide whether to revise our understanding of the Kingdom of God or not. In this sense, the parable will often present some kind of conflict between our understanding of the world and the world that the parable presents, with the resolution of this conflict driving us to revise our understanding of the world. TeSelle writes, “The secure, familiar everydayness of the story of their own lives has been torn apart; they have seen another story – the story of a mundane life like their own moving by a different ‘logic,’ and they begin to understand (not just with their heads) that another way of believing and living – another frame or context for their lives – might be a possibility *for them*.”¹⁶⁴ The parable presents a possibility to us, that God is like such and such, that the Kingdom of God is like such and such, that I need to live a life like such and such. Yet the parable does not present them as intellectual possibilities, things that we might need to merely assent to. Instead, they are presented as real possibilities for us that can impact our lives.

Interacting with and engaging the metaphor empowers its ability to make us choose, and thus we realize that the possibilities in the parable are real possibilities for us.

¹⁶² I am here referring to the parable in Matthew 20:1-16

¹⁶³ TeSelle 634

¹⁶⁴ Ibid 634

Lorentzen's examination of metaphor turns his attention to Kierkegaard's *The Book on Adler*, in which he finds support for a similar hypothesis. "The intent is to push the primitive existential moment of choice to its crisis by compelling 'one either to be offended or to believe,' for, 'contemporaneity is the tension that does not permit a person to leave it undecided.'"^{165, 166} The parable is contemporaneous for it offers us a choice that is always relevant to our lived experience, and thus is eternally contemporaneous. No matter my situation in life, recognizing my sin in the face of Christ, or understanding what the Kingdom of God is like, will always relate to me. The religious parable, in this sense, offers up offense or belief as the options that we must choose from. The parable is asking us to reorder our understanding of the world and to that extent, there is a chance of offense. In the act of asking me to reorder things, the parable is claiming that my understanding is incorrect and therefore I can respond with offense, which disallows the parable to be successful. Thus we can either ignore the parable and fail to engage it, or we are forced to choose between offense and belief. When faced with an understanding of our fallen state in the face of God we are either offended or we choose to believe, and it is parables that bring us to this tipping point.

Seemingly what I have just described amounts to a kind of persuasion. The parable will often either persuade me to believe or to be offended. Yet, Lane argues that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous and philosophical works are not meant to be persuasive to the reader.¹⁶⁷ Instead, he argues, the philosophical works are meant to clear up confusion and give an explanation of what true Christianity is. To that extent, they cannot be

¹⁶⁵ Lorentzen 65, citing Adler 41

¹⁶⁶ The concept of "offense" is one that is more closely examined in *Practice in Christianity*, as well as in *Judge for Yourself!*

¹⁶⁷ This appears multiple times in Lane. See, for instance, 94, 104, or 116.

persuasive, for their goal is knowledge. Thus, he argues, the religious works are the ones that are trying to be persuasive. However, this approach seems to me to neglect the literary side of Kierkegaard's philosophical works. Parables, metaphors, analogies, allegories, all of these invite our participation and prompt us to decide. In order to understand how these tools fit into the context in which they are placed, we must endeavor to interpret them in a way that is meaningful to the text in which they appear. Thus they invite us to participate with them, and to the extent that they are designed to be persuasive, they prompt us to decide. This process is inherently persuasive to the extent that we go through with it. Thus, if the reader engages the parables in Kierkegaard's philosophical works, we see the possibility of persuasion beyond just the religious writings.

But how exactly do parables persuade us? When considering their persuasive power, we have to take into account that it is the reader who is interpreting and thus constructing them. The author puts together a parable, in Kierkegaard's case, with a specific goal in mind. But all that the author can do is write the parable and then give it to the reader. The reader, having now been invited to participate with the parable, has to figure out what the parable means. Given, as I have described, that the parable is going to offer an alternative account of the Kingdom of God for instance, one that the reader must then measure up against his or her own account, the reader must endeavor to uncover this alternative account. However, the parable does not outright describe this account. Instead, the reader must build it for themselves. Yet, in order to understand what that account is, or if it even differs from your own, you must construct the account from the parable. It's possible that you are unable to do so, maybe you just can't make sense of the parable. But

if you can, then the account that you have created is at least somewhat coherent. So now you must measure this coherent, alternative account versus the one that you already hold yourself. This alternative account now has a good chance at being persuasive for two reasons. First, since it was a creation of yours, you feel like this is self-discovered knowledge, and thus the parable bypasses many of your defense mechanisms. You do not feel like your views are being attacked externally, for you were the one who constructed this account. Secondly, since the account is your construction, and you constructed it in order to make sense of the parable, you put together something that is at least somewhat coherent and rational. To that extent, you are unlikely to dismiss it immediately or offhandedly. You will instead give it some consideration and truly measure it against the account that you currently hold. Thus, the parable will possess a much greater possibility to persuade than say, a diatribe that attacks the account of the Kingdom of God that you currently hold.

Another ability that the parable has is what Arnold Isenberg refers to as “critical communication.” Isenberg’s work is primarily centered on aesthetics. One of his most famous pieces presents an argument about the duty of the art critic. Some take the job of the art critic to be evaluative. That is, the art critic is supposed to evaluate the value of certain works of art based on criteria that are more or less accepted. Isenberg claims that this usually goes about via a three-step process. The critic renders a verdict, gives a reason for the verdict, and backs up the reason by some norm. So, a critic might say that a painting is good (verdict) because it matches form to content very well (reason), and any painting that matches form to content is a good painting (norm).¹⁶⁸ Taking issue with this

¹⁶⁸ Isenberg 330

approach, Isenberg says that it leaves out something meaningful that comes along with criticism. He argues that it is not merely the critic's job to evaluate art, but also to bring about a shared vision of a work of art. He writes,

“And if communication is a process by which a mental content is transmitted by symbols from one person to another, then we can say that it is a function of criticism to bring about communication at the level of the senses, that is, to induce a sameness of vision, of experienced content. If this is accomplished, it may or may not be followed by agreement, or what is called "communion" - a community of feeling which expresses itself in identical value judgments.”¹⁶⁹

The job of the critic is to make you see what she sees. For example, the film critic does not exist so that I can know which movies I should see and which I should avoid. Instead, the film critic exists so that when I go see a certain film, I can see all of the depth, mystery, and symbolism that I would have missed without the help of the critic. She allows me to see what she sees, and assumedly what she sees is a fuller vision of the work of art.

How exactly does the critic do this? An evaluation is something that is easy enough to communicate, but how does one bring about a shared vision? The critic can tell me how she sees the work of art, but that won't make me see it that way. Something beyond a communication of her vision must occur. Isenberg refers to this special kind of communication as “critical communication”. According to Isenberg, “In ordinary communication, symbols tend to acquire a footing relatively independent of sense-perception.”¹⁷⁰ When we communicate ordinarily, the words or symbols that we use to communicate have established their meanings independent of our individual sense-perceptions. Thus, if we are trying to bring about a sameness of vision, ordinary

¹⁶⁹ Ibid 336

¹⁷⁰ Ibid 336

communication will be no good. Isenberg uses the following example to illustrate critical communication, and the difference between it and ordinary communication.

““The expression on her face was delightful.”
 “What was delightful about it?”
 “Didn’t you see that smile?””¹⁷¹

The final line here is important. Were the speaker to simply say, “The smile” there would be no special communication. Instead, we would merely have information being communicated. The speaker would be communicating that a specific smile was delightful. Instead, by asking the question, the speaker is prompting something very different to happen. The interlocutor must consider the question. Assumedly he did see the smile, but yet he didn’t notice that her expression was delightful. So, he has missed something about her expression. What he has missed is something interpretive. He hasn’t missed out on any content; he saw her face. So the “critic” in this situation is trying to share her vision of a woman’s expression. She asks if her interlocutor saw the woman’s face. What effect does this have? The interlocutor must now reconsider what he has seen. He saw her expression, and he saw her smile. But he somehow missed connecting her smile to a delightful expression. The smile is the key here. He must reinterpret what he has seen and center his reinterpretation around the smile. Once this happens, he should hopefully see the delightful face that the critic has seen.

This kind of critical communication is not something that can be objectively stated. Instead it is intuited from one to another, in Isenberg’s example through the form of a question. The critic is not informing their audience about qualities found in a work of art. Instead, they are trying to affect a change in their audience. They want their audience

¹⁷¹ Ibid 337

to pick up on the same subtleties that they are picking up on. But telling you about these subtleties won't make you see them. Instead, I have to get you to reorient your vision such that you then see the same things that I am seeing. Critical communication is what causes us to reorient ourselves in this way.

Section 4: Come Now David, Where Has Uriah Gone?

Given this scaffolding that I have put together describing how parables function, let's now look at a classic example of this in action, one that a number of scholars, and Kierkegaard himself, all consider: that of David and Bathsheba. I want to turn to this example primarily for two reasons. First, it is a parable that both Kierkegaard and a number of parable scholars examine. Thus, by looking at David and Bathsheba, we can gain at least a small understanding of how Kierkegaard's analysis of parables fits in with that of modern scholars. Second, I want to examine this parable because it presents to us a perfect example of what I'm arguing a parable should accomplish for Kierkegaard. It is a story about a successful parable and thus gives us a good image for the process that I'm claiming we find in Kierkegaard's works. In order to examine this parable, I'm first going to start by turning to Ted Cohen, a philosopher who primarily worked in aesthetics. Cohen uses the story of David and Bathsheba from the Bible to illustrate critical communication in action.

One day, David sees Bathsheba bathing and invites her to his palace and has sex with her. She becomes pregnant soon after though her husband is away at war. King David thus calls her husband back from the front lines and tells him to go and be with his wife, hoping that Uriah would then be the assumed father of the unborn child. However, Uriah, the husband, refuses. He claims that it is not right for him to be with his wife while

his comrades in arms are fighting. So King David sends Uriah back to the front lines and arranges for him to die in battle. Upon his death, David summons the widowed Bathsheba to live in his palace. This course of action angers the Lord and he sends the prophet Nathan to speak to King David. David feels no remorse at his actions and thus Nathan tells him a story.

““There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb which he bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and his children. It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, and was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd, to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him; rather he took the poor man’s ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him”

Then David’s anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion.”

Nathan then said to David, “You are the man!”¹⁷²

The context of what Nathan says to David informs us that this is clearly something in need of interpretation. Nathan is not telling David that David stole someone else’s lamb and must have forgotten about it. He is telling David that David is the rich man from the story, but obviously not in a literal sense. This context demonstrates the need for interpretation, but where does this interpretation lead us?

Cohen brings up two points that are very important to keep in mind. “(1) Nathan has not told David anything David did not already know, (2) When Nathan has finished speaking, David has new feelings and thoughts about something he has already known.”¹⁷³ If David did not know that he had done something wrong, he would never

¹⁷² From 2 Samuel Chapter 12 in the NASB translation

¹⁷³ Cohen 235

make the connection that Nathan wants him to make between himself and the rich man. He must already know that he is guilty of taking something from someone less fortunate, when he had no need to take anything. So Nathan is not informing David that David has done something wrong, for David already know this. Instead, Nathan is making David feel something new about things that he already knew. He wants David to feel the guilt, shame, and anger towards himself that he feels towards the rich man. Also, it is important to note that the truth of the story is irrelevant here because we only need David to entertain the story seriously in order to bring about the emotive effect.¹⁷⁴ When Nathan tells David that he is the rich man, Nathan has artificially closed interpretation. From the standpoint of David there is now only one meaningful way to interpret the story.

But what happens is more than just an issue of interpretation. The story of David and Nathan isn't interesting because David is able to properly interpret what happens. Instead, the interest lies in the effect that the interpretation has on David; the critical communication that passes from Nathan to David. "David's anger and moral outrage at the rich man have been transferred to himself."¹⁷⁵ How exactly does this happen? We should be very careful and precise in describing this, for in doing so we are hopefully elucidating one of the central powers of parable. Cohen writes,

"No doubt David 'is like' the rich man in the story. But that itself leads to nothing. What matters is that some specific feeling attached to David's sense of the rich man is provoked in David's sense of himself, to which it had not previously been attached. This is not achieved simply by drawing David's attention to the fact that he and the rich man share membership in some similarity class. Nathan needs the absolute particularity of the rich man. This is what arouses David's feelings. Nathan does not effect the transfer of feelings by saying, "You resemble people whom you dislike." David might accept the proposition that he is like these disagreeable people and yet not be moved to anger at himself. After all, any group can be judged similar in some respect or other, and the

¹⁷⁴ Ibid 237

¹⁷⁵ Ibid 237

question will remain, why should David identify himself as such a person with respect to his feelings? Nathan does not permit this way out. Instead of telling David that he resembles people who make him angry, Nathan says, with absolute specificity and particularity, that David *is the rich man*, exactly the man at whom he is angry. And David responds at once.”¹⁷⁶

It is the particular specificity of the instance that brings about the change in David. As was argued, David must have already known that what he had done was wrong. Yet, he did not have an emotive response to his moral wrongdoing. Thus, Nathan must do two things: he must evoke the emotive response from David, and he must make sure that the response is aimed at David himself. Nathan could have tried to do both at once, by telling David that he should feel bad for what he’s done. But that leaves David with an escape. He can verbally assent to Nathan without making the emotive connection. Nathan takes a different route. He evokes the specific emotion that David needs to feel, and then he redirects that emotion. By doing this Nathan is able to achieve a sameness of vision with David, he is able to critically communicate. He makes David feel what he feels, and then he redirects that feeling in an inescapable way. Thus, David feels guilt and anger towards himself, and the lesson is complete.

This example is demonstrative of the idea that this kind of change is only able to take place because of the specificity that the parable possesses. As individuals, we do not respond in a significant manner to general stories. Our empathetic response, for instance, is closely tied to individual, specific stories and actions. If critical communication is the bringing about of a shared vision, then we are referring to some kind of perceptive state and not merely a state of knowledge. I am not trying to get you to agree with me, I am trying to get you to see what I see. In order to see what I see, you need to adopt the

¹⁷⁶ Ibid 237

viewing stance that I have. This adoption, or as I referred to it earlier, reorientation, is brought about by the specificity that we gain from the parable. If they are viewing the situation in the same gestalt view that I am viewing it, their interpretation should be the same as mine and thus it will apply to them as it does to me.

When Nathan tells the story of the rich man, he is setting up David to see the situation in the same way that Nathan sees it. When Nathan tells David that he is the rich man, there is no escape. David could deny that he is the rich man, but there will be no logical way in which to do so. David can either be completely delusional, or he can accept the critical communication that Nathan is giving him. The option of delusion is one that is certainly available, but it is hard to take. David first is given the correct emotional orientation by the story about the rich man. Given this orientation, he interprets the story, and his interpretation reorganizes his view of himself. So, the parable allows for critical communication in those steps. First it reorients the reader to the orientation of the storyteller.¹⁷⁷ By telling such a specific parable, we are able to prompt the reader to read the story in a specific way. The reader, having been reoriented, interprets the story. This interpretation should bring about a reorganization on the part of the reader, for something has been critically communicated to them and thus they are adopting a new point of view of themselves or of others. In this way, the parable effects a change in the reader, though this change is not merely one of knowledge. The reader has not just been taught a moral lesson. Instead, they now see the world in the same way that the author does, if the author has been successful in their endeavor.

¹⁷⁷ If a critic is present, then assumedly the reader is oriented towards the viewpoint of the critic.

Kierkegaard himself addresses the parable that Nathan tells David in *For Self-Examination*. He writes,

“But do you not believe that David himself was well aware beforehand how abominable it is to have a woman’s husband killed in order to marry her? Do you not believe that David, the great poet, could himself easily describe this (eloquently, terrifyingly, shockingly)? Then, too, do you not believe that David was well aware that he was guilty and what he was guilty of? And yet, yet, yet someone from the outside was needed, someone who said to him: You.”¹⁷⁸

David was well aware that the law had been broken, and he was not so foolish so as to imagine himself as having acted righteously. However, what was missing was his personal connection to the truth. What he needed was an outside source that connected David’s own person to the truth. What Nathan was able to do was indirectly communicate the truth to David such that David appropriated the truth that Nathan presented and was able to immediately change. I think it is all too easy to imagine Kierkegaard considering himself to be like Nathan, bringing the truth to Denmark, his David.¹⁷⁹ Kierkegaard is weaving the parable such that his audience becomes as enrapt as David was. They are caught up in the story, emotionally connected to it, full of inwardness. At that moment, Kierkegaard wants to turn to them and say: “You.”

Seeing this connection between parable and indirect communication by examining the way in which parable functions leads us towards an examination of Kierkegaard’s parables themselves. This chapter sets up the framework required to connect parables with Kierkegaard’s goals as an author, specifically that of his religious goal and his use of indirect communication. Understanding that parables can persuade, instructing the readers about themselves and offering up a sameness of vision with the

¹⁷⁸ FSE 39

¹⁷⁹ Of course, he can only do this towards those individuals who already possess the condition, as was discussed in chapter one.

author, we see how a close look at Kierkegaard's parables can help us better understand his works individually and collectively.

Conclusion

In chapters one and two, I worked to establish the goals that Kierkegaard had for his authorship as well as the conceptual tools that he saw necessary to use in order to accomplish that goal. Kierkegaard wants to bring us to Christianity, to make us aware of the true requirements of Christianity and of how much we lack in respect to them. He does this by using indirect communication to present possibilities to us. This chapter examined how parables fit into that schema and work towards advancing and fulfilling Kierkegaard's goals. Having now established a Kierkegaardian approach to parables, our next task is to turn to some of the parables themselves and examine them in order to give demonstrations of how they function both towards his overall goals and towards the goals of each individual work. Thus, we will next look at a number of parables taken from different times of the authorship and analyze them with the Kierkegaardian approach to parables that I've just established. Having done that, in chapter four, our last chapter will finally put forward the argument that ties all of these pieces together by showing precisely how the Kierkegaardian parable functions on the reader.

Chapter 4: Kierkegaard the Storyteller

Quantum theory provides us with a striking illustration of the fact that we can fully understand a connection though we can only speak of it in images and parables.

– Werner Heisenberg

Having examined the parable that Nathan tells David, we are now going to turn to a few of Kierkegaard’s own parables. In that spirit, I will begin with one such parable.

“It is supposed to have happened in England that a man was assaulted on the highway by a robber disguised with a large wig. He rushes at the traveler, grabs him by the throat, and shouts: Your wallet. He takes the wallet, which he keeps, but he throws away the wig. A poor man comes down the same road, finds the wig, puts it on, and arrives in the next town, where the traveler has already given the alarm. He is recognized, arrested, and identified by the traveler, who swears that he is the man. By chance, the robber is present in the courtroom, sees the mistake, turns to the judge and says, “It seems to me that the traveler is looking more at the wig than at the man” and asks permission to make an experiment. He puts on the wig, grabs the traveler by the throat, and says: Your wallet – and the traveler recognizes the robber and offers to swear to it – but the trouble is that he already has sworn an oath. So it goes with everyone who in one way or another has a “what” and pays no attention to “how”; he swears, he takes an oath, he runs errands, he risks his life and blood, he is executed – all for the wig.”¹⁸⁰

As I have stressed a number of times in this project, we must pay attention to the “how” just as much as we pay attention to the “what.” So far I’ve argued that parables are an important part of Kierkegaard’s “how” because they have a specific function that lends itself towards Kierkegaard’s self-professed goals.¹⁸¹ We’ve examined the ways that parables function and thus work towards these goals. This chapter is going to examine a number of parables individually and demonstrate the way that each specific parable functions both in the work in which it is found, and in the overarching schema that Kierkegaard has in mind: bringing people inwards so as to turn them into authentic

¹⁸⁰ CUP 615-616

¹⁸¹ Kierkegaard’s goals were discussed primarily in chapter one where I argued that Kierkegaard is working to bring his audience closer to authentic Christianity.

Christians.

In my previous chapters I have outlined why we should pay attention to Kierkegaard's parables. Kierkegaard wants to push individuals towards Christianity and given that Christianity has a specific subjective nature, Kierkegaard must employ the kind of communication that is tied to subjective truth: indirect communication. Taking into account his doctrine of indirect communication and examining his poetic side, we have been brought to his parables as the next object of examination. But before we dive into Kierkegaard's specific parables, I want to consider a short defense that one of the pseudonyms, Johannes Climacus, gives concerning the use of parables and fairy tales.

“Suppose there was a king who loved a maiden of lowly station in life – but the reader may already have lost patience when he hears that our analogy begins like a fairy tale and is not at all systematic. Well, presumably the erudite Polos found it boring that Socrates continually talked about food and drink and physicians and all such silly things that Polos never talked about. But did not Socrates still have one advantage that he himself and everyone else had the prerequisite knowledge from childhood on?”¹⁸²

Climacus here makes reference to the metaphors and parables that Socrates would often use. He finds that Socrates benefits from referring to concepts that everyone involved is familiar with. Everyone had the same ideas about the foods and drinks and physicians that Socrates mentioned. Thus, he is using a shared language of referents and concepts in his explanations and questions. The value here is that nothing needs to be introduced. Socrates does not have to teach his audience some new concept by referring to abstract ideas. Instead, he talks about food and drink metaphorically, and everyone knows the things of which he speaks. This is the defense that Climacus gives of his breaking into a parable in the middle of his philosophical discourse. Parables present a kind of shared

¹⁸² PF 26

language that all, or at least most, individuals can partake in. I might not understand what you mean when you say “objective truth” or “sin” or “faith”, but I do understand a king and a maiden. I’ve read many stories about such individuals and I know many maidens and am familiar with kings. So while I struggle to even begin to understand your writings on sin, I can immediately begin to understand the story of the king and the maiden, for I already possess the prerequisite knowledge.

This chapter will provide a close reading of a few of Kierkegaard’s parables. Given the frequency with which Kierkegaard employs parables, it would be an unruly task to try to examine each of them, so instead I’ve selected a small number that I think provide good examples of well-crafted parables that serve Kierkegaard’s overarching goals. I’ve organized them chronologically so that we can see how they directly relate to different stages that Kierkegaard is hoping to usher his readers through. The first of these that I will examine is the parable of Agnes and the Merman that is found in *Fear and Trembling*. I’ve chosen this parable for a number of reasons. First of all, it contains the very first mention of sin in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works. I find this especially valuable for Kierkegaard’s audience consists of people who are sinners. Thus, Agnes and the Merman represents the very first communication that directly examines this important spiritual side of his audience. Agnes and the Merman also functions in *Fear and Trembling* as a bit of a foil to the Abraham and Isaac narrative, for Abraham is without sin in his actions towards Isaac. Therefore, as I will argue, the parable of Agnes and the Merman presents to us, the readers, something that the story of Abraham and Isaac cannot: a shared language and experience. Given that Kierkegaard’s own defense of the use of parables is built on this idea of a shared language, I think it especially valuable to

examine the parable that first speaks to sin as a factor in life.

The next two parables that I will look at both come from *Philosophical Fragments*. The first is the parable of the King and the Maiden, which begins with the excerpt just above. The second is the parable of the Tyrant Historian. I'm choosing two parables from *Philosophical Fragments* because both of these parables serve to illustrate some of the central themes in *Fragments*, as well as function towards Kierkegaard's overarching goals in important ways. *Fragments* was written after *Fear and Trembling* and serves to continue the shift from the ethical to the religious that began in *Fear and Trembling*. Thus, in *Fragments* we see a lot of discussion about how we can be religious, how we can transition to faith. *Fear and Trembling* laid out the struggle between the ethical and the religious, and in *Fragments* we get the exploration of some of the basic questions that someone might have as they move into faith. Both of the parables that I've selected from *Fragments* help to serve this goal. The parable of the King and the Maiden addresses how humans can enter into a relationship with God when, due to sin, they know that they do not deserve one. Similarly, the parable of the Tyrant Historian examines the age-old question about the historicity and rationality of faith. How can I believe something written in a book thousands of years ago? Maybe I could believe if I had been there, or if I had known the disciples of Christ. The parable of the Tyrant Historian addresses this sentiment, trying to convince readers that it wouldn't have made a difference, that the question of faith remains the same if we were best friends with Simon Peter or if we are reading about the actions of Simon Peter two thousand years later. So where in *Fear and Trembling* we see the introduction of some religious elements, for instance of sin instead of just unethical action, in *Fragments* we find the

transition to the religious.

After looking at *Fragments*, I want to turn to a much later work, *For Self-Examination*. This work takes place long after Kierkegaard has hoped to reintroduce Christianity to his audience, an action that was initially planned to be completed in the Postscript. In *For Self-Examination*, we instead see a message aimed at those who seemingly consider themselves Christian. A lot of *For Self-Examination* consists of lessons and messages to Christians. I will be looking at two different parables from this work. The parable of the royal decree and the parable of the Beloved's Letter appear a few pages apart and both address the same problem. Something that we see Kierkegaard referring to throughout a number of his works is how the truth of Christianity is essentially a subjective truth. It is a truth that should transform and change us. In these parables we see Kierkegaard trying to impart this to his audience, again using the shared language that parables bring. Both of these parables present situations in which direct action instead of careful study is the prescribed approach. Kierkegaard is pushing us to be doers of the Word and not merely scholars of the Word.

One of the reasons that this chapter is dedicated, almost entirely, to the examination of a few parables is that Kierkegaard scholarship generally ignores them. With very few exceptions outside of the errant reference here and there, the parables are never discussed. As you may note reading through this chapter, some of the interpretations that I provide are not complex, while others are. Kierkegaard's parables are not all convoluted. Indeed, some of them are very straightforward. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile for us to examine them, for otherwise we neglect and dismiss significant portions of Kierkegaard's work. The parables serve a function both in helping to explain

the concepts that Kierkegaard describes in standard philosophical prose, as well as to motivate the reader to enact the kind of individual change that Kierkegaard desires. This chapter will explain the former of these, primarily focusing on an understanding of what the parables are, how they explain ideas, and how they are related to the works in which they are present. My next chapter will focus on the latter, presenting an argument for the ways in which parables function to motivate us as individuals to change.

Overall with these parables I hope to present both a number of examples of how parables fit into the schema that I have outlined thus far, as well as to suggest a new way to read Kierkegaard. My goal with this chapter will be to demonstrate how we could focus on the parables found in Kierkegaard's works to try to gain an understanding of the main concepts at work, and specifically to recognize how they apply to us as individuals struggling with our movement through Kierkegaard's spheres of existence. A suggestion that I offer up for consideration: we may be able to construct a roadmap of Kierkegaard's main ideas by putting together a chronological collection of his parables. Such a collection would serve the individual searching to subjectively, and not just objectively, interact with and appropriate Kierkegaard's ideas.

Section 1: Merman. MERMAN!

The parable of Agnes and the merman appears in Problema III of *Fear and Trembling*. In this section, Silentio questions whether or not it was ethically defensible for Abraham to remain silent, that is, for Abraham to have concealed his intentions from Isaac, among others. In delving into this problem, Silentio turns our attention to four different stories. The story of Agnes and the merman is the second of these stories, and one that most Danes would be familiar with, as it was well known in Danish tradition. In

the fairy tale, a merman seduces a woman named Agnes. She desires to go to the bottom of the sea, and he takes her there. She has a number of children with the merman and one day wishes to return to the surface and go to church. The merman knows that if she leaves the sea she will never return, but Agnes does not relent. Eventually she does return to the surface and ends up staying there, leaving her children and the merman all alone in the ocean. This is the most common version of the story known by the Danes, although there are a number of slight variations depending on who is telling it. Hans Christian Andersen, for instance, wrote an unsuccessful musical about Agnes and the merman.¹⁸³ Kierkegaard, as Silentio, created his own version of Agnes and the merman that broke both with the regular tradition of the fairy tale and with Andersen's retelling of it. The version of the story that appears in *Fear and Trembling* has a number of unique characteristics.

In Silentio's version of the story, the merman is unable to take Agnes. He begins to seduce her, and she willingly submits herself to him, but just as he is about to whisk her away into the sea, she looks at him one last time, "not fearfully, not despairingly, not proud of her good luck, not intoxicated with desire, but in absolute faith and in absolute humility."¹⁸⁴ With this last look, the merman stops; he cannot continue his seduction. The sea is calmed as the wildness within the merman is calmed. Her absolute innocence wins the merman over and defeats him. The merman takes Agnes home and tells her that he just wanted to show her how beautiful the sea can be when it is calm. Silentio begins with this story, and he adds to it to create his particular treatment of repentance and thus of sin,

¹⁸³ A full copy of the music with the lyrics can be found at <http://img.kb.dk/ma/hca-udst/pdf/gade-agnhavm.pdf>

¹⁸⁴ FT 94

for one can only repent if one has transgressed.¹⁸⁵

When looking at this initial version, we already get a taste of the central problem—the clash between the faithful and innocent Agnes versus the unethical merman. Agnes’s faith is able to overcome the merman specifically because her faith is complete. She looks at the merman in “absolute faith and absolute humility.” Agnes is unlike any of the other women that the merman tries to seduce, and in this we recognize the merman’s problem. Agnes wants the merman faithfully, but he only wants her as a captured prize. Part of a successful seduction, for the merman, is winning a woman over despite her reservations. But Agnes has no reservations, and to that extent the merman has not seduced her. So Silentio envisions Agnes as being absolutely innocent, and it is that innocence that the merman cannot overcome. Indeed, the opposite occurs: Agnes overcomes the merman.

The innocence that Agnes possesses is not a quality or trait that any real human being could have, and Silentio himself acknowledges that Agnes is an impossible human being. He claims that it would be an “insult” to envision a seduction in which the woman is as innocent as he portrays Agnes to be.¹⁸⁶ We must keep this in mind as we work through the story. Agnes represents an ideal of innocence, faithfulness, and humility. In order to overcome the merman’s sin, we need something drastically non-human.

Silentio then elaborates on some possible outcomes of the parable. If the merman is overcome by Agnes’s innocence, then the merman can do one of two things. His first option is that of mere repentance by turning away from his initial plan to seduce Agnes.

¹⁸⁵ Additionally, as I have noted multiple times throughout this work, the condition is also required in order for us or the Merman to recognize sin. God provides us with the condition, and Agnes provides it to the Merman.

¹⁸⁶ FT 95

He recognizes the wrongness of his actions and he experiences the unhappiness that is tied to that recognition. If he merely repents he does not communicate to her what his true intentions are, nor does he reveal the depths of his depravity. Instead, he lies to her. He tells her that he only wanted to show her how beautiful the sea looks when it is calm. Given this approach, the merman remains closed, for repentance does not in and of itself include disclosure to Agnes. This leaves Agnes upset, for she loved the merman and was ready to spend the rest of her life with him. The merman too is unhappy, for he loved Agnes but was unable to disclose himself to her and this now carries a new guilt. Therefore, repentance alone leaves both of them unhappy, for repentance alone leaves the merman without Agnes.

The second option that Silentio offers is repentance accompanied by disclosure to Agnes. In this scenario, like the first, the merman goes through the motion of repentance. However, in this case, he does not remain burdened by this guilt. Instead, he discloses himself to Agnes. He tells her of himself, of his treachery, of his indiscretion. But he also tells her of his love, and in this he pledges himself to her. He decides to marry her. He overcomes his guilt and does more than repent in the sense of merely turning away from his initial wrongness; he goes further, takes the step of faith, and gains Agnes. This is the expanded story that Silentio gives to us. But, the question remains, why should we examine the story of Agnes and the merman?

Fear and Trembling is primarily concerned with the account of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac and attempts to understand how Abraham could have acted as he did.¹⁸⁷ Abraham is righteous both in the eyes of God and of men. Though Abraham is not

¹⁸⁷ Kierkegaard refers to the Biblical story found in Genesis 22:1–19.

perfect, he is nonetheless chosen by God. Abraham can choose sinfully, but he is not currently possessed by sin.¹⁸⁸ With Agnes and the merman, Kierkegaard offers the reader a story that bears some resemblance to that of Abraham and Isaac, but one with a number of differences, primary among them the presence of actual sin. The merman is a seducer, very clearly in sin. He wants to seduce Agnes, take her away to the bottom of the sea, and make her his own, but Agnes defeats him through her perfect innocence.

While there is a sense in which the merman overcomes his own sinful urges, he is not the source of this change, Agnes is. Hall claims that it is through the accident of Agnes's virtue that the merman is saved, and not through his own virtue.¹⁸⁹ I agree with Hall's assertion, though I want to carve out room for an additional claim. It is not the merman's virtuous self that impedes the seduction, but rather is it Agnes's. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that the merman has no part in his repentance. Agnes's innocence makes the merman aware of his need for repentance, but it cannot make him repent. He must make that choice for himself.^{190,191} Agnes's innocent nature brings about a change in the merman that moves him to choose repentance.¹⁹² This is in contrast with Abraham's faith: Abraham is a man who hears the voice of God and acts; Abraham's nature does not change when he responds to God. The merman, on the other hand, relinquishes his seductive ways in the face of Agnes's innocence. He changes himself in order to respond to the purity he sees in Agnes.

Thus, the merman repents. He is unable to seduce Agnes and this failure causes

¹⁸⁸ This is to say that Abraham can choose to disobey God, and in doing so would be sinning, but prior to that choice, he is not a sinful individual. He is righteous in the eyes of God and is God's chosen one.

¹⁸⁹ Hall 53

¹⁹⁰ That is to say that Agnes gives the Merman the condition.

¹⁹¹ FT 99

¹⁹² In this, the Merman has been transformed. He is no longer a seducer, or a person to whom seduction even sounds appealing. It is this new, transformed person that would choose to repent and disclose.

him to realize the error of his ways. When the merman recognizes his evil intent and must decide whether to disclose that intent to Agnes, the merman seems to hold a position similar to that of Abraham: after the real sacrifice was made, Abraham has to come to terms with his seemingly evil decision to kill his son and he must decide whether or not to disclose this information to Isaac or Sarah. However, the merman and Abraham are not identically placed. Abraham was chosen by God for his faith; the merman is not even a candidate for faith until after his encounter with Agnes.

Silentio claims that if the merman decides to remain quiet then he is in the realm of the demonic. This category is something that Abraham did not experience, as it relates specifically to the fact that the merman is in a sinful state. The merman is in the realm of the demonic when he recognizes his sin, but in such a way that he rejects the possibility of salvation. The merman, in this scenario, does not accept forgiveness, and he sees this refusal as the only clear sign of his virtue: “Now the demonic in repentance probably will explain that this is indeed his punishment, and the more it torments him the better.”¹⁹³ The demonic individual bears his sin alone, refusing to share it with anyone, refusing to burden anyone with it. Bearing it alone isolates him from others and it estranges him from himself. Rather than accept the possibility of forgiveness and salvation, the demonic turns away from them out of warped respect for his unworthiness of them.¹⁹⁴

Silentio goes on to describe what one who succumbs to the demonic might do in this situation. Agnes is sad because she loves the merman and now the merman is leaving her. Thus, he will try to save her from her sadness, and will endeavor to remove the love

¹⁹³ FT 96

¹⁹⁴ This is only a sketch of the state of the demonic. Given the constraints of my topic and the thesis that this project aims to argue, a full explanation of the demonic state is outside my parameters.

that Agnes feels towards him. He might “belittle her, ridicule her, make her love ludicrous, and if possible, arouse her pride.”¹⁹⁵ So if the merman remains closed, he enters into this demonic state via a kind of self-imposed suffering.

In this we find Kierkegaard’s first discussion of both sin and the demonic. Interestingly, Silentio sees the demonic as being higher than the ethical. The merman must come to terms with the universal and then turn away from it in order to enter into the demonic.¹⁹⁶ Silentio writes, “With the assistance of the demonic, therefore, the merman would be the single individual who as the single individual was higher than the universal. The demonic has the same quality as the divine, namely, that the single individual is able to enter into an absolute relation to it.”¹⁹⁷ Speaking of the merman’s demonic approach, Lippitt writes, “Such an orientation does not just fail to express the universal, in the manner of shooting at a target and missing. Rather, the merman demonstrates a *self-absorbed embrace* of his (demonic) hiddenness.”¹⁹⁸

While Abraham embraces the divine directive, the merman instead embraces his desire to remain closed to Agnes. Thus, the merman must recognize the universal and intentionally move beyond it. The merman in the demonic stage recognizes the ethical category of existence and purposefully denies it. In this sense he too experiences a teleological suspension of the ethical, quite like Abraham. It is in this respect that the demonic resembles the divine, but the merman’s teleology is quite different from that of Abraham. Abraham’s telos is based on the word of God, whereas the merman’s telos is not. However, were we, as readers, not privy to their innermost experiences, these two

¹⁹⁵ FT 96

¹⁹⁶ Kierkegaard uses the terms “universal” and “ethical” to refer to the same core concept.

¹⁹⁷ FT 97

¹⁹⁸ Lippitt 122

men might seem the same. They both recognize the ethical and purposefully choose to move beyond it, for reasons unknown. Only if they disclose themselves can we judge them to be demonic or divine.¹⁹⁹

Having considered the demonic approach in which the merman remains closed to Agnes, Silentio turns his attention to the possibility of the merman repenting like before, but this time opening himself to Agnes. In such a case, the merman explains that he was intending to seduce Agnes, but that her innocence has won him over. Silentio writes that in this situation, the merman goes on to marry her. However, this is no simple choice. The merman cannot merely decide on a whim that disclosing himself to Agnes is a good idea. In order to come to the dialectical apex, the merman must first realize his own sin. That is, he must realize that his sin makes him unworthy of Agnes, for she is perfectly innocent. Given this realization, what is the merman to do? How can he disclose himself and marry Agnes?

For the merman, repentance is what brings about the possibility of faith. He must repent in order to move past his sin. Given his repentance, the merman must then decide whether to disclose himself or to remain hidden. If he remains hidden then he enters into the demonic, but if he chooses to disclose himself to Agnes then he has the opportunity to enter into a relationship with her. As Keeley puts it, “Resignation is the last stage prior to faith, and repentance is a first possible sequel to sin.”²⁰⁰ So when we look at the actions of the merman, we first see him in sin. After sin, he enters a stage of repentance and that

¹⁹⁹ One might think that Abraham and the merman are dissimilar in another way, specifically in that the merman can make himself understandable to Agnes while Abraham can make himself understandable to no one. I think that this is a poor reading of the parable. If we think of Agnes as God in the parable, then of course the merman can make himself understandable to God, just as Abraham can also do. So they can both make themselves understandable, it’s just that they can only be understood by God (Agnes).

²⁰⁰ Keeley 145

repentance can lead him into faith, but it can also lead him into the demonic if he does not disclose himself.

Silentio describes this act of disclosure by the merman similarly to the way that he describes the movement of faith. Speaking of the merman he writes, “Then he marries Agnes. He must, however, take refuge in the paradox. In other words, when the single individual by his guilt has come outside the universal, he can return only by virtue of having come as the single individual into an absolute relation to the absolute.”²⁰¹ The merman’s sin takes him outside of the ethical, and he chooses either to remain closed to Agnes, or to open up to her. The only way that the merman can re-enter into the ethical is by overcoming the ethical. Silentio describes this process as “entering into an absolute relation to the absolute.”

This should sound familiar to the descriptions that Silentio gives of the movement made by the knight of faith.^{202,203} Indeed, Silentio even describes it as such when he says, “The merman, therefore, cannot belong to Agnes without, after having made the infinite movement of repentance, making one movement more: the movement by virtue of the absurd.”²⁰⁴ So, the merman becomes the knight of faith when he discloses himself to Agnes. Keeley writes, “But when repentance and Agnes both gain possession of his soul, the merman expressed the more difficult movement. It is this latter movement that is comparable to the movement of faith.”²⁰⁵ He becomes the knight of faith because he has no reason to think that disclosure will bring about a positive outcome. Instead, he has

²⁰¹ FT 98

²⁰² Keeley 141

²⁰³ To be brief, the knight of faith is the perfect archetypal believer. The knight of faith is one who believes “by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that with God all things are possible.” (FT 46) Abraham is a knight of faith because he believes that he will receive Isaac even though Isaac is to be sacrificed.

²⁰⁴ FT 99

²⁰⁵ Keeley 145

faith by virtue of the absurd. It is certainly beyond the bounds of reason to think that the merman would gain the love of Agnes, one who is perfectly innocent, by disclosing to her his sinful past and the perverse desire that he had to seduce her. He believes, for reasons that surpass the understanding, that by disclosing himself he will gain Agnes, just as Abraham believes that he will gain Isaac through obeying God's order to sacrifice him. So the merman is able to make the same movement of faith that we see in Abraham, though they both are acting under very different circumstances.

Silentio's descriptions of the merman after he has disclosed himself are strikingly similar to those that he gives of the knight of faith. In the act of disclosing himself to Agnes, the merman makes the movement of the absurd, which is precisely what Silentio targets as being the unique identifier of the knight of faith, for it is what separates the knight of faith from the knight of resignation. Describing the merman who discloses himself Silentio claims, "then he is the greatest human being I can imagine." He goes on to say, "The merman, therefore, cannot belong to Agnes without, after having made the infinite movement of repentance, making one movement more: the movement by virtue of the absurd."²⁰⁶ Silentio describes the knight of faith in much the same way. The knight of faith makes the infinite movement and then continues on to make the movement of the absurd.

The parable of Agnes and the merman presents to the reader an image of the knight of faith that is graspable in a way that the story of Abraham is not. Abraham was chosen by God and, in the confines of the Binding of Isaac narrative, was blameless.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ FT 99

²⁰⁷ This is not to say that Abraham was supra-human or entirely sin-less, but merely that in the confines of the story, he heard the voice of God and acted correctly without hesitation.

But I, and I assume all of Kierkegaard's other readers, am neither of those things. I have not heard the voice of God, and I am very much steeped in sin. Thus, if Abraham is the only vision of a knight of faith, then such a thing is beyond me. But when we view the merman, and see him as a knight of faith, the readership gains back the possibility of the knight of faith. I struggle to imagine being called by God to sacrifice my son, but I can easily imagine being a sinful person in the face of a pure creature. The parable of Agnes and the merman allows the reader to connect to a salvation narrative that we cannot find in Abraham. I share the experience of the merman, and thus I can consider his narrative from my own perspective, as an insider. I am the merman and I need Agnes. This is the critical communication, to return to a concept I explained last chapter, that this parable drives towards. Just as David needed to realize that he was the rich man who stole from his neighbor, I need to realize that I am the sinner in need of salvation.

Having presented a reading of this parable, we might next ask: Why examine Agnes and the merman? *Fear and Trembling* has a number of parables in it, and the Agnes parable is itself nestled in a series of four parables late in the book. Yet, the parable of Agnes and the merman has something unique in it: the very first mention of sin. Prior to this parable, readers of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms have not seen the concept of sin anywhere. We do not see sin discussed with relationship to Abraham, for he was sinless in his actions towards Isaac. The reader has therefore not yet had any existence possibility presented that is part of the reader's shared experience. As was noted in the introduction to this paragraph, parables bring to the table a shared language and experience that the audience can understand and connect with. Up until the parable of Agnes and the merman, such a shared experience did not exist in *Fear and Trembling*.

Thus this parable holds special significance. For if, as I have contended, parables function as a part of Kierkegaard's plan to bring his readers into authentic Christianity, the parable of Agnes and merman is where we must start, in sin and in need of salvation.²⁰⁸ The possibility of salvation and of becoming a knight of faith exists for the merman, as long as he chooses well. So too does Kierkegaard want us to recognize that we also can choose well. We therefore see how this parable, if successful, begins to move Kierkegaard's audience towards faith for it provides a reminder of the initial realization of the need for salvation.

What I've presented here is primarily an understanding of the content of the parable. I haven't yet dug into the form itself. In order for us to examine how the form functions, we need to first understand the kinds of content that we find in Kierkegaard's parables and the ways in which they work within their individual texts. In chapter five I will be presenting my argument for their specific function, referencing the parables that are found here, like that of Agnes and the merman.

Section 2: A Cinderella Story

The next parable that I will examine comes from the next pseudonymous work after *Fear and Trembling, Philosophical Fragments*. Early on in the work we come across the parable of the king and the maiden. Climacus writes that there once lived a king who was very powerful and wise. He was well respected and feared by all the other nearby kingdoms. And on top of this good fortune, he was also in love. He loved a lowly maiden. His heart overflowed with love for her. And yet, as he was full of love, he slowly

²⁰⁸ Again, this is all premised on the possession of the condition, for without the condition, this entire discussion is fruitless.

began to feel sorrow as he realized something. “Alone he grappled with the sorrow in his heart: whether the girl would be made happy by this, whether she would acquire the bold confidence never to remember what the kind only wished to forget – that he was the king and she had been a lowly maiden.”²⁰⁹ The king realizes that the maiden might recognize that she could never repay the king for the love that he’s showing. She could never deserve to be so uplifted, for she is only a lowly maiden. So the king hopes that she can forget her upbringing and status. Climacus claims that the maiden would be happier to live a lowly and obscure life rather than to be uplifted by the King and to realize, every minute of every day, that she did nothing to deserve her treatment and that she can never repay it.

So, what is the king to do? The first option that Climacus presents is for the king to leave her where she is, living the life of a lowly maiden. The maiden is pleased by this, for she is content with her life before she knows of the king and his love. So inaction on the king’s part does not interrupt or damage the maiden’s life at all. From her perspective, she does not need to be uplifted, even though she might indeed be happier if her life were to be magically improved. Yet, though the maiden would be satisfied with the king’s inaction, the king would be left in sorrow. The king deeply loves the maiden and her contentedness does not calm his sorrow. The king wants the maiden selfishly and erotically, but he also wants to make her happy. Thus the king is saddened because even though the maiden is content with her current situation, she is unaware of the possibilities that she’s missing out on and the king also fails to have her as an object of love.

The next option that Climacus gives the king is the option to uplift the maiden.

²⁰⁹ PF 27

Climacus writes, “the king could have appeared before the lowly maiden in all his splendor, could have let the sun of his glory rise over her hut, shine on the spot where he appeared to her, and let her forget herself in adoring admiration.”²¹⁰ This is able to overcome the situation where the maiden recognizes how much she owes to the king for the change in her circumstance. By revealing himself in all of his splendor the king is overwhelming the maiden such that she forgets her worry. In view of all the king’s splendor, her memory of her lowly state disappears. She can think only of the king’s glory and his magnificence. Yet, the king is still unhappy for he considers this to be a deception. If the maiden only sees the king’s glory and can only think about his glory, then she cannot see him for who he truly is and she cannot see his love for what it is. “This perhaps would have satisfied the girl, but it could not satisfy the king, for he did not want his own glorification but the girl’s, and his sorrow would be very grievous because she would not understand him; but for him it would still be more grievous to deceive her.”²¹¹ By revealing his glory to her he glorified himself and made it so that she only saw his glory. Thus the maiden does not understand the king, for she does not know why he would uplift her as he did. She does not understand what he feels for her.

Taking all of this into account, Climacus provides a third option that the king may pursue so that he may resolve his situation. Uplifting the maiden will be unsuccessful and thus Climacus brings up the possibility of the king’s descending. The king will become low, as low as the maiden, so that he can express his love in earnest. However, Climacus notes that this descent cannot be one of mere attire. The king cannot dress like a servant and hope that his descent is complete. “But this form of a servant is not something put on

²¹⁰ Ibid 29

²¹¹ Ibid 29

like the king's plebian cloak, which just by flapping open would betray the king."²¹² The king cannot just dress like a peasant, for to only mask one's clothing will eventually lead to the truth of the king's identity being revealed one way or another. He might accidentally order the palace guards around or require niceties foreign to the average peasant. At the first sign of trouble he will claim that he is the king and must be treated as such. Instead, the king must wholly become a servant. In word, deed, appearance, and thought he must be as low as the maiden. Once he has descended, he can love her in truth and she can receive his love in truth. For Climacus, this is the only outcome where they can both be happy in their love.

The analogues to this parable are quite obvious, and Climacus even points them out. The king acts as god, the maiden as humanity. Humanity is low and though content in ignorance, could be made immensely happier by receiving the god's love. So how must the god love us? As was demonstrated with the king and the maiden the god must lower himself. The god must descend into humanity and truly become one of us. The obvious metaphor here being a reference to Christ. So, we have a parable that seems to have a rather obvious metaphorical meaning, God sending his son Jesus to us as an act of love, so that we might be happy. Climacus notes most of this, for he tells the parable and then moves back and forth between the narrative and the metaphorical in his analysis. He writes about God in one sentence and then the king in the next, switching from maidens to humans when he sees fit. So the intended metaphorical meaning is made clear to the audience by the author as he analyzes his own parable. This is something that Kierkegaard rarely does so completely. Oftentimes he will have a few lines of analysis of

²¹² Ibid 31-32

his parables, but the analysis is usually quite vague, noting only the general themes that the parable has in common with whatever his current subject is. Yet here we have a parable that is quite well analyzed by the author and broken down for the audience. Given this analysis, what use is there in my inclusion of this parable in this project?

When we take into account the goals and structure of Kierkegaard's works as well as the approach to parable that I've laid out, I think that the parable of the king and the maiden provides us with a good example of how Kierkegaard's parables are supposed to cause personal and individual change in the readers and not merely to impart knowledge to them. The parable doesn't inform us of anything new. Climacus flat out describes why the god has to descend and how this relates to the overall problem of the teacher and the learner in *Fragments*. Yet, despite this, we are given the parable of the king and the maiden. At the end of the previous chapter I analyzed the story of Nathan and David, remarking that Nathan did not communicate any new information to David. David knew that he had done something wrong, he just didn't seem to care very much. What Nathan was able to do was to transmute David's knowledge about his wrongful act into a transformative experience for him. When we look at the parable of the king and the maiden, I think that we have Climacus attempting to do something similar. In the parable of Agnes and the merman, we were introduced to the concept of sin, we identified as mermen who needed an Agnes to save them. Moving from *Fear and Trembling* to *Philosophical Fragments*, we are now dealing with the possibility of salvation; how exactly can we be saved? How does Agnes save the merman? How can God save us? Well, let's forget God and sin and all of these difficult concepts, instead let's think about a king and a maiden. What can the king do? He can relinquish everything, leave his old

life behind, and become a servant. Only in this action is he able to love the maiden in truth and for their love to be happy. The king needs to descend if he wants to express his love. As an audience, this connects us to our blind ignorance for we see the same ignorance in the maiden. She would have been perfectly happy to remain where she was, and she would have been happy if the king uplifted her by a show of glory. But both would have left the king in sorrow and would have been deceptions. So, the king must become a peasant, a servant. As readers, we realize what the servant does not: how much the king is sacrificing and how little the maiden is aware of her situation. All that remains is for Nathan to point his finger at us like he did at David and say, "You are that maiden." But David trusted Nathan, they were like brothers. I do not trust Johannes Climacus and thus he cannot do as Nathan did. Instead he can only hope that we take the parable to heart, recognizing it as a parable, as something additional that was added to the text. By investigating and unraveling the oddity of a story tossed into the middle of a serious philosophical inquiry, we might come to understand the content of the parable and also to realize that we are the maiden just as we came to realize that we were mermen.

As we move from the parable of Agnes and the merman to the parable of the king and the maiden we also move forward in Kierkegaard's overall goal for his writing. If he is trying to engender inwardness such that authentic Christianity can come forward and blossom, both of these parables serve his needs. We have been made aware of our own sin, of our lowly state by the merman, and now the king and the maiden helps us recognize the vast difference between us and God. What could possibly bridge this difference? Only God descending to our level, God becoming human, the Christ. So we see these parables functioning not only to teach us these objective truths, but also, and

more importantly, to bring about a subjective relationship to these truths such that they might change who we are and how we think of ourselves.

As we move through *Philosophical Fragments* we eventually come to another parable that I wish to examine, the parable of the tyrant historian. At this point in *Fragments*, Climacus has become concerned with the issue of faith and its relation to the historicity of Christ. I might struggle to believe in Christ now, being two thousand years separated from him, but maybe I could believe if I had been there, or if I could speak to his disciples. It is this problem that the parable is in dialogue with.

“Suppose there lived in the generation closest to the contemporary generation a person who combined a tyrant’s power with a tyrant’s passion, and he had the notion of concerning himself with nothing but the establishment of the truth in this matter – would he thereby be a follower? Suppose he seized all the contemporary witnesses who were still alive and those who were closest to them, had them sharply interrogated one by one, had them locked up like those seventy translators and starved them in order to force them to speak the truth. Suppose he most cunningly contrived to have them confront one another, simply in order to use every device to secure for himself a reliable report – would he, with the aid of this report, be a follower?”²¹³

Climacus notes that such information would not help the tyrant for he would have deceived himself. While he indeed may be able to attain the best possible history of the situation, even something that all eye witnesses were to agree on, that would not help him believe for faith is not a matter of history. If the parable of the king and the maiden made us realize why God descended to our level and became human, then we might next ask how we can know, with objective validity, that Christ is that human. The parable of the tyrant historian drives us to answer that we can’t, regardless of how strong our historicity claims are. The tyrant does not become a follower when he receives the perfect account that all agree upon because that account only gives him objective claims about when a

²¹³ Ibid 92

certain person went to certain places and said certain things. It gives an account of numerous people who all saw this certain person perform miracles. But even this does not demonstrate the godhood of a human being. Instead, it merely shows that a large number of people all saw what appeared to be a miracle.

This helps to demonstrate the difference between the objective approach and faith, which Kierkegaard has argued elsewhere to be primarily subjective. The objective gives us the facts, in this case the historical facts. But the historical facts do not give us faith. Knowing that Jesus was from Nazareth or that many people saw him change water into wine does not help me believe that he is God made flesh. Instead this belief is one that I have only through faith, through a subjective relationship with it. So, establishing the historical situatedness of the story of Jesus might help us as scholars, but it does not help us as followers, and for this reason the tyrant is not a follower. *Fragments* thus has advanced from introducing the necessity of Christ to demonstrating what is required in order to believe. We shouldn't try to become scholars; establishing the history will not help us believe. We can imagine ourselves as the tyrant historian working to put together an exact account of what transpired. We can imagine interviewing each witness, testing their testimony against that of other witnesses. We might amass a huge amount of work all aimed at helping us paint the perfect picture of who Jesus was, what he was like, and exactly what he said and did. And despite all of this, my skepticism might remain. Maybe it was a mass delusion. Maybe Jesus was merely a very persuasive sleight of hand trickster. Maybe all of these stories are a false memory shared by many people. No amount of accounting for the story helps me believe that a god had become human. Thus, Climacus not only tells the reader that a history is not enough, he uses the parable of the

tyrant historian so that we can realize it for ourselves, as I will argue in chapter five. I could become a tyrant historian, but it will do me no good, so instead I must seek to be a follower by taking a subjective approach to faith.

Section 3: I Obey the Letter of the Law, if Not the Spirit

Next, I want turn to a few parables from *For Self-Examination*, a book published much later in Kierkegaard's career, and one published under his own name. *For Self-Examination* has a general assumption that the reader is a Christian and is seeking self-improvement or that the reader is earnestly seeking to become a Christian, and much of the book addresses issues related to becoming a more authentic Christian. Early on in the book, we run into two parables only a few pages apart, the parable of the royal decree and the parable of the beloved's letter. They both touch on the same issues, so I'm going to describe both of the parables before we examine them more deeply.

In the parable of the beloved's letter, Kierkegaard begins by making quite clear what the parable is about. He writes, "Imagine that a lover who has received a letter from his beloved – I assume that God's Word is just as precious to you as this letter is to the lover. I assume that you read and think you ought to read God's Word in the same way as the lover reads this letter."²¹⁴ So we have a parable about a letter from someone's beloved and this letter signifies, in some sense, the Word of God. We are the lover and God is the beloved. Kierkegaard goes on to consider a rebuttal that his audience might make: but the Word of God is written in a foreign language, and we must decipher it. Thus Kierkegaard adds to his parable the claim that the beloved's letter is written in a language that the lover does not understand. So what is the lover to do? He obviously cannot just read the

²¹⁴ FSE 26

letter, for he cannot understand the language in which it is written, and so he must instead begin to translate it. The lover finds a dictionary so that he might translate the foreign tongue into his own and begins the arduous task of translating. Kierkegaard describes what might happen were an acquaintance of the lover to enter and take notice of the labors of the lover. The acquaintance might say,

“Well, so you are reading a letter from your beloved? - what do you think the other will say? He answers, ‘Have you gone mad? Do you think this is reading a letter from my beloved! No, my friend, I am sitting here toiling and moiling with a dictionary to get it translated. At times I am ready to explode with impatience; the blood rushes to my head and I would just as soon hurl the dictionary on the floor – and you call that reading – you must be joking!’”²¹⁵

Kierkegaard goes on after this to note a distinction here between two different forms of reading. There is reading to translate and reading to understand. The lover is currently focused on the former so that he might eventually be able to accomplish the latter. Having finally completed the translation the lover can transition from one kind of reading to the other and can finally read the letter from his beloved.

After this initial setting, Kierkegaard goes on to offer another stipulation: what if the letter not only contained the standard professions of love that we would expect, but also expressed a directive aimed at the beloved? This directive would “require very much” of the lover, and thus there seems ample reason, Kierkegaard thinks, for anyone to pause and give thought to the directive. Yet Kierkegaard imagines that the lover, upon reading the directive, immediately jumps to action and runs off to accomplish what was asked of him. But what would happen if, when the lover accomplished the task and returned to his beloved, she were to tell him that he must have mistranslated her letter or misunderstood her, for what he accomplished was not the directive that she gave him?

²¹⁵ FSE 27

Would she be happy or upset with him? Would he be pleased with himself or full of regret? In order to answer this, Kierkegaard takes a quick detour into another short parable. He has us think of two students, both instructed to learn their homework lessons very well. One student goes home, and in his attempt to learn his lesson well, reads twice as far and learns twice as much as he needs to, but he learns it well. The other student, curious about what it means to learn a lesson very well, goes around asking his friends from school what they are studying or how they were learning. Soon he got sidetracked enjoying a discussion with a friend and the night was over before he had learned any of the lesson.

Kierkegaard uses this second parable to explain part of the problem in the first. He claims that the beloved would not be upset with the lover who acted instantaneously, wanting to immediately fulfill the directive he'd been given. Similarly, the schoolboy who studied twice as much did more than was necessary, but his teacher will not be angry with him. However, the boy who spent all of his time trying to figure out exactly how he should learn has wasted his time and accomplished nothing. Kierkegaard finds this analogous to the lover who spends all his time working on a translation such that if he comes across a directive he redoubles his efforts to make sure that he gets the perfect translation of the directive so that he can be sure that he will act in the correct way. Kierkegaard finishes these parables by returning to the topic at hand, the Word of God. He claims that we need to treat the Word of God like the lover who acts on the beloved's directive and like the schoolboy who learns twice as much as is necessary. As fits in with many of his claims that we've already discussed, Kierkegaard wants to make sure that we do not become overly concerned with the scholarly approach to Christianity if doing so

impedes our ability to act as God wants us to act. We see this theme quite clearly in the parable of beloved's letter and the short parable of the schoolboy's homework contained within it.

A few pages later we find another parable, the parable of the royal decree.

Kierkegaard writes,

“Imagine a country. A royal decree is issued to all public officials, subordinates – in short, to the whole population. What happens? A remarkable change takes place in everyone. Everybody turns into an interpreter, public officials become authors, and every blessed day an interpretation is published, one more learned, more penetrating, more elegant, more profound, more ingenious, more wonderful, more beautiful, more wonderfully beautiful than the other. Criticism, which is supposed to maintain an overview, can scarcely maintain an overview of this enormous literature; indeed, criticism itself becomes such a prolix literature that it is impossible to maintain an overview of the criticism: everything is interpretation – but no one read the decree in such a way that he complied with it. And not only this, that everything interpretation – no, they also shifted the view of what earnestness is and made busyness with interpretations into real earnestness.”²¹⁶

The contemporary reader will likely immediately recognize how applicable this parable is to current academic philosophy. Despite this clear similarity, let us instead think of the context in which Kierkegaard was writing this. This parable goes on to lament this type of response. As we saw in earlier chapters, Kierkegaard very much saw Christianity as something that required action. Here we see the popular response not being action, but instead study. Everyone is to become a scholar and a critic. It is this approach that Kierkegaard finds so problematic.

Both of these parables deal with similar themes. In the parable of the beloved's letter, we have a character who can seemingly choose between making sure he gets the exact perfect translation of a call to action or acting on an imperfect translation. In the parable of the royal decree, we have an entire country who so strongly desire to

²¹⁶ FSE 33-34

understand a royal decree that they all become scholars and critics, though no one follows the decree. Prior to these two parables, in between them, and after them in the text, Kierkegaard writes about the Word of God and the proper orientation that we should have towards it. It seems quite clear that we need to be doers of the Word and not scholars of the Word. The Word of God does not ask for us to be scholars, it demands action on our part. So again, given that Kierkegaard seems to describe his intended meaning and theme with the parables, what use do the actual stories hold? Why tell these two parables instead of just instructing us to be doers of the Word?

Both of these parables seem poised to instruct the reader to act on the commands of God rather than to spend time making sure that one is interpreting them correctly. Yet, this is a rather straightforward message and one that Kierkegaard laid out in plain words. The form of the parable allows the individual to access that common experience and language that they share with Kierkegaard and to activate their ability to imagine different possibilities. I do not know what it is like to, with authority, give commands to all humans. I have no experience relating to what is expected in such a situation. But I am familiar with a couple in love, either through experience or through popular literature and storytelling. If I had sent a letter to my beloved that directed her to act in some way, but I had done it in a foreign language or had coded it in some other way, what I want most is for her to do the thing that I'm asking her to do. If I sent a coded message to my wife asking her to pick up some butter on her way home from work and she mistranslated my message and instead brought home olive oil, or bread, or coffee, I would likely find the whole situation amusing. I'd be glad that she had tried her hardest to do what I had asked and I would recognize that coded messages are not easy to understand. If I think of

myself being put in the parabolic situation that Kierkegaard describes, I would very much want action and not study. If my wife came home empty handed but assuring me that she had spent hours poring over my message, working with different cyphers and translators, I would be quite annoyed. The purpose of the message wasn't to obtain a good translation, but to cause an action on the part of my beloved.

Similarly, when we examine the parable of the royal decree, I'm sure that many of us find the situation already frustrating. The royal decree orders us to act in a certain way, to follow certain rules. For everyone to become scholars and critics concerning the decree is to obviously miss the point of the decree. What makes the situation even worse is that the general populace becomes so warped that they begin to think that this critical and scholarly attitude toward the decree is true earnestness! Everyone can imagine the frustration that the ruler must have at this outcome. Even if you've never ruled a country, you could think about this in terms of your own children, for instance. If you gave your child a command and your child spent all of her time analyzing and studying the command instead of completing it, you would rightfully be quite angry with her. The parable of the royal command describes a situation where a command is received from a place of power and authority, and so every individual only needs to recognize and understand those concepts in order to be able to individually connect and personally imagine themselves in that type of situation. These parables tap into shared individual experiences and the emotional responses that those experiences elicit in order to bring about the kind of critical communication that Kierkegaard wants to take place.

Something interesting that is worth considering is that in both of the parables that I just described, that of the beloved's letter and of the royal decree, I have interpreted

them from the standpoint of the God character. In both parables, I have imagined myself as the ruler who made the decree or as the letter writer who was amused at the response of the lover. If we look at the parable of the beloved's letter, the lover is the main character of the narrative. We see the entire situation through his eyes as he struggles to translate the letter and has to decide whether or not to act on it. So naturally, we might try to interpret the parable from his point of view. However, we are unable to judge the actions of the lover unless we take the beloved's position. From purely the lover's perspective, studying the letter to get a perfect translation or acting on the first translation that is made are both quite sensible actions. In order to judge which action is correct, we must ask ourselves what the beloved must have wanted. Why would she include a directive in her letter? Thus, we must adopt her perspective, and indeed Kierkegaard makes her perspective easy to adopt, for it is only that of a beloved writing a letter to her lover. So, we see that we can identify with both characters here. This is a bit different from the situation of Agnes and the merman where I cannot imagine what it is like to be Agnes, for I have never been pure and innocent. Therefore, when we examine the parable of the beloved's letter, we have to think through the situation from both perspectives in order to recognize the proper response and thus in order to recognize how we should act. We have a similar situation with the parable of the royal decree. We need to think through the situation from the perspective of the public as well as the perspective of the ruler in order to make a judgment call about the actions of the public.

This does lead to some interesting conclusions when we look at the place of parables in Kierkegaard's works that I want to briefly mention here, though these will be heavily expanded upon in chapter five. First, I want to note that I think that Kierkegaard

intends for these parables to be interpreted this way. They are written such that we have to take the “God” position in the parable in order to glean the intended meaning from it. One might contend that I am instead interpreting these parables incorrectly and taking the wrong meaning from them, but they are heavily contextualized by the works in which they are found and, at least in the case of these two parables, the context leads us to a very clear meaning. So Kierkegaard wants us to take the “God” position as we read through these parables.²¹⁷ Recognizing that forces us into another conclusion, namely that we cannot always interpret parables from the standpoint of the character that is most like us. In the parable of Agnes and the merman, I cannot be Agnes so I must think it through from the perspective of the merman. But this is not the case in the parable of the beloved’s letter. So it seems unnecessary for the reader to be able to identify as a single character and to thus derive their subjective relationship to the parable from that character. In the parable of the beloved’s letter, I will think through the situation from the standpoint of both characters, even if one of them is an analogical representation of God.

When we examine all of these different parables from different works of Kierkegaard, we find a few primary things of interest. First, all of these parables try to use images, experiences, or stories that the majority of Kierkegaard’s Danish audience would be familiar with. The Danes knew the story of Agnes and the merman, so Kierkegaard retold it, changing some things to make it fit his purpose. Everyone was familiar with the concepts of kings and maidens for such things were, directly or indirectly, a part of everyday life. So too can they imagine tyrants and lovers and royal

²¹⁷ It’s important to recognize, I think, that when we take the “God” position, doing so does not help us understand God, as Kierkegaard constantly maintains that God is wholly different from us. But rather, as I will argue further in chapter five, taking the “God” position helps us see ourselves truly. We don’t come to understand God better, instead we come to understand ourselves better.

orders. All of these topics and concepts were a part of the shared experience and language that Kierkegaard's audience possessed. Thus, because both of the specificity of these stories, as well as with their commonality, readers are able to imaginatively project themselves into these stories in order to understand them. I imagine myself as merman, or as king or, as a lover, and am able to work through the consequences of the parable from those positions. Given the various arguments that I've presented up to this point, I think we can conclude that Kierkegaard is trying to indirectly communicate to us with these parables and bring about a kind of shared vision of ourselves. As I will argue next chapter, the parable of the royal decree doesn't exist so that I can agree with Kierkegaard about Christianity requiring us to be doers of the Word and not scholars of the Word. It exists so that I become a doer of the Word!

Second, many of these parables deal with love as a central concept. I picked the parables that I did for this chapter not based on this shared theme, but rather because I thought that they were all excellent examples of Kierkegaard's use of parables, and that they all served to seriously prod the reader. However, what I've ended up with are a bunch of parables about love. The parables of Agnes and the merman, the king and the maiden, and the beloved's letter are all focused around an individual struggling to love another or to successfully express their love for the other. The parable of the tyrant historian doesn't deal with love in any obvious way. The parable of the royal decree doesn't appear to deal with love, though one could argue that underneath all of it, we have a king's love for his people and the people's love for the king. Nonetheless, love ends up appearing not only in the parables that I selected, but in a great many of Kierkegaard's. In recognizing this, I want us to remember Kierkegaard's ultimate goal for

his authorship: to bring the religious forward. As I noted in chapter one, Religiousness C, as Westphal calls it, carries with it the requirement of agape. We must love others in a self-emptying way as we try to imitate Christ, who did the same. If Kierkegaard wants to bring the religious forward, the ability to love others in a self-emptying way is a necessary part of that. Thus, we can directly connect the concept of love to Kierkegaard's intended goals for his writings.

Yet, despite this connection, Religiousness C demands agape of us, and most of the parables deal with some variant of romantic love. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard separates love into different kinds: neighborly and preferential. Neighborly love is the kind of love that Religiousness C demands of us. It is a self-emptying, other-focused type of agape love. Neighborly love requires that we love all others as neighbors, and that we want what is best for them in a fashion that neglects or denies our own selfish desires. Preferential love, on the other hand, would refer to the more common types of love that most people experience like romantic love, the love of friends, or familial love. So the parables mostly present versions of preferential love even though neighborly love is the goal that we need to strive for. The parable of Agnes and the merman has a bit of both, in that the merman certainly feels romantic love towards Agnes, but he also seems to experience self-emptying love, as evidenced by his refusal to seduce her and his desire to disclose himself to her. In order to respond to the prevalence of preferential love in the parables, I want to very briefly refer to some of Sharon Krishek's work.

Krishek examines the place that love holds in the writings of Kierkegaard in a few of her works. One of her interests is in the parallel structure of *Fear and Trembling* and *Works of Love*. Referring to this she writes, "In this central text Kierkegaard presents,

side by side with stories of romantic love, an account of the double structure of faith, which includes two seemingly contradicting movements: the movement of resignation and the movement of faith. There is an important connection, I claim, between these two movements and a possible understanding, and fulfilment, of love.”²¹⁸ Krishek argues that we must understand preferential and neighborly love like we understand the dual movement of faith, for Kierkegaard. Just as faith requires two contradictory motions, resignation and groundedness, so too love requires two contradictory motions, self-emptying (neighborly) and self-fulfilling (preferential) love. Thus, while the parables might be focused quite heavily on preferential love, this type of love, on Krishek’s account, still very much holds value for us in fulfilling Kierkegaard’s goal of becoming Christ-like. The parables are modeling different types of love for us, showing us variations of romantic love, familial love, self-emptying love, among others.²¹⁹

Last, these parables, as we might expect, mirror some of the main themes that Kierkegaard is working through in the texts in which the parables are found. However, the parables sometimes take a different approach to these themes than the rest of the work does. If we look at Agnes and the merman, for instance, we find a parable about how someone in sin might work towards becoming a knight of faith. The rest of *Fear and Trembling*, though, doesn’t deal with sin at all. Instead it is mostly concerned with Abraham. So the parable provides us with an individual connection to the overarching concepts and themes that the main work does not. Abraham’s story was not one of sin and thus one that we ultimately cannot understand from an insider perspective for none of

²¹⁸ Krishek 5

²¹⁹ A fuller treatment of Kierkegaard’s parables overall would likely need to explain the frequency with which we find parables focused on love, but doing so is outside the bounds of this project. For excellent discussions of Kierkegaard’s understanding of love see the work of both Hall and Krishek.

us are without sin. When we add the parable of Agnes and the merman we are able to examine a narrative about becoming a knight of faith that we can make sense of, for we who are in sin must deal with sin and repentance in ways that Abraham didn't. We can thus see this parable, and others, as walking us through, on an individual level aimed at our inwardness and appropriation. His works also function to lay out a kind of road map on becoming a Christian. We start in the aesthetic stage, move to the ethical, and finally to the religious. Once we have become authentic Christians the writings then turn towards our steady improvement as Christians. So while we might view Kierkegaard's sections that are closer to standard philosophical prose as sections that explain important concepts to us in this path towards Christianity, I will argue in chapter five that we see his parables as actually doing the work of prompting the individual to move closer to Christianity.

Conclusion

The examination of these parables sets us up for the argument that I'm going to put forward in the next, and final chapter, which is that Kierkegaard's parables function as a mirror for us. Once we recognize that these parables guide us through the stages towards the religious by critically communicating to us through this common experience and language of kings and lovers and maidens, we can begin to see how in order for the parable to truly succeed, I must see the possibilities that it is offering as real possibilities for myself. Since Kierkegaard never points out, as Nathan does with David, that "You are that man," we must be able to recognize this for ourselves within the parables themselves. Otherwise we are only left angry when we consider the parable of the royal decree, much as David was angry when he heard of the rich man who stole his neighbor's lamb. We must be able to transform that anger into action by recognizing the truth that the parable

reveals is a truth about us, regardless of if we come to that conclusion by taking the stance of the God character or the stance of the human character.

Chapter 5: Kierkegaard the Metaphorical Mirror

You use a glass mirror to see your face; you use works of art to see your soul.
- George Bernard Shaw

In my heart of hearts, I wish that chapter four was the final chapter of this work. I'd like to end things with a few parables, and I still might, instead of with a lengthy philosophical discussion. Some of the power of the parable is lost when we demystify it, it seems to me. Nonetheless, a demystifying is now in order and this chapter will seek to provide an argument for the overall value that we find in Kierkegaard's parables. In order to properly frame this argument, I'd like to briefly sketch out a number of the concepts and conclusions that have been covered in the previous chapters.

As has been noted constantly throughout this work, Kierkegaard's goal for his writings seems to be to turn his countrymen and women towards an authentic version of Christianity.²²⁰ A number of times in his later works he claims this as his purpose. Though it may merely be a tired writer in hindsight making sense of what he's done, I think that the structure of his works backs up this claim. Kierkegaard finds that many in his society claim to be Christian, but they lack what he thinks is of central importance to what is truly Christian, and that is a passionate subjective relationship to the truth. Thus, his goal seems to be to bring this about. Yet, at the same time, he claims that he cannot make people Christian, for that is something that only God can do. Early on in *Fragments*, Climacus considers the learner's paradox as it relates to Christianity. How can someone come to know that they are in sin? It cannot be taught to them, for being in

²²⁰ I give a brief overview of what Kierkegaard's authentic Christianity looks like in section one of chapter one.

sin, in untruth, specifically implies an ignorance of your own untruth. So Kierkegaard cannot speak to those in untruth; doing so would be, to quote Epictetus, “fighting against a God, opposing Zeus.”²²¹ Making the individual aware of their untruth is something only God can do, and it occurs via a transformation of the individual. Kierkegaard, being unable to effect this transformation, seemingly cannot bring the individual to Christianity. Instead, what he can do is remind them of a truth that has already been revealed to them. An individual, having been transformed by God such that they can now see the truth, can go on to ignore or forget what they’ve seen. It is this individual whom Kierkegaard is targeting with many of his pseudonymous works. He cannot make us become Christians, for he cannot reveal to us our untruth; instead he can speak to those that have what he calls the “condition.” The condition is the ability to recognize your own untruth, and the condition can only be granted by God. Once someone has the condition, Kierkegaard can then speak to them and remind them of the truth, remind them of their sin. This is what we see occurring throughout his works. Kierkegaard is trying to remind us of something that has already been revealed to us, yet something that we have consciously or unconsciously forgotten. The argument that this chapter will present very specifically works within this framework, trying to show how the parables help to bring about this goal. Kierkegaard is not speaking to heathens who have never heard the Gospel, but rather to individuals who already consider themselves Christians but who seem to have forgotten what that means. They are thus in need of a reminder, and I will demonstrate that Kierkegaard’s parables do an exceptional job at offering this.

In order to remind us, Kierkegaard writes that his goal is to turn us inward. He

²²¹ Epictetus. *The Discourses of Epictetus*. Edited by Christopher Gill. Translated by Robin Hard, Everyman, 2000. 207.

notes inwardness and appropriation as being central to his project and as being central to Christianity in *Fragments*, *Postscript*, *For Self-Examination*, and *Point of View*. If we have the condition, and thus Kierkegaard wants to remind us of what we've forgotten (our own untruth), he doesn't need to present any new information to us. Rather, he needs to reorient us towards information that we already possess. If asked, I would admit that I'm a sinner in need of salvation. Yet Kierkegaard imagines that when faced with this question, I would likely follow it up with some claim about how I attend church, tithe, and properly believe the correct doctrines, and thus am on my way to salvation. He thinks that I have forgotten that Christianity requires something very specific of me. It is not enough to believe the correct things; instead I must have a certain type of relationship with the things that I believe. This relationship is what Kierkegaard is working to engender. He wants to turn us inward, to see the things that we already know, but to see them in new ways that changes how they affect us and the kinds of people that we are.

Part of the reason that Kierkegaard wants to turn us inward is because he claims that Christianity is essentially subjectivity. That is to say, true Christianity is not a set of beliefs, but a special orientation towards those beliefs. In *Postscript* he imagines two different individuals. The first individual prays to the correct God, but does so in untruth. The second prays to an idol, but does so with the "passion of infinity." Climacus then asks, which of the two is truly worshipping God? His answer is that the second individual is, despite praying to an idol, specifically because he is correctly oriented towards the divine, even if it is an idol.²²² He is full of passionate subjectivity and so though he might have the wrong name for God, and though he is looking at an idol, his subjectivity is

²²² CUP 201

what matters. Thus, Kierkegaard is trying to bring about a certain kind of subjectivity when he turns us inwards. He's not merely trying to communicate a set of correct doctrines, though he does seem to do this as well. Instead, his primary goal is to cause his readers to subjectively relate to the truth that has already been revealed to them by God.

In order to do this, he must examine his style of communication. Kierkegaard considers two different forms of communication, direct and indirect. Direct communication is the communication of facts. Direct communication relates to objective knowledge and thus is concerned with things that can be demonstrated. The vast majority of formal education is direct communication. When you take a physics class, you are trying to learn about the rules that govern the natural world and how they interact. Similarly, when you take a religious studies class, you are likely to learn about the belief systems that a number of different religions have and how they have changed over time. Both of these would be the direct communication of objective knowledge. But Christianity is not as concerned with the objective as it is with the subjective. Thus, Kierkegaard cannot employ direct communication to bring about his desired end. If he did so, we would end up with something that would likely give us a list of rules to follow and doctrines to believe, with rational defenses for each rule and doctrine. But this is not Kierkegaard's goal. Instead, since Christianity is essentially subjectivity, Kierkegaard employs indirect communication. Indirect communication works not to inform me of certain bits of information, but to bring about inwardness, appropriation, and subjectivity.

Using indirect communication, Kierkegaard specifically wants to communicate existence-possibilities.²²³ To communicate an existence-possibility is to communicate an

²²³ This concept is covered in more detail in Chapter two at the end of section one and the beginning of section two.

entire life possibility that one can inhabit. The communicator is trying to give to the receiver a view of a possible life that could be theirs. This is precisely the type of thing that cannot be directly communicated, for if I were to hand you a list of what your life would be like if you were a true Christian, there would be something missing from that list. No list could properly communicate what it is like to be a Christian, to exist in a certain way. So Kierkegaard has to use indirect communication to bring us existence-possibilities. As has been noted, Kierkegaard is trying to change us in a specific way, so you might ask, “Why use an existence possibility instead of an existence actuality? Would it not be more effective to actually demonstrate these things instead of offering up possibilities?” Climacus responds,

But existence-actuality cannot be communicated, and the subjective thinker has his own actuality in his own ethical existence. If actuality is to be understood by a third party, it must be understood as possibility, and a communicator who is conscious of this will therefore see to it, precisely in order to be oriented to existence, that his existence-communication is in the form of possibility. A production in the form of possibility places existing in it as close to the recipient as it is possible between one human being and another. Let me elucidate this once again. One would think that, by telling a reader that this person and that person *actually* have done this and that (something great and remarkable), one would place the reader closer than by merely presenting it as possible. Apart from what was pointed out in its proper place, that the reader can understand the communication only by dissolving the *esse* of actuality into *posse*, since otherwise he only *imagines* that he understands, apart from this, the fact that this person and that person actually have done this and that can just as well have a delaying as a motivating effect. The reader merely transforms the person who is being discussed (aided by his being an *actual* person) into the rare exception; he admires him and says: But I am too insignificant to do anything like that.”²²⁴

Climacus’ reasoning for using existence-possibilities stems from a fear, shall we say, that the reader, upon hearing that our moral exemplar is an actual person who has done such and such, will think of the communicated existence as something impossible for themselves.

²²⁴ CUP 358

When the communication is of an actuality it is all too easy to compare oneself to that actuality. When I am told that a friend of mine spends all her free time volunteering, I can find a number of ways to dismiss her actions and describe why those would be impossible for me. Her job is less demanding, or she's not married and thus doesn't have duties at home, or any other reason. The actuality of the existence allows me to compare it to my own in concrete terms and come up with concrete reasons as to how I cannot inhabit that existence. But possibility does not run into this problem. If something is presented as a possibility to me, then I am comparing myself not to a concrete individual, but to an imagined fictional character. The existence-possibility is presented as an option to the reader in a way that ends up being different than the presentation of an existence-actuality. I compare myself to the concrete person in order to determine if the actuality is something that I can fulfill. However, with the possibility I don't compare myself to the fictional character, for I recognize their fictional nature. Instead, the comparison becomes one of self-examination. I compare myself to another possible myself. I imagine me as moral exemplar versus me as I currently am and wonder if I can bridge the divide between the two, actualizing what has been presented to me as a possibility.

Engaging in this action requires an imaginative effort on my part. I have to imagine myself as the possibility being presented. Stokes examines this issue of moral imagination and existence-possibilities, eventually noting an issue that we have to contend with. Stokes, referring to a section from *Sickness Unto Death*, writes, "Here Anti-Climacus makes it clear that any actualization of the self is dependent upon the subject's ability to posit another, ideal self which it is to become."²²⁵ Stokes goes on to

²²⁵ Stokes, Patrick. *Kierkegaard's Mirrors* 77.

claim, “What is posited in imagination has the specific quality of becoming possibility, and this already adds something to the content of imaginative thought. What we imagine is not simply an inert piece of representational imagery or conceptual construct, but instead something that bears a distinct modal relationship to the world and the imagining subject.”²²⁶ Stokes looks at this question of possibilities and sees that imagination plays a significant role. In order for the existence-possibility to become a real possibility for me, I must imagine it. As Stokes notes, this imagination is not merely a considering of the thing in some abstract manner, the way that one might imagine a triangle when doing geometry. Instead, this imaginative process has a close relationship to the imagining subject. Thus, as I imagine the existence-possibility, I imagine it as a possibility for myself. There is no absolute reason why I connect it to myself, I could instead imagine it as a possibility for someone else. Yet, I know myself more intimately than I know anyone else, and I can much more easily imagine myself in various scenarios than I can imagine others. My default, my instinct, is to imagine myself in the existence-possibility that’s been presented to me.

Stokes examines this process of imagination and, noting that other scholars have a similar approach such as Ferreira and Gouwens, proposes imagination occurring in a kind of two-step process. Our first step is to imagine the possibilities that are being presented to us. Yet Kierkegaard’s goal here is not merely for imagination to occur. Instead, he wants us to somehow relate this imagination back to our concrete selves.²²⁷ So, we need to transcend imagination and actualize the possibilities that are being presented to us.

²²⁶ Ibid 77.

²²⁷ By “concrete selves” here I am referring to our empirical self. This is our personality, memories, and even our body.

This is the second step. We might think of this in a very simple way. You are going to meet someone for the first time so you imagine a few different ways that you might do so. You imagine yourself shaking their hand or waving and introducing yourself, or waiting for someone else to introduce you, etc. There are a number of possibilities that you imagine. When you meet the person, you select one of the possibilities that you imagined, and you actualize it. So, we have a two-step process of, first, imagination, and second, action.

Stokes, however, claims that while this two-step process is sensible folk-psychology, it runs aground of some of Anti-Climacus' claims about how imagination works. Stokes writes,

“[Anti-Climacus] takes it that feeling, willing, and knowing are all, at base, dependent upon imagination. Imagination pervades all psychic activity; and if this is so, we cannot say that imagination comes *first*. Fidelity to Anti-Climacus' insistence that imagination is inseparable from reflection and *active at the same moment* as resolution, will compel us to avoid a picture of the reflective self which first imagines possibility and *then* chooses deliberately from the options it has imagined.²²⁸

Stokes thinks that in order to remain true to Anti-Climacus we cannot think of imagination as occurring first and acting as second, as the folk-psychology approach would claim. Thus, when we examine the question of existence-possibilities, the idea would be that these possibilities are not presented to us and considered at one point in time, and then a change occurs within us and we choose one at a different time when we are no longer imagining them. Rather, imagination is constant. We are imagining the possibility as we actualize it. It both remains possibility and becomes actuality simultaneously, somehow. Yet, Stokes' claim here only ends up being problematic for us

²²⁸ Ibid 85

if we think of imagination as an action of pure thought. As I've argued, when we are asked to imagine an existence-possibility, we are not merely thinking of a possible thing for an unknown person. We are imagining it for ourselves. I am, for instance, imagining myself as a merman. To that end, I am already mixing my concrete existence with an imaginary possibility, and thus am doing more than just involving the faculty of thought or imagination, I am also employing my will. Bringing my concrete existence to bear on an existence-possibility requires me to will, for I am not an abstract creature. I struggle to imagine myself as an abstract thing in an abstract situation. I already bring my concreteness to my imagination of the existence-possibility. I am willing myself to consider the possibility that I could be other than as I am, or as I think I am. So we can grant to Stokes that we don't imagine first and act without imagination second. The possibility is always a live possibility in our minds. Even the initial act of imagining requires an act of will, such that we are always engaging in willing and imagining to the extent that we are bringing our concrete selves to bear on the imagination.

Thus, Kierkegaard is looking to turn us inwards by offering us existence-possibilities that he hopes we will actualize. These existence-possibilities come to us through indirect communication and they work to activate our imagination so that we will be prompted to remember, and therefore, choose to see, the truth about ourselves that has already been revealed to us by God. These possibilities do not always present the truly Christian. However, taken as an entirety, they demonstrate the movement into the truly Christian. Keeping these concepts in mind, let us now turn to the topic at hand: parables and the ways in which they act as a mirror for us so that we might see our true selves.

Section 1: Nobody Expects the Merman Parable!

As has been argued, Kierkegaard is hoping that his readers appropriate what he is writing, ideally bringing forth inwardness. But there is an open question here as to what the reader is appropriating. Appropriation is a bit challenging because seemingly the reader can appropriate Kierkegaard's works however he or she wants and end up acting or changing in a way that Kierkegaard doesn't want. I can read the fairy tale about the Tortoise and the Hare in Aesop's fables and learn that I must never give up. I appropriate the story, examining the situations in my life in which I lack perseverance and I work to overcome that lack. I become a new person, someone who perseveres regardless of the challenge ahead of me. But maybe Aesop wanted me to take from the story that overconfidence is a dangerous fault. Maybe instead of becoming more perseverant in the face of extreme difficulty, I should lessen my pride and humble myself. In one retelling of the story the forest animals elect the Tortoise to be their messenger as he must be the fastest since he won the race. A forest fire soon threatens their habitat and so they send the Tortoise to warn everyone, resulting in the deaths of most of the forest creatures. So maybe what I need to change about myself is my reliance on specific outcomes as the source of my everyday judgments. Maybe the best student isn't the one who gets the best grades. Maybe my wife should not be angry when I don't do the dishes. The problem with appropriation is that it is at the whim of interpretation. So if Kierkegaard is trying to bring about inwardness and appropriation, we need some way to overcome this issue.

Lorentzen examines the preface to *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions* and notes that Kierkegaard seems to have a specific kind of appropriation in mind, at least with that text. Referring to the book, Kierkegaard writes,

“[this book] quietly waits for that right reader to come like a bridegroom and to bring the occasions [for learning] along with him. Let each do a share – the reader therefore more. The meaning lies in the appropriation. Hence the book’s joyous giving of itself. Here there are no worldly “mine” or “thine” that separate and prohibit appropriating what is the neighbor’s... The appropriation is the reader’s even greater, is his triumphant giving of himself.”²²⁹

The book is giving itself to the reader, but Kierkegaard claims that the reader should do more than receive the book. The reader must also give himself. But to whom? The book is being given to the reader so that the reader can appropriate it. The reader can collapse the distinction between “yours” and “mine” such that the book is both Kierkegaard’s and the reader’s. So when it comes to the book giving itself, we have some kind of clarity of what is happening. But when we think of the reader giving himself, things are much more difficult. What is the reader giving and to whom is he giving it? The first question here isn’t too challenging. When we talk of the book giving itself, we mean that it is giving its content, its identity, its ownership to someone or something else. So to with the reader. The reader is giving his person, his identity, everything that makes him, him. But to whom is he giving it? I contend that the clearest answer to this question, both in the context of this quote and in the larger context of Kierkegaard, is that the reader is giving to himself. The reader is being appropriated by himself. Lorentzen remarks something similar when he writes, “The ethical-religious poet’s indirect communication essentially allows a reader to map out his own actions personally through the appropriation of parables (or any metaphorical speech) onto the reader’s thoughts, thereby prompting meaning into the reader’s deeds.”²³⁰ Lorentzen claims that our interactions with parables and metaphors provide us with situations where we examine our own thoughts and

²²⁹ TD 5

²³⁰ Lorentzen 53

actions. Let's imagine that the three interpretations of the Tortoise and the Hare that I outlined are the only possible interpretations. Lorentzen is arguing that I will end up supplying the interpretation that most evenly matches onto myself and my own struggles, thoughts, and desires. With that interpretation in hand, I will then appropriate what appears to me to be the parable. Though, what I'm really appropriating is what I've already supplied, my own concern that I am too prideful or that I lack perseverance, or that I'm too quick to judgment. If that's the case then really my appropriation is of myself, for what I am gaining from the parable and thus changing about myself is something that I've put into the parable. I think it's somewhat telling that Kierkegaard, especially in the *Postscript*, often lists appropriation and inwardness together as being what make up subjectivity. On the surface, these seem like different things. Inwardness is an examination of the self, but appropriation is taking something external and making it part of yourself. Yet, if we think of appropriation here as taking part of yourself, maybe a part that you've ignored or forgotten, then inwardness and appropriation seem quite similar.²³¹

In *For Self-Examination*, Kierkegaard claims that the Word of God acts like a mirror for us, so that what we are really seeing and learning about is ourselves. "If you are to read God's Word in order to see yourself in the mirror, then during the reading you must incessantly say to yourself: It is I to whom it is speaking, it is I about whom it is speaking."²³² Kierkegaard goes on to describe the experience of reading the parable of the good Samaritan. A man is robbed and left injured and half naked on the side of the road. The first person to pass him is a priest. When we read about the priest passing him by,

²³¹ The concepts of inwardness and appropriation are explored more fully in Chapter Two, section one.

²³² FSE 40

Kierkegaard thinks that we should think of ourselves as the priest. We are to think to ourselves, “Alas, to think that I could be so callous, I who call myself a Christian.”²³³ He claims that we shouldn’t avoid this thought by noting that we are not actually priests. We should identify as the villain of the story, for in that we can see our faults and become better. Here again, what we are appropriating is something about ourselves. As much as I like to ignore it, I am sometimes very callous and unloving or uncaring towards others. The parable of the good Samaritan should remind me of that fact. Thus the real subject of the parable isn’t Samaritans or priests, the subject is me. It is a parable about me, and I am to learn about myself from it.

When we ask about appropriation, and how we can be sure that the reader is appropriating the right thing, to some extent we still can’t. We can’t be sure that the reader identifies as the priest and not the Samaritan or the man who was beaten and robbed. Nonetheless, if appropriation is of self, then at least we have narrowed the possible ways in which someone could interpret and appropriate. The parable will appeal to me in certain ways and I will fill it with my thoughts, fears, and desires. It will then turn these around and show them to me, allowing me to appropriate parts of myself that I had neglected or forgotten. And given that part of Kierkegaard’s goal here is to remind us of the truth that God has already revealed to us, this seems to be an especially relevant consideration.²³⁴

If what I am appropriating is myself, as I have argued, why not just straightforwardly tell me the faults that I have? Why should we use the song and dance of parables just to tell me that I’m sometimes callous like the priest? Part of the reason

²³³ Ibid 40

²³⁴ The truth here being that we are untruth, as Climacus describes in PF 19-21.

comes down to the issue of offense. If you were to outright tell me that I'm a callous person, I will likely be somewhat offended, and that offense will strengthen my rejection of your claim. You've upset me, so you must be wrong. Yet, if God does this we are not offended.²³⁵ Seemingly the experience of recognizing your own sin does not cause offense when this experience is caused by divine revelation, for the divine speaks with authority. On the other hand, when a human attempts to inform me about my sin, I become angry and upset. Because of this, Kierkegaard needs to devise a way to remind us of our sin and of our untruth without tripping those psychological alarms that go off when we are confronted by another human. Climacus writes, "but there is inwardness when what is said belongs to the recipient as if it were his own – and now it is indeed his own. To communicate in that way is the most beautiful triumph of resigned inwardness."²³⁶ For Climacus, the goal of indirect communication is for the recipient to experience the communication as if it were his own. To refer to the popular film, Kierkegaard wants to practice inception. The ideal scenario occurs when I read something that Kierkegaard has written, and as I think about it, interpret, and consider the ideas, I come to realize something for myself. This realization has some relation to the text, but it is not what is found in the text, and thus it appears to me to be an idea that originated with me. Since the idea is mine, I am not offended and no psychological defense systems are tripped. Thus, Kierkegaard needs to write and communicate such that the communication belongs to the receiver so as to avoid the possibility of offense.

²³⁵ I am using the term "offense" here in the way it is normally used in English, and not in the way that Kierkegaard uses it. Where Kierkegaard describes our offense to God, he is generally referring to the faculty of reason rebelling against something that extends beyond reason. I am not describing this kind of offense to reason, but instead I am merely describing the experience of becoming antagonistic towards an individual who said something that upset us.

²³⁶ CUP 260

Stokes examines this approach in the context of the David and Nathan parable that was first discussed in chapter three. David has sinned though he refuses to admit it, so Nathan tells him a story which is a metaphorical version of David's own actions. David is enraged at one of the characters in the story and Nathan then informs him that he is that man. Thinking about this, Stokes writes, "Once again, the meaning conferred by the image is nowhere to be found in its direct content, but in the viewer's engagement therewith. That is not, however, to say that David simply imports a meaning into the story that properly does not belong there; rather, he uncovers a meaning that is only accessible if he engages with the story in an immediately self-referential attitude."²³⁷ Nathan can't just tell David that David has done wrong. David either already knows this but is refusing to acknowledge it or he is unaware entirely, though the latter seems unlikely. If he's already actively refusing to acknowledge his wrongdoing, pointing it out to him will be fruitless. So instead Nathan tells David a story and David recognizes the wrongness of the actions of the man in the story. Though he requires Nathan's help to do so, David is appropriating himself. He's not putting meaning on the story that doesn't belong there, though he is putting meaning on the story. His interaction with the story is what provides the meaning that is then appropriated by him, with Nathan's help. Since Nathan's help was required, David does have the opportunity to reject Nathan's assertion that he is that man. He is a king, not a shepherd (anymore). He did not take an animal from his neighbor to slaughter. He matches none of the literal analogues of the story. Yet, he does match them metaphorically. Part of Nathan's success stems from his ability to rouse David's anger. Being that he is somewhat in a fit of rage upon hearing the story, David is not in

²³⁷ *The Immediacy of Moral Vision* 83.

full possession of his rational faculties, and thus is not quite in the proper state of mind to separate the literal from the metaphorical and argue that since he doesn't fit the literal that the story cannot be about him. Instead, when Nathan informs him that he is that man, his heightened emotional state collapses the literal and metaphorical into one, and he recognizes himself in the story.

It's worth noting that Kierkegaard doesn't think that scripture has need of a Nathan who will tell us that we are that man. In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard writes, "The interpretation is that you, you who read the words of the gospel, you are the tree. What the prophet Nathan added to the parable, "You are the man," the gospel needs not add, since it is already contained in the form of the statement and in its being a word of the gospel."²³⁸ The Word of God does not need a Nathan character, for it already speaks with authority. Thus, one could dismiss Kierkegaard telling us that we are sinners, for who is Kierkegaard? What does he know? But we cannot do so with the Bible, for it is the Word of God. We can therefore see why the Bible does not need a Nathan character. The assumed interpretation is that we are the sinners that the Bible is speaking of, for we have all fallen short of the glory of God. No one needs to say, "you are that man," as that is already built into the fabric of the Word. Kierkegaard himself is another issue though. He never says that we are that man. He never directly claims to be writing about his audience, at least, unless you do the sort of thing that I am doing now and connect a bunch of errant pieces of his works to put that together. He doesn't tell the parable of Agnes and the merman and right afterwards say, "Oh by the way, you're all mermen." Nathan was able to make that transference by way of David's anger, but Kierkegaard

²³⁸ WoL 31.

doesn't often provoke that kind of intense emotional reaction in his readers, I assume. Thus the task for Kierkegaard seems to be greater than that of Nathan. Nathan had to merely tell the story and then point out that it was really about David. Kierkegaard has to tell the story, but he needs to tell it so well and structure it so perfectly that the audience realizes for themselves that it is about them. That is quite a difficult task, and I will argue that Kierkegaard attempts to accomplish it by using his parables as mirrors for his readers.

Section 2: The Man in the Mirror

In order to answer the question of how Kierkegaard attempts to get his audience to realize that he is talking about them, and not some pagan, un-Christian, "other," let us turn to Anti-Climacus.

"And only the sign of contradiction can do this: it draws attention to itself and then it presents a contradiction. There is a something that makes it impossible not to look – and look, as one is looking one sees as in a mirror, one comes to see oneself, or he who is the sign of contradiction looks straight into the contradiction. A contradiction placed squarely in front of a person – if one can get him to look at it – is a mirror; as he is forming a judgment, what dwells within him must be disclosed. It is a riddle, but as he is guessing the riddle, what dwells within him is disclosed by the way he guesses. The contradiction confronts him with a choice, and as he is choosing, together with what he chooses, he himself is disclosed."²³⁹

There seem to be at least two distinct things going on here. First, we have a discussion of the divine. Kierkegaard's use of the term "contradiction" is, at least in part, referring to the God-man, to Christ. Christ is a contradiction because he both God and man, he is God in time and in flesh. So, on first pass, we have a selection that describes human's interaction with the divine. When the divine reveals itself to us, we must choose to

²³⁹ PIC 126-127

believe or not and to follow or not, and in choosing we disclose ourselves. But I think that there is also a second thing going on here. This passage is bookended with discussions about direct communication and its efficacy, or lack thereof, to communicate the truth of Christianity. Given that context, I think that it's also important for us to read this passage as Anti-Climacus offering us some considerations about Kierkegaard's overall method as a writer. As we have seen multiple times, Kierkegaard wants to bring about inwardness and appropriation, for he cannot do much more in bringing true Christianity to his audience.²⁴⁰ We have here a discussion about how a concept, a contradiction, can cause a reader to disclose themselves, even unintentionally. This disclosure acts as a kind of self-revelation. The individual, in choosing and in their choice, makes visible something about themselves that was previously invisible. This person becomes disclosed like the merman was, and his disclosure was his first step to salvation.

Let us consider how this works with reference to parables. There seem to be a few key ingredients to the situation that Kierkegaard is describing. First, we need a contradiction. As I mentioned, Christ acts as his own contradiction, but Kierkegaard does not have this luxury. So instead Kierkegaard must provide one. As was argued in chapter three, Kierkegaard's parables are implemented so that they present a contradiction to the reader and force the reader to choose for themselves. Metaphors and parables carry with them a tension in that they present the reader with a dialectical knot that the reader must untie. In untying the knot, the reader has to choose and thus disclose themselves. The tension that was described in chapter three was a result of a dialectic in which the

²⁴⁰ A fuller description of Kierkegaard's understanding of what true Christianity is and what it isn't can be found in Chapter one section one.

metaphorical and the literal are superimposed on each other. The reader must make something out of this tension, and I argued that in doing so the reader is creating meaning, though that creation is directly tied to the metaphor or parable. We see how this fits into what Anti-Climacus is describing. Anti-Climacus shows us a contradiction that forces us to choose and that when we choose we are disclosing ourselves. The tension in the parable is the contradiction that forces us to choose, and that when we choose and disclose ourselves, we are thus creating something. We are combining what is found in the parable with what is found in ourselves. This is appropriation and inwardness just as Kierkegaard wants.

Another ingredient that we see in Anti-Climacus' description is that the reader or viewer must look at the contradiction. The contradiction must draw attention to itself so that the reader investigates it. This investigation can then lead to the untying of the dialectical knot and thus the disclosure of the reader. So Kierkegaard not only needs to craft a contradiction, a dialectical knot, but must also bring it to our attention. As a reminder, this must all occur indirectly. Kierkegaard cannot tell us that we all need to pay close attention to the contradiction that he's about to present to us, for doing so makes the communication direct and then instead of subjectivity we find objectivity. Instead of bringing the reader closer to Christianity it teaches the reader some aspect of soteriology (or any other such academic, doctrinal pursuit of Kierkegaard's writings). He would be taking something that was intended to be transformative to the reader and instead making it educative to the reader. So Kierkegaard has to draw our attention to a crafted contradiction without actually telling us any of the above. Parables and metaphors are wonderful vehicles for accomplishing this. Specifically, most of Kierkegaard's parables

appear tossed in the middle of his normal philosophical, though poetic, prose. He generally does not explain his parables, giving only a few brief remarks about them before moving on. The experience of reading through them is an interesting one. You are reading about some philosophical concept, like that of objectivity. Climacus is explaining his criticisms of objectivity and some of the strengths of subjectivity as a route to truth. Then, all of the sudden, we have a story about an escaped mental patient from an insane asylum. Climacus finishes this story and moves back to his discussion of the objective subjective distinction, without explaining the story. We are left wondering about the nature of the story. Why was it included? Is it just to lighten the mood and keep our attention like a professor telling a joke in the middle of a lecture? It certainly does lighten the mood, for the story is amusing. In this, we see that the story is inviting. Its placement and its pleasure serve to invite the reader to inspect it. What purpose does such a story serve? In this way Kierkegaard is able to present contradictions that draw attention to themselves without Kierkegaard having to explicitly call our attention to anything. The parable wants to be read, and we want to read it.

We read the parable, are invited to explore it, and in doing so come into contact with the contradiction. We are then prompted to choose, and in choosing we disclose ourselves. But to what end? My contention is that parables are to act as mirrors for us, disclosing ourselves to ourselves. The parable reveals something about me, but the revelation is for myself and not for anyone else. *Stages on Life's Way* begins with an epigraph that is a quote from one of Georg Lichtenburg's notebooks, "Such works are mirrors: when an ape looks in, no apostle can look out." Kierkegaard is tasking himself with reminding a populace who are complacent and confident in their Christianity that

they are not apostles, but indeed are closer to apes when it comes to their religion. I think that this epigraph is a fitting claim about what Kierkegaard is trying to do overall with his parables. He presents to us the dialectical knot that wants to be untied. As we untie it and interpret it, we create something and thus disclose ourselves, for the creation was ours. We are then faced with what we have disclosed, and we must recognize that it is ours. In this way we come to see ourselves, or at least, some facet of ourselves, in the way that Kierkegaard sees it. He sees us as being in untruth, as having forgotten the radical requirements of Christianity. He sees me as thinking that I am already saved and thus need to only make sure that I act in accordance with what I am told to do at church. I must make sure not to murder anyone, for instance. But I am no murderer, and thus I sit confident in my salvation and my faith. Kierkegaard then shows me Agnes and the merman. I find the story very intriguing, for somehow it's supposed to help me understand Abraham, which I'd like to do. The more I dig into the parable of Agnes and the merman, though, the more I can't understand any of Agnes' actions. As I try to resolve the dialectical tension, I try to think things through from the stance of the merman. This helps me make some progress, as I can at least understand some of the merman's actions. As I do so I also recognize that this is likely metaphorical and I start to think through what Agnes and the merman stand for. Ideally, Kierkegaard wants this thought process to end with the recognition that I am the merman, and that Agnes is Christ. Kierkegaard wants me to see that I am sinful, like the merman. This is a facet of myself that is already there, but it's one that I'm ignoring. So the parable works to get me to see part of myself. This mirror image is difficult to alter once it's been made. Just as David could not dispute Nathan's claim that he was that man once he had already become full of anger and judgment, so

too, we struggle to deny the image in the mirror when we're the ones who have made it. When an ape looks in, no apostle can look out.

But what about the possibility in which I do not see myself in the mirror? What happens if I am disclosed through the process just described, but I do not recognize the disclosure as myself? Stokes, in his work on moral imagination and moral vision considers this possibility. Stokes' overall project is to map out Kierkegaard's thoughts on moral vision and his attempts to get us to see things a certain way. This work ends up being relevant to my argument here, and Stokes also considers some of the mirror metaphors that Kierkegaard uses. Stokes writes,

“Looking at oneself is therefore not the same as seeing oneself. One can look at oneself (literally, as in the Peasant example, or imaginatively, as in the case of positing possibilities for action) and yet not see oneself. This brings us back to the “mirror of possibility”, into which one must look in such a way as to see “oneself” rather than “a human being merely”. This mirror metaphor thus brings into focus the conditions necessary for cognition to maintain an essential connection to the subject's concrete reality. Central to this is a mode of vision in which we see ourselves such that there is an immediate experience of co-identity with the imaginatively posited self. This is apparently necessary even where the “objective” content of my imaginings contains me. I may imagine a possibility that contains me (say, my responding to a present situation by undertaking some action) but I can still fail to “recognise myself”, that is, experience my co-identity with the “me” in this possibility. In such a case, I fail to maintain the connection between my lived reality and what I imagine. Such a self's will has, according to Anti-Climacus, become “fantastic.”²⁴¹

We have to seriously contend with the problem of the individual who does not recognize their reflection. Stokes introduces a terminological distinction to help clarify things: the difference between “looking” and “seeing.” To look at yourself in the mirror is to focus your attention on the image. To look at the mirror of metaphor or parable is to read it closely and to imagine the situation and examine the contents of that imagining. In doing

²⁴¹ *The Immediacy of Moral Vision* 75.

so, I might run into an image of myself as a character in the story or even as the topic of the story. The disclosure that comes with interpretation might render myself for myself. Yet, I am only looking, and thus lack self-recognition. As Stokes puts it, I might fail to experience co-identity with the “me” that I am looking at.

Seeing, on the other hand, is to experience that co-identity. I look at the image and I recognize it as being me. I identify with what I am looking at, and thus gain a new perspective on myself. This seems to be precisely what Kierkegaard desires out of his parables, so we must figure out how to move from looking to seeing. We see this occur in the King David narrative when Nathan tells King David that he is that man. Prior to hearing this, David looks, but he does not see. He recognizes the wrong-ness of the actions and might even be imagining someone very like himself committing them, but he does not identify with the person doing so. Only when Nathan informs him does he change over into seeing himself and thus seeing his faults. One of the key ingredients that we see in the David story that is missing from the straightforward mirror approach is emotional attachment. David looked, felt, and then saw. He heard Nathan’s story and was overcome with anger. The anger was targeted at the man in the story and so Nathan turned that anger on David, and once that attachment was made, David saw himself truly. Stokes refers to this as moving from an objective mindset to a subjective one. Referring to Nathan telling David that he is that man, Stokes writes,

“This statement is needed to take David from his objective approach from the story, an objectivity which he uses to keep awareness of his own moral culpability at arm’s length. Had David been more concerned for his own moral condition, the implication seems to be, he would have seen himself in the story without needing to be told that it was a story about himself (even though the story itself concerned the slaughtering of sheep). In the same way, Kierkegaard re-tells the Good Samaritan parable and claims we are to understand that the Priest who passes the

injured man by is us.’²⁴²

For Kierkegaard, holding up mirrors won't be enough as it will leave us hoping that the reader changes from looking to seeing. We do not want to rely on hope when it comes to readers who are self-assured in their Christianity. In the retelling of the Good Samaritan parable, Kierkegaard takes on the mantle of Nathan and tells us that we are the Priest. Yet, this is a rather uncommon occurrence, and this happens in *For Self-Examination*, which was one of his later works, and which was not written pseudonymously. Here he directly communicates, telling us how to interpret. It's interesting to note that somehow Nathan is able to use direct communication to bring about inwardness, something Kierkegaard doesn't seem to consider. Nathan telling David that he is that man is a moment of direct communication, but it is directly communicating about an indirect communication, and thus the subjective approach is still preserved. Nathan has also been established as a prophet, and thus as someone with authority, something that Kierkegaard lacks, as he stresses multiple times. This direct communication was able to move David out of his objective approach and appropriated his anger, changing its target from a fictional person to himself. The direct approach is not something that Kierkegaard will take in his pseudonymous works, for doing so would ruin his entire indirect approach. Just as Nathan waited until the story was over to directly communicate, Kierkegaard waits for pseudonymity to be over before he directly communicates with us. Thus Kierkegaard still needs some way to get his audience to move from looking in the mirror to seeing themselves truly in the mirror. He needs for us to be emotionally invested and focused with interest on what he is doing in order that he has the best chance for the

²⁴² Ibid 83.

change to occur.

Parables again provide an ideal opportunity for this. In reading through the parable (if it is well written, at least), we should come to find ourselves identifying with characters, or cheering for heroes, or trying to predict the outcomes. Though the parables may be short, they engage us and focus our interest. We likely do not end up as overcome with emotion as David was, but parables serve to do more than just invite us to look, as I discussed above. They actively engage us in a way that has already bypassed our psychological defense systems. We read the parables almost naively. We think that we are just trying to understand Kierkegaard and his odd writings, but we are not worried about ourselves. We do not think that an attack is coming. So, we investigate recklessly. That investigative spirit leads us to engage with these stories and to become invested in them and their meanings. That investment is then turned around on us. We begin by looking, but Kierkegaard is able to make some kind of emotional attachment with us through his parables, and this leads to us seeing. Yet, there is no guarantee of this. I might not be moved by the parable. I might not find it interesting or engaging. Seemingly this happens all the time as regards Kierkegaard. I find it unlikely that all readers of Kierkegaard have had transformative experiences when they work through his parables. Minimally, the scholarship seems to treat the parables as unimportant, so even among Kierkegaard experts, the parables do not seem to always have the desired effect.

Nonetheless we see how Kierkegaard's parables are put in place to move us from looking to seeing. Kierkegaard wants to hold up a mirror in front of us. He makes the image in the mirror interesting and attractive, so we really look closely and engage with it. He has not developed the rapport with us that Nathan developed with David and so he

cannot point out to us that in the mirror is an image of us. Instead he uses repetition. He creates many mirrors, all with slightly different images drawn on their surface. As we investigate these over and over, he hopes that we slowly come to realize that we are not looking at paintings of some other person, but at images of ourselves deceptively shrouded in imaginative drawings. In doing so we move from looking to seeing, as we begin to identify with the image placed in front of us. We slowly come to realize that not only is the merman in need of Agnes, but that I, too, am in need of an Agnes.

Section 3: Through a Mirror, Darkly

The ultimate goal of these mirrors is not only that we see ourselves, but that we see ourselves truly (not darkly). If we look into the mirror and are able to see ourselves and identify with the thing that we are seeing, then in order for the Christian to come forward, we also need to see something that is true. It's not enough for me to identify with the image in the mirror that I see if that image presents some falsehood about me. This occurs plenty in literary works. The reader thinks themselves like the protagonist, a hero or heroine who really would stand and fight and save the world. In reality, none of this might be true, we may all be cowards. But when we read the Iliad, we imagine ourselves as Hector, tamer of horses, fighting to protect his homeland (or, at least, I do). Thus, the image that Kierkegaard wants us to identify with is markedly not heroic, or even positive. Instead, he's trying to get us to identify with a rather negative image of ourselves. I am not being presented as the hero, but the sinner, the morally corrupt, or the ignorant. Yet, upon seeing myself portrayed this way, I am likely to dismiss the portrayal, or to never identify with it. Kierkegaard remarks in *Christian Discourses*, concerning why this shouldn't even be a problem, writing, "One tells him a story. This now puts him

completely at ease, because he understands well enough that since it is a story the discourse is not about him. A few words are introduced into this story that perhaps do not immediately have their effect but sometime later are suddenly transformed into a question of conscience.”²⁴³ If Kierkegaard were to plainly present these unflattering mirror images, we would ignore him. But the parable doesn’t appear to be a mirror to us, at first. So we engage it, we examine it, for the parable is just a story about some imaginative occurrence. But, in doing so, we run into the image and only after considering it do we slowly realize that it is a mirror, an image of us.

But this image is not supposed to just be Kierkegaard’s thoughts of what we are like. Instead, he is trying to make true claims reveal themselves to us. King David, on some level, knew that he was guilty. Were this not the case, he would struggle to understand how he could be the man that Nathan was accusing him of being. Unless he knows, but is suppressing the knowledge, that he is guilty of terrible things, he would be unable to make the connection that he did when Nathan spoke. Nathan was thus not revealing anything new to David, he was showing David something that was already known, however much ignored or suppressed. Kierkegaard envisions himself as having a similar task. As has been discussed, he cannot make us Christians, for only God can do that. Instead, his task is to remind us of what has already been revealed to us by God, that we are sinners and that Christianity requires our passionate, subjective investment in our beliefs. Thus, Kierkegaard is not only trying to convince us of something that he thinks is problematic, though that too is clearly the case. He is also trying to show us something true.

²⁴³ CD 235.

Part of his project here is to remind us of what God revealed to us, and thus to somewhat try to re-do what God has already done. God revealed to us what was true about us from the standpoint of absolute knowledge. Because of this, the content of what Kierkegaard wants us to realize is something akin to divine knowledge, though not in any problematic way. There is a sense in which Kierkegaard wants to give us a God's-eye-view of ourselves. To that extent, some of the parables have us as the subject, but some of them have God as the subject that we identify with. In the last chapter we looked at the parables of the Beloved's Letter and the Royal Decree. In both of these parables, the natural interpretation leads us to think about things from the metaphorical standpoint of God. This doesn't help much if the goal of the parable is to present a mirror for us, for then I would begin to see myself as if I were God. Instead, the goal here is for me to see myself truly, and taking a divine standpoint is helpful in doing so. If I can see myself the way that God sees me, I have gained much. So when I think through the parable from the standpoint of the Beloved or the King, I learn to see myself the way that God might see me. I recognize the frustration or annoyance that I would feel if I were in God's position watching my actions. Initially, I probably fail to realize that this parable is about how God sees me, but as Kierkegaard noted in *Christian Discourses*, sometime later these words will ideally be transformed into a question of conscience.

Thinking through this experience of anger, frustration, or annoyance that the King in the parable of the Royal Decree would feel also provides part of what was mentioned earlier as regards the need for an emotional response. David felt anger, and Nathan was able to redirect that anger from a fictional character back onto David himself. This anger is part of what motivates the efficacy of the parable. Kierkegaard, when he gets us to see

ourselves the way that God might see us, is able to do something very similar to Nathan. The emotional response is a powerful one, and one that will not easily go away. Had Nathan informed David that his story was only a parable, David's anger would not have immediately dissipated. Our emotions stick with us, and so rousing an emotional response is a good way to make sure that we do not turn around and deny the claim that is then made upon us. If I, thinking of myself as the King in the parable of the royal decree, feel anger and frustration at the inability of the general population to follow my commands, then all that needs to happen is for me to realize that God must feel that way with me, that God is the King. As soon as I realize that, my anger or frustration does not disappear, for I am already in a heightened emotional state. Instead, my emotions are transformed, for now I am angry and disappointed with myself and I feel sorrow and regret. Thus we can see that Kierkegaard's parables seek to present to us a true image of ourselves. Yet this image might come from different perspectives. Maybe I identify as the merman and remember that I am a sinner. But maybe I see myself as the king and give consideration to God's view of me. Both of these approaches work to elicit a specific response from me such that I entertain the story, become engrossed by it and emotionally invested in it, and then slowly come to realize that the story is really about me, revealing truths that I knew, but had forgotten or was suppressing, about myself to myself.

Section 4: Objects in Mirror are Closer Than They Appear

I've argued that parables do a great job at providing us with a true image of ourselves, but I also want to provide the inverse of this, that mirrors alone cannot provide this and thus that parables are in a weak sense, necessary for Kierkegaard. As I've noted a few times throughout this work, Kierkegaard cannot directly communicate our failings to

us. This is for at least two reasons. First, Christianity is essentially subjective for Kierkegaard, and thus while he could directly communicate that we are failing in that subjectivity, it will not have the desired effect.²⁴⁴ Secondly, doing so would likely cause our defense systems to kick into gear. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous method wasn't implemented for the mere fun of it, rather he saw it as a necessity so that his readers couldn't dismiss what was being written by connecting it to his concrete person. Upon hearing that Kierkegaard was criticizing them, the public might respond by thinking that these are the errant thoughts of a lonely man who scorned his fiancée, or maybe the thoughts of one angry at a system under which he struggled to flourish. Generally speaking, his claims and criticisms would fall on deaf ears. We see a similar problem when we consider the possibility of Kierkegaard adding straightforward mirrors to his works. If Kierkegaard put together true images of us, but did not hide them within poetic, metaphoric, or parabolic language, his audience would ignore them. I do not think myself a terrible sinner who has forgotten his religion and been led astray, so if Kierkegaard were to claim that I was, I would likely respond by rejecting his claim outright. For this reason, mirrors by themselves will not accomplish enough, for as Anti-Climacus claims, "Even in seeing oneself in a mirror it is necessary to recognize oneself, for if one does not, one does not see oneself but only a human being."²⁴⁵ Kierkegaard needs to not only present mirrors to us, he needs to present mirrors that we do not reject. This mirror also needs to stir us from merely looking, into feeling, and then finally into seeing ourselves.

²⁴⁴ That is to say, something subjective can be given an objective description, but the objective description will always fail to accomplish anything, for the issue is subjective at heart. For instance, Kierkegaard could tell me that I'm not a true Christian, and that would be an objective statement about something that is essentially subjective (as I argued in Chapter One), however, in doing so he does not cause me to become a true Christian or to understand what a true Christian is, for those things are essentially subjective.

²⁴⁵ SUD 37

The mirror does not hold truth within itself. Instead, it is through active use of the mirror that truth comes forward. To that extent, a plain mirror does not suffice. The objective description of his audience's shortcomings will not assist Kierkegaard. Instead, he must deceive us to some extent. He must get us to look at something that we do not suspect is a mirror but that actually is.

In order to see how the mirror would work in an ideal situation, we can briefly look at Kierkegaard's words concerning the Word of God.

“What is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word? The first requirement is that you must not look at the mirror, observe the mirror, but must see yourself in the mirror... The second requirement is that in order to see yourself in the mirror when you read God's Word you must (so that you actually do come to see yourself in the mirror) remember to say to yourself incessantly: It is I to whom it is speaking; it is I about whom it is speaking... Finally, if you want to look at yourself in the mirror with true blessing, you must not promptly forget how you looked.”²⁴⁶

The first two considerations that Kierkegaard has here are quite similar, both aimed at pushing the reader to see themselves in the mirror.²⁴⁷ Similarly, the third is aimed at making sure that whatever is learned from looking at the Mirror of the Word is not forgotten. Again, we have to note that Kierkegaard and God are in somewhat different positions with respect to how appropriation and inwardness function. God can transform the learner, Kierkegaard can only remind the learner. So the instructions given here are aimed at making sure that the transformation takes place. One could, for instance, read the Word as if it were a purely fictional tale and thus gain nothing from it. Kierkegaard's advice here is an attempt to correctly orient the reader of the Word so that they realize the truth found within. Yet, despite the difference in positions between Kierkegaard and God,

²⁴⁶ FSE 25, 35, 44

²⁴⁷ See Gregor 75-81 for a close, in-depth reading of this passage.

there is still a focus on being able to see oneself in the text. Whether you are reading the Parable of the Prodigal Son or the Parable of Agnes and the Mermaid, you must see yourself in the mirror in order for the desired outcome, of moving closer to authentic Christianity, to occur.

Stokes analyzes the second aspect of Kierkegaard's claim about how to read the Word as an act of volition. He notes that Kierkegaard goes on to claim that when someone sees themselves in a mirror unexpectedly that they do not recognize themselves. While this is, at most, a rare occurrence, it does help us understand Kierkegaard's point. In order to see myself in a mirror I must, in some sense, be prepared to do so. Thus Stokes argues that there is some amount of openness required in order for us to be able to see ourselves in the mirror. "Self-recognition requires an attitude of receptivity, and adopting such an attitude will be a willed act."²⁴⁸ In order for the mirror to be successful, I must be open to whatever it reveals. Had Kierkegaard approached me and claimed that he would show me what I am truly like, I would not be open to whatever he revealed. I would probably be quite guarded and dismissive if he painted me negatively. Yet, with a parable, the reader's default position, to the extent that the reader is engaging the parable, is openness. The reader can pass over the parable or treat it as mere amusement, and to do so is to remain closed. But if the reader engages, doing so requires willed openness. Engaging with the parable is acknowledging that there is something that I don't yet understand that is hidden in the parable, and that I want to uncover. This, my first step is to will to learn, willing a recognition that the parable possesses something that I currently lack. The parable wants to be interpreted, it wants me to work with it. I might have some

²⁴⁸ *The Immediacy of Moral Vision* 88.

guesses as to how to interpret it or what it means, but since I don't think that it is about me, I am not guarded or dismissive. I am open to considering whatever the parable puts forward. I still might dismiss it at the end, but my initial stance is one of openness. Thus, parables assist in providing an impetus for the initial act of volition that needs to be in place in order that we might see ourselves in the mirror.

Kierkegaard's mirrors therefore require the activity of the reader in order to have their desired effect. We see him claim as much in *Upbuilding Discourses* when he writes,

“The discourse does not address itself to you as a specific person, it does not even know who you are; but if you think about the occasion very vividly, then it will seem to you, whoever you are, as if it were speaking directly to you – this is not the merit of the discourse, it is your self-activity's doing, that you for your own sake assist the discourse and of your own accord will be the one to whom it says: you.”^{249,250}

Kierkegaard is claiming that the eventual outcome of reading his discourses will require both the discourse and the reader. It is not as if the discourse works on the reader, who remains passive. Instead, the reader is an active component is making the discourses meaningful. Stokes analyzes this passage in a similar manner, writing,

“Again, Kierkegaard is *not* suggesting that we project meaning onto discourses such that we ‘find’ meanings in these discourses that are actually in ourselves. Rather, it is only through a specifically self-reflexive mode of receptivity that the moral meaning of the discourse can become evident. The capacity of a discourse to prove morally upbuilding depends upon the ‘self-activity’ of the reader, without which the moral communicator is helpless to communicate her message.”²⁵¹

So while we are playing an active part as readers, it's not as if we are putting meaning into something that lacks meaning. I'm not merely projecting something into a story that

²⁴⁹ UDVS 123

²⁵⁰ It's interesting to note that the Danish term that is here translated as the last “you” in the quote is the personal, intimate version of that term.

²⁵¹ Kierkegaard's Mirrors 124.

has nothing, and then “finding” that thing in the story. Kierkegaard’s goal was to bring about appropriation and inwardness, not to convince the reader of some moral truth.

Stokes’ reference to “moral meaning” here would therefore best be interpreted to refer to the moral change that I must undergo. Kierkegaard doesn’t want to tell me that stealing is wrong, he wants me to react with disgust to the thought of stealing. The “meaning” in the story cannot be some kind of objective claim. There is nothing to find, for the desired outcome is a change in us. Thus, we have to be an active participant in the creation of meaning, for we are part of the meaning. The parable is for me and it is about me. But Kierkegaard does not know me, he lacks knowledge of any of my particulars. So, he must craft something that applies generally, and I supply the particulars. His parable and I work together to create meaning, that meaning specifically being my appropriation of my true situation vis-à-vis my religion.

Putting this all together we see something akin to a list of requirements that is placed before Kierkegaard if he is to complete his task of causing his audience to become more authentic Christians. First, he must communicate something to his audience.²⁵² This initial requirement is rather straightforward. Kierkegaard is trying to speak to each person individually and communicate something to them. Second, the thing that he is trying to communicate is about the audience.²⁵³ Though parts of his works look to explicate Christianity, he claims that his primary goal is to bring about Christianity in his audience. Thus, the thing that he is communicating is not about the nature of religion, or truth, or any other concept. Instead, he’s looking to reorient us towards something concerning

²⁵² This connects to Kierkegaard’s goals for his authorship, which is primarily covered in Chapter One.

²⁵³ Chapter Two discusses the content of the communication and the drive for inwardness and appropriation.

ourselves: our sinful nature and our need for salvation. The third requirement is that he cannot communicate this thing to us directly.²⁵⁴ He cannot straightforwardly tell us what we've done wrong or how to fix our mistakes. Christianity is, at its root, subjectivity, and thus he must use the style of communication that matches subjectivity, indirect communication. The goal of this indirect communication is to bring us inwards, to cause appropriation. It's not that he needs to use indirect communication to clue us in to some concept, rather the indirect communication should work to change us as individuals.

Fourth, in order for this change to occur, we need to engage the indirect communication.²⁵⁵ We need to be active participants with the text in order to appropriate any meaning from it. Kierkegaard does not want to merely hope that this occurs. Instead, he has to craft his indirect communication such that it invites this kind of interaction and engagement. And the last requirement, this communication needs to bypass our natural psychological defenses since the content of the message has the strong possibility of causing offense.²⁵⁶ Telling someone that they are not a real Christian when they consider themselves otherwise will likely not elicit a positive reaction. Instead, you will be dismissed, ignored, or attacked. Kierkegaard needs to find a way for his communication to overcome this problem. He needs to craft something that we willingly engage with despite the fact that it attacks us.

I've argued for all of these pieces in different parts of this work. Ideally, we now see how parables perfectly fit as a solution to this requirement. Parables create the

²⁵⁴ This is covered in Chapter Two where the line between direct and indirect communication is drawn and I argue that Kierkegaard must use the indirect approach.

²⁵⁵ Chapter Three examines the ways in which we engage with metaphors and parables and how that engagement affects us.

²⁵⁶ This point was established previously in this chapter.

opportunity for Kierkegaard to tell us something about ourselves by using them as mirrors. Parables function as indirect communications that invite us to engage with them and require us to be active participants in the creation of meaning. Parables also bypass our defense systems for we do not initially believe that they are about us. Through all of this we see that Kierkegaard tries to accomplish something very significant with his parables that cannot be accomplished with his philosophical prose. Taking into account the discussion that I've put forward concerning some of Kierkegaard's claims about his goals as an author, we have to very seriously consider parables as being of paramount importance to our study of Kierkegaard.

Section 5: "I Deceived Her by Pretending I was a Deceiver"²⁵⁷

I want to end with a parable and by offering up the possibility that we must thus treat Kierkegaard as something of a trickster, a deceiver. To begin, a short parable of his found in *The Sickness Unto Death*,

There is a story about a peasant who went barefooted to town with enough money to buy himself a pair of stockings and shoes and to get drunk, and in trying to find his way home in his drunken state, he fell asleep in the middle of the road. A carriage came along, and the driver shouted to him to move or he would drive over his legs. The drunken peasant woke up, looked at his legs and, not recognizing them because of the shoes and stockings, said: "Go ahead, they are not my legs."²⁵⁸

Kierkegaard gives us a wonderfully humorous little tale about a failure in recognition.²⁵⁹

To use some of our language from earlier, the man looks at his legs, but he does not see his legs. He does not identify with the legs that are in front of him, and thus he tells the

²⁵⁷ This is a line of Kierkegaard's taken from his journals, referring in part to his relationship with Regine Olsen. JP VI 6762.

²⁵⁸ SUD 53

²⁵⁹ Some, I have heard, do not find this story humorous, but instead find it creepy.

carriage driver to run over them (with no care shown for whosever legs they might be). However, he will likely soon realize his mistake when the carriage runs over his legs and he experiences intense pain. He will move from looking to seeing upon feeling his legs shatter. However, instead of deep-diving into this parable from the standpoint of the reader who is being pushed towards authentic Christianity, I'd like for us to consider how this might help us understand Kierkegaard's actions as a writer.

When Kierkegaard presents to you a mirror as a parable, you do not initially think it is a mirror, for you are entranced by the parable. You think you are looking at an image of someone else. Someone terrible, or downtrodden, or ugly, and you are none of those things. But as you examine it from different angles and look closely, you slowly start to realize that it's you in the image. And at that point, you've already condemned the image as ugly, and so you've already passed judgment on yourself. You are like the drunken man in Kierkegaard's parable. We look at our legs and judge them, make comments about how out of shape that person is, how lazy they must be, how ugly they are. But, unbeknownst to us, Kierkegaard had slipped the stockings over our legs so that we wouldn't immediately recognize them. Yet, slowly, as we look closer, we realize that the legs are ours.

Kierkegaard, in order to bypass our defenses, has to play a trick on us. He has to slip stockings over our legs so that we don't recognize them at first glance. We can imagine him tiptoeing around, tying our shoelaces together, hiding our keys, or putting food-coloring in our toothpaste. His parables are invitations, but we don't quite fully grasp to what we are being invited. We think that we are going to participate in a pleasant, but abstract, philosophical exercise, but lo and behold, we are actively being

self-critical. Kierkegaard gets us drunk on philosophy, and in that abstract philosophical stupor, he slips stockings on our legs. We cast abstract judgments on those legs, for we do not recognize them as our own. But as we judge and examine them, we slowly come to realize the truth that was revealed to David by Nathan. Those are our legs, we are that man. This realization places us in a precarious position, for we need the carriage to stop, lest our legs get run over. Action is now required of us. David must atone, the drunken man must tell the carriage driver to stop, and we must repent.

Conclusion

We return to the problem first sketched out by Climacus in *Fragments*, that of the teacher and the learner. The teacher cannot demonstrate to the learner that the learner is in untruth, for one of the properties of being in untruth is being ignorant about your own state of untruth. Socrates repeatedly professed that he did not know what virtue was. Meno responded by asking how Socrates would then know if Meno had not properly answered the question. Meno could have given a perfect answer, but Socrates, being ignorant of what virtue is, would not recognize it. Socrates responds by claiming that we can remember it, for our soul has already gained all knowledge prior to us being born. Kierkegaard refers to this as the Socratic version of the problem. His version of the problem is much worse, however, for we cannot remember not being in sin. We have been born into sin for Kierkegaard, and thus our memory cannot save us. Instead, only God can save us by transforming us. This transformation both reveals the truth to us and allows us to recognize it as true.

Only God can function as this kind of teacher, so what space can Kierkegaard occupy? If he is trying to bring us closer to authentic Christianity, and he cannot

transform us, what can he do? Seemingly, he can return to the Socratic, he can prompt us to remember. Though we have forgotten the terrible truths about ourselves that have been revealed to us, Kierkegaard can prompt us to remember. But to do so is no easy task. Kierkegaard must engage with us indirectly, using pseudonyms and parables. He has to trick us into engaging a text or story that we find interesting only to realize, potentially in terror, that we are the subject. The use of parables throughout his works doesn't function to obfuscate his philosophy or to serve as humorous interludes. He is not telling stories the way that many do in the classroom so that they might recapture the attention of their audience. Kierkegaard's parables work to serve a very specific function in his overall goal as a philosopher. He needs to disarm us before he shows us how ugly we are, and he needs for us not to reject the true image that he is presenting. Parables work to accomplish both of these things, as I've demonstrated.

If my argument has been successful, I think that it requires us to read Kierkegaard a little differently. We have to read his parables as philosophy, and not merely as companion examples to his philosophical prose. Beyond that, though, I think that there is still quite a lot to be gained from this study despite Kierkegaard having a relatively small audience these days and despite Christianity being taken less and less seriously in the West. If my argument has been successful, which I think it has, and if Kierkegaard is correct in his approach, we might need to change the way that we try to spread philosophy. We might want to take a page from C.S. Lewis and write stories. If our goal is to change individuals and to reorient them towards wisdom, academic philosophical prose likely won't do the job. Instead, we need to become storytellers.

I'll conclude with a short epigraph that I'm using to mourn the state of

Kierkegaard scholarship vis-à-vis his parables,

“In a theatre, it happened that a fire started offstage. The clown came out to tell the audience. They thought it was a joke and applauded. He told them again, and they became still more hilarious. This is the way, I suppose, that the world will be destroyed – amid the universal hilarity of wits and wags who think it is all a joke.”²⁶⁰

²⁶⁰ EO1 30.

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