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ISSN 2245-0610

### Kontakt:

Kontakt til TIDskrift kan ske ved henvendelse til en af følgende e-mail-adresser:

kontakt@tidskrift.dk

ruc.redaktion@tidskrift.dk

ku.redaktion@tidskrift.dk

sdu.redaktion@tidskrift.dk

au.redaktion@tidskrift.dk

dpu.redaktion@tidskrift.dk

# Forord

Vi er fra *TIDskrift* redaktionen stolte af, at kunne præsentere volume fem af vores online filosofimagasin, der i denne omgang indeholder bidrag fra to forfattere. Man finder i “Kierkegaard and the Quest for Continual Striving” af Arman Teymouri Niknam en undersøgelse af Kierkegaards tros-begreb dvs. en diskussion af spændingsfeltet mellem det subjektive og det objektive som den kristne tro, i følge Kierkegaard, befinder sig i. I “Thinking from a Human Point of View” af Eskil Juul Elling sammenlignes tekster af Thomas Aquinas og Giovanni Pico della Mirandola for at fremdrage de to tænkeres menneskebilleder og i forlængelse den filosofi eller filosofiske tradition som disse menneskesyn afføder.

Fra Redaktionens side ønsker vi således god læselyst og håber de to artikler vil give stof til eftertanke. *TIDskrift* vil desuden rette en stor tak, en god jul og et godt nytår til både læsere, forfattere og reviewere.

På vegne af redaktionen

Lars Bjørn Kristensen

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# Thinking from a Human Point of View

– *On the relationship between the conceptions of philosophy and of man in the thought of Thomas Aquinas and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*

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skrevet af Eskil Juul Elling, RUC · udgivet 15 dec. 2014 · 3446 ord

## Abstract

Comparing texts by Thomas Aquinas and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, this article looks at their conceptions of man's position in the Cosmos and the role of philosophy as it results from these conceptions. It concludes that, though the two might share certain dogmatic views on these questions, including the one that man is epistemologically bound by his senses, Pico is able to tentatively transcend these views through the employment of metaphoric language, ascribing a transcendent quality to the human intellect and allowing for the possibility of increased human freedom. Though this second view is not strictly speaking affirmed in the course of Pico's text, the very ambivalence between the doctrine and the metaphorical transgression of this doctrine opens up a previously unknown space of possibilities. In the light of this, the article speculates that Pico's literary transgression of scholastic doctrine may have played a part in the formation of a distinctly modern mentality.

## I

The seed of the Modern era is often thought to have been planted at some point during the Renaissance, which for the first time challenged theological dogma in favor of human autonomy, paving the way for the epistemological breakthroughs of the 17th century (cf. Krayer 1993: 50). Yet looking at certain Renaissance texts, one is struck by their profoundly ambivalent nature. They seem at once free thinking and traditional, at

once striving for pure knowledge and deeply indebted to mysticism and dogma. Such seems to be the case with Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) yet the work is at the same time considered a fundamental document of Renaissance humanism (cf. for example Encyclopedia Britannica 2014). To understand this apparent paradox, this article proposes to investigate the conceptions of man and of philosophy, and the interdependence between the two, as expressed in Pico's oration, and to compare them to the views found in the *Summa theologiæ* (1265-74), St. Thomas Aquinas' seminal work of scholastic theology. This historical perspective will allow us to illustrate both the continuity of Pico's work with that of Thomas as well as the novelty of Pico's project, and thus the way in which it might be considered a step towards Modernity, albeit in a highly eccentric fashion.

This article thus proposes to assess one of the ways in which Renaissance thought may have facilitated the transition to the modern era. However, it does not do so by imposing Modern criteria on the works of the Renaissance. Rather, I will provisionally accept the blend of philosophy, theology and rhetoric that is found in some of these texts, and I hope to be able to show how it may have been this very ambivalence that made possible the later breakthroughs of Descartes and others. Behind this approach lies the persuasion that judging the ideas of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries by Modern standards obscures the logic inherent in these works, which preceded and perhaps conditioned the development of Modernity. No claim as strong as that will actually be formulated – our goal is not to posit causal relationships, but to suggest a way of thinking about Modernity, which does not reduce it to an epistemological or scientific phenomenon, nor which opposes it categorically to the tradition which came before it.

It may be appropriate at this point to discuss briefly what it is exactly that has been referred to above as “Modernity”. *En gros*, I follow Jürgen

Habermas' description of Modernity as involving (but not limiting itself to) "a differentiation of the value spheres of science and knowledge, of morality and of art" (Habermas 1997: 45), that is, a process in which expert cultures developed, within these three value spheres, distinct forms of rationality suited to their separate domains, which enabled them to greatly increase their effectiveness. On the one hand, this resulted in the separation of science and theology (we might say from René Descartes and onwards). But on the other hand, this was also the process in which art came into its own, or at least in which the theory of *l'art pour l'art* was made possible by such notions as Immanuel Kant's separation of understanding and aesthetic reflection.<sup>1</sup> I shall touch upon both developments – in a strange and ambivalent mixture – in my discussion of Pico. As we shall see, my position in this regard differs from that of certain others. I will mention as an example Jill Kraye's assessment of Renaissance philosophy (Kraye 1993). In her account of Pico's place in the thought of the period, she stresses his traditional, scholastically inspired conception of philosophy, though she does note the formal ambiguity of his writings (ibid.: 24), a point to which I shall return. In addition, throughout her account of the accomplishments of Renaissance philosophy, she seems to view it as ultimately inferior to "the scientific and epistemological revolutions of the seventeenth century" (ibid.: 50). I do not in any way possess the historical education to seriously challenge Kraye's position on these matter, but I hope to be able to present in the following an alternative way of reading at least two texts of fundamental importance for the transition from Medieval to Renaissance thought.

As we shall see, it is important to keep in mind the differences in genre between the two works that I propose to analyze: The *Summa* is a strict, logical exposition detailing, in the parts with which I am concerned

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. for instance §1 of the Critique of Judgment (Kant 1987). Naturally, our historic scope here is excessively wide – the exact chronology of the differentiating process of Modernity is not our subject.

here, Thomas' views on his own thinking and on the soul, intended as a manual for Dominican friars (Davies 1998: 242f.). Pico's work is an oration intended as an introduction to his 900 philosophical theses and as such is probably best considered a sophisticated piece of rhetoric introducing the actual, philosophical exposition in these (unknown) theses. But, as I aim to show here, one shouldn't simply try to compensate for these differences. Indeed, there might be an important lesson to learn from the fact that Pico delivered part of his message in this particular form. Besides, Thomas' logical, impersonal prose (the first person pronoun almost never appears) is also indicative of a choice of style with a certain aim.

The approach of this article can hardly be called historical in the classical sense, but at the same time, it does pretend to have a historical point – perhaps on a more fundamental level, concerning the progress of thought, than concerning the actual historical facts. All this should be clear by the time we reach the conclusion.

## II

In his discussion of the nature of man, Thomas takes as his starting point the human soul. He discusses this in a rather strict, Aristotelian fashion: First of all, the soul must be incorporeal, since it is the root principle of life, in contrast to things like the eye, which is only the principle of a specific vital activity, namely seeing. The root principle of life, however, cannot be a bodily substance, since if being a body alone meant being alive, everything would be alive (Thomas 1976b: Ia. 75, 1). Secondly, the soul must subsist apart from the body, since understanding is the principle of the human soul, and this understanding faculty cannot be of the same kind as that which is understood, that is, something bodily, because, according to Thomas, the soul's being a specific body would hinder its understanding of all other bodies. And as the soul has its own activity apart from the body, it subsists separately from this (ibid.: Ia. 75, 2). This is in contrast to

animals, whose souls have as their principle the senses. But sense-acts require physical change in the senses themselves, thus the souls of animals are not independent of the body (ibid.: Ia. 75, 3). This does not mean, however, that man himself is incorporeal, since his sensing too is a corporeal activity, and besides, though his intellect is immaterial, it does depend on the physical world for its object (ibid.: Ia. 75, 2 and 4).

Thus Thomas states that man must be “the whole compound of body and soul” (ibid.: Ia. 75, 2). So man is a corporeal animal, situated below the angels in what might be called the ontological hierarchy of the world, though he is distinguished from the animals by his intellect.

Pico's discussion of man in the *Oration* is not quite so systematic. It also has a different aim; it is a tribute, praising the unique status of man in the Cosmos. His starting point is the biblical account of the creation of the world, which he modifies for his own purposes. Pico postulates that man was created after God had already completed his creation, in order to admire and understand it. But, since the world was already complete, there was no particular form to be given to human beings. So God decided to let man “have a share in the particular endowment of every other creature” (Pico 1994: 1). This gives man the freedom to become what he wants: “The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We [God] have laid down; you [man], by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, [...] trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature” (ibid.: 2).

This freedom of the will thus means that man can become anything, depending on the way he lives his life. And Pico does seem to mean literally everything: “If vegetative, he will become a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will reveal himself a heavenly being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God” (ibid.). Pico is in fact reprising, with slight modifications, the different parts of the soul, and the beings with which they are identified, as discussed by Aristotle in *De*

*anima*, except that the functions normally ascribed to man are ascribed to heavenly or divine beings.<sup>2</sup> The result is that man is placed outside the traditional scholastic or Peripatetic hierarchy, both able to sink lower or to rise higher than this strict system would have allowed, that is, to occupy any position in it, instead of the one explicitly ascribed to him.

Thus both Thomas and Pico assert the uniqueness of man in the Cosmos. But while Thomas determines this uniqueness as man's being a compound of soul and body, Pico stresses the peculiar "ontological indeterminacy" of man as his distinguishing characteristic. This might well be in part a rhetorical trick; Pico is known to have respected traditional doctrine. He does indeed indicate man's corporeal limits elsewhere in the *Oration* (Pico 1994: 3), and Pico's apparent orthodoxy is also the focus of Kraye's account of his position in Renaissance philosophy (Kraye 1993: 24). But it is an important trick. For, as I shall now proceed to show, this difference in the descriptions of man has an important impact on the sort of thinking that the two can endorse.

### III

I have already indicated the limits that Thomas imposes on human knowledge, that is, its dependence on the corporeal senses from which the intellect as pure form deduces the abstract, universal nature of concrete, material things (Thomas 1976b: Ia. 75, 5). In this, human knowledge is distinguished from the knowledge of the angels, which is innate and immediate (cf. Maurer 1982: 184). This is the basis for Thomas' conception of philosophy and theology.

Philosophy deals with reality – that which can be apprehended by the senses and by reason. Philosophy cannot exceed these human limits. However, additional knowledge may be provided by divine revelation, and this is of an entirely different kind from what reason can supply. This is

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<sup>2</sup> Compare Pico's description to the one given in Aristotle 1975: III ix, 432a27-432b8.

due to the fact that “God destines us for an end beyond the grasp of reason” (Thomas 1976a: Ia. 1, 1), and it is essential that we get to realize this end. Because of this, Thomas can conclude that Christian teaching rests upon things beyond reason. This can be further explained by noting that Thomas endorses an *exitus-reditus* view of reality, that is, a view in which God is the origin and the end of all things. So we would have to know God to explain reality. But according to Thomas, we cannot know God; his is a *negative theology*. So we have to rely on revealed truths to approach an understanding of the world and its purpose (ibid., Davies 1998: 243ff.).

This means, of course, that Thomas' thinking cannot simply be considered philosophy. Indeed, in the end it should probably be called Christian theology<sup>3</sup> since it exceeds the limits of the human intellect to grasp a specifically religious truth. But one cannot necessarily draw a clear line between the two disciplines. For one thing, Thomas notes that the two might have the same object, though the sort of knowledge that they provide is different (Thomas 1976a: Ia. 1, 1). But in addition, the dialectical method that Thomas employs – in which common views are presented and contrasted to the views of religious or rational authorities before Thomas' own view is deduced from the two, usually resembling the latter while explaining the misgivings of the former<sup>4</sup> – should not, apart from its dependence on religious sources, seem too foreign in its logical rigor to the philosophically minded.

Pico's account naturally differs somewhat from that of Thomas, at least in form. It discusses how, from man's indeterminate starting point, to attain the higher, heavenly levels of the Cosmos. This is achieved, according to Pico, by imitating the natures of the three orders of angels

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<sup>3</sup> This is to be contrasted to rational, philosophical theology, see Thomas 1976a: Ia. 1, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Appendix 1: “Structure of the *Summa*” in Thomas 1976a. The author of this appendix is not clearly noted, though ostensibly it is Thomas Gilby, the volume's editor. See also note 5.

who inhabit them: To equal the *Cherubim*, who are distinguished by intelligence, one must pursue natural, contemplative philosophy. To equal the *Thrones*, who are distinguished by justice, one must pursue moral philosophy. Finally, to equal the *Seraphim*, who are distinguished by charity, one must love God through theology. If one succeeds in emulating the angels in this way, then, contrary to the view of Thomas, one “shall be inferior to them in nothing” (Pico 1994: 3).

This, however, is where we start to run into contradictions. For while Pico is asserting man's ability to equal the angels, he is, as I have already mentioned, at the same time positing the corporeal limits of human knowledge. Human beings need to resort to scripture in order to know anything about the higher levels of the Cosmos, to which they aspire: “[I]t is not granted to us, flesh as we are and knowledgeable only the things of earth, to attain such knowledge by our own efforts” (ibid.). This conception of thought is obviously not all that different from the one presented by Thomas. What then to make of the contradictory assertion of man's intellectual independence? Is it all just empty rhetoric? Perhaps, but in many ways this second, more orthodox view of knowledge does not seem to exclude to the first, metaphorical one, even though, as Krayer claims, Pico was probably at bottom a quite traditional thinker (Kraye 1993: 45): The goal of the *Oration*, as the title states, is not to devalue man, but to pay tribute to his dignity and potential. As such, the need to interpret scripture might even be said to end up *supporting* the view of man's privileged position. In order to justify this view, we are led to consider what is perhaps the most unique characteristic of Pico's view of knowledge: his *syncretism*.

Pico is determined to reconcile the views of several thinkers who are traditionally opposed, not least Plato and Aristotle, but he also discusses magic and the Jewish Cabala. The latter is a mystical system for the interpretation of religious texts that Pico allegedly applied to the first

verses of Genesis (ibid.). These and other views can all be interpreted to reinforce the truth of Christian doctrine, which is essentially what Pico aims to do (Pico 1994: 13, Kraye 1993: 45). But at the same time, Pico's interpretation of man's position in the Cosmos is, as I have tried to show, not entirely in line with the traditional, Scholastic position. We might speculate that he can allow himself to present this interpretation because he *remains* on the metaphorical level of the texts that he talks about: On the one hand, he wants to interpret the thought of classical thinkers and other religions as allegories of Christian doctrine, but on the other hand, he ends up carrying on this symbolical writing himself in the figure of man as a "creature of indeterminate image" (ibid.: 1). And although Thomas was not himself entirely opposed to symbolic language when talking about revealed truths, his own account remained firmly grounded in the logic of the scholastic method.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Pico doesn't simply allow symbolic language as a measure to assimilate ancient texts to the Catholic truth. He also establishes within Christianity itself a metaphorical language, which, however discretely, challenges the cosmology of traditional scholasticism – even though it isn't directly opposed to it.<sup>6</sup> It is Pico's supposedly metaphorical view of man, rather than his more dogmatic one, which structures the *Oration*.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Appendix 2: "Method of the *Summa*" in Thomas 1976a. See also note 4.

<sup>6</sup> This might be considered a literary point rather than a philosophical one, and Pico seems to have been extremely ambivalent on the subject. Thus, as Kraye notes, he declared rhetoric to be "sheer mendacity, sheer imposture, sheer trickery", directly opposed to the truth of philosophy, while he himself remains so eloquent as to make this point rather ironic (Kraye 1993: 24). In any case, I am considering the *Oration* as an autonomous work with an effective history independent of the original intention of its author. I cannot claim any knowledge of the prevalence at the time of rhetorical works such as Pico's, but its predominant position in accounts of Renaissance humanism does suggest its special status.

#### IV

In both Thomas' strictly logical exposition about man and philosophy and Pico's more metaphorical one, I have observed an intimate relationship between the ontological status of man and the epistemological perspectives that are suggested. Thomas asserts that, while man can know certain things directly, this knowledge is limited to the senses, a fact that reflects a stable ontological hierarchy handed down from Aristotle. Pico, on the other hand, suggests in somewhat rhetorical terms that by virtue of his intellect, man can progress or fall freely in this ontological hierarchy, even though God remains ontologically prior, since it is His creation that man has been born to admire. While Pico communicates this method in rhetorical form, as it were calling into question its truth and allowing for the persistence of scholastic doctrine, the very ambivalence between the two positions<sup>7</sup>, which are both present in the *Oration*, seems to allow for a more autonomous, interpretive way of thinking, of the kind advocated on the metaphorical level, which frees man from his traditional position in the Cosmos and might have been a step towards the establishment of the autonomous individual of Modernity.

What Pico promotes is thus man's originary role in interpreting the Cosmos; even though he is ontologically dependent on God, he can explore the world unhindered by this dependence. He can lead a free, rational, autonomous inquiry into the nature of the world.<sup>8</sup> This position may be seen as a precursor to the Modern differentiation of the scientific sphere from, among others, that of theology. But this is made possible in part by Pico's use of a literary form in which he can allow himself to transgress the

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<sup>7</sup> This ambivalence seems entirely typical of Renaissance writings; about 75 years later, the French *Pleïade* poet Joachim Du Bellay could write, in his *Regrets* (1559), a tribute to the king of France (sonnet 191) which in its content paid homage to him in accordance with the Gallican doctrine that Du Bellay actively supported, while at the formal level it played on the sonic resemblance between *roi* and *moi*, "destabilizing" the king's superior position and promoting that of the poet – or the individual.

<sup>8</sup> Some resemblance may be noted here to the position of Descartes, where the *cogito* is known before the existence of God can be proved, cf. Descartes 1993.

boundaries of dogmatic cosmology. This (albeit somewhat weak) assertion of artistic autonomy may likewise be considered a step towards the differentiation of the artistic sphere. But these two developments are not totally separate. What we see in the *Oration* is rather a sort of dialectic between art and understanding that may at first seem foreign to the Modern, differentiated aesthetic and scientific spheres, but which may as well be seen as leading towards it.<sup>9</sup>

We have now reached the point that I have been wanting to make about historical development. It may be worth it to explore further its underlying logic. In spite of the importance of science for the development of Modernity, scientific development might not be as linear and separate from that of the “irrational” arts as one might have thought – indeed there might be a dialectic relationship between these spheres (and others, such as that of morality). Krays suggests that, while the humanist critiques of scholastic philosophy may have weakened Christian doctrine, “it was the scientific and epistemological revolutions of the seventeenth century which delivered the death blow” (Kraye 1993: 50). This may be true, but no death blow can be delivered until its target has been struck to the ground. Although Pico's destabilizing of scholastic doctrine lacks much of the objectivity which came to characterize Modern *scientific* thought (and also in many ways characterized Medieval Scholasticism), depending instead on rhetoric and mysticism, it does posit the possibility of man's autonomous exploration of the world. But it does so not in rational, scientific terms, but in a distinctly literary or poetic form. Pico thus employs the *aesthetically* Modern notion of *artistic* autonomy to promote the *epistemologically* Modern idea of *scientific* autonomy. This interplay between artistic and scientific practices may have played a fundamental role in the founding of Modern thinking.

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for pointing out some productive ambivalences in my view of Modernity, thereby, as far as I can see, allowing me to formulate a much clearer position on this subject.

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# Kierkegaard and the Quest for Continual Striving

– *Johannes Climacus on Indirect Communication and Faith as an Individual Task*<sup>1</sup>

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skrevet af Arman Teymouri Niknam, RUC · udgivet 15. dec. 2014 · 6371 ord

## Abstract

This article will suggest that Johannes Climacus presents a problematic way of grasping the Christian faith in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Because of his emphasis on a thoroughly subjective concern with faith, Climacus offers his readers a task that poses problems in regard to sociality and interpersonal relations. I also believe that the continual state of (subjective) striving, as well as uncertainty in relation to faith, can be related to the concept of indirect communication. While the task of faith in Climacus' account is a task that is given to each of us as individuals, the emphasis on indirect communication still makes it possible for us to view Climacus' project in the *Postscript* as one which goes beyond the narrow frames of individual subjectivity. Nevertheless, I will contend that the purpose of indirect communication precisely is to enhance an individualistic, subjective striving. However, it will also be shown that the emphasis on inwardness is not unequivocally negative as regards sociality.

## Introduction

While Søren Kierkegaard is respected throughout the world as the originator of existential thought in the modern era and as a Christian thinker who emphasised the commandment of neighbour love, he has also been criticised vehemently by some thinkers – such as Knud Ejler

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<sup>1</sup> This is an edited version of the original article from December 2014. In June 2015 some mistakes in regard to the references in the text have been corrected.

Løgstrup – who have argued that Kierkegaard’s philosophy and conception of faith contain major problems in regard to sociality. I believe that there is a certain double-sidedness in Søren Kierkegaard’s oeuvre with regard to sociality: Kierkegaard’s conception of faith in general may be seen as both isolating *and* stressing the need to involve with other people. By this, I mean that both of these two tendencies can be found in Kierkegaard’s oeuvre and often the same book can contain them both. In general, the stress on neighbourly love is joined together with a strong emphasis on the God-relationship in a way which can create problems for the exercise of love, even in a book such as *Works of Love*<sup>2</sup>. While Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Anti-Climacus presents an ideal in *The Sickness unto Death* whereby the individual should relate to himself/herself, to God and other persons, I believe the ideal is made difficult to achieve since most people are said to be in despair and therefore not able to properly to the sum of these three elements (Kierkegaard 1980: 57). Moreover, the crowd of people as well as the common norms of society are often an obstacle for the one who has achieved an inner realization of faith in Anti-Climacus’ account (Kierkegaard 1980: 123f).

This article will focus on *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, and I will argue that Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus’ account of faith and inwardness here in general is problematic in terms of sociality. Inwardness is, however, not an unambiguous term in the *Postscript*, and Climacus’ relationship to sociality therefore includes nuances that should be taken into account. In a broader sense, my article is a study, which exemplifies the two tendencies, which I believe are present in Kierkegaard’s oeuvre.

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<sup>2</sup> In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard stresses that if two persons are in love and each of them do not relate to God and the relationship as such is not related to God, then Christianity will not “hesitate to split up this relationship” (Kierkegaard 1995: 108). Other examples of the isolating tendency can be found in the book (Kierkegaard 1995: 194f).

## **Faith and continuous striving**

In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus states that there is a link between objective uncertainty and the infinite passion of inwardness which is a part of faith: "The *summa summarum* [sum total] of this is an objective uncertainty [den objektive Uvished], but the inwardness is so very great, precisely because it grasps this objective uncertainty with all the passion of the infinite" (Kierkegaard 1992: 204). We can thus understand that Climacus – despite his emphasis on subjectivity – does not want to abandon all forms of objectivity altogether. Rather, he wants to keep the feeling of objective uncertainty close as a way to try to grasp faith. However, objective uncertainty is not the same as faith or inwardness, but the objective uncertainty still constitutes a part of what faith is about. More precisely, faith contains two important elements, namely the passion connected to inwardness and the objective uncertainty. Moreover, Climacus writes that risk is an integrated part of faith:

Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction [Modsigelsen] between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith. If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast to the objective uncertainty, see to it that in the objective uncertainty I am 'out on 70,000 fathoms of water' and still have faith (Kierkegaard 1992: 204).

So, according to Climacus, if we wish to stay in faith, we must "hold fast" to the objective uncertainty and still try to retain our faith. When we are confronted with faith, we are confronted with an uncertainty, which may be termed 'objective' because we experience an uncertainty in regard to *what* our faith is about. It may also be termed an 'objective uncertainty' because the effort to grasp faith in an inward sense involves an uncertainty, which is then the *only* thing that we, objectively speaking, can be sure of (Kierkegaard 1992: 203). This feeling of uncertainty may lead us

to ask ourselves questions about the nature of our faith; it may change the way in which we strive towards a stronger, inner realisation of our faith, and this can be seen as the reason why objective uncertainty is related to inwardness. But does this mean that one cannot reach a stage of certainty in one's relation to God? Is faith a phenomenon always marked by instability?

When we are grasping faith, we are constantly at work since faith requires a continuous action and striving on our part, as Johannes Climacus makes evident through the analogy between faith and the situation in which a ship has sprung a leak and we continually have to keep the ship afloat (Kierkegaard 1992: 224f). It is possible to reach a stage in which one feels some kind of certainty in one's relation to God, but this 'certainty' is never an objective certainty and it will always be marked by the instability which is a part of one's close relationship to God. We may feel some certainty in our relationship to God, but this certainty will always be influenced by the very (subjective and objective) uncertainty we feel in relation to important issues such as faith, death etc.

Our 'certainty' in relation to faith is in this manner marked by uncertainty, and this paradox can be characterised as a part of the paradox of faith. And if we search for a relationship to God, we are never able to rest, but are always at work.

One can note that, according to Climacus, the objective uncertainty is a part of faith when faith is understood in the light of the Socratic (Kierkegaard 1992: 204, 322). When we go further than the Socratic and arrive at the (proper) Christian faith, we reach an understanding of the absurdity of faith (Kierkegaard 1992: 210). An understanding of faith as absurd is connected to more inwardness than the Socratic conception of faith, and moreover, it is connected with even less objectivity (since the only thing we can be sure of in regard to faith is that faith represents something absurd) (Kierkegaard 1992: 209f). I still believe, however, that

the objective uncertainty on a general level represents a part of the Christian faith as it is described in the *Postscript* since I am of the opinion that faith represents a continual striving precisely because it is linked to an element of (objective) uncertainty. We are never truly able to arrive at a point where we can say that we (objectively) have grasped faith for sure, but, as Climacus emphasises, we should nevertheless remain in the constant process of trying to relate to the paradox of faith, understanding that we can't understand it (Kierkegaard 1992: 558). And it is exactly this process (of relating to something which is absurd) that I believe is marked by a kind of (uncertain) objectiveness because we only are able to relate to faith if we presuppose that our faith has a certain content or carries a belief in something specific. This effort of relating to something specific (even though we cannot gain absolute certainty about it) makes the subject matter of Christian faith in the *Postscript* related to a type of (uncertain) objectiveness. What is then this content (of faith)? The content is described in Climacus' description of the absurd:

The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come into existence exactly as an individual human being, indistinguishable from any other human being, inasmuch as all immediate recognisability is pre-Socratic paganism and from the Jewish point of view is idolatry. Every qualification of that which actually goes beyond the Socratic must essentially have a mark of standing in relation to the god's having come into existence, because faith, *sensu strictissimo* [in the strictest sense], as explicated in the *Fragments*, refers to coming into existence (Kierkegaard 1992, 210).

Climacus thus makes it clear that the Christian faith carries relatedness to the belief that Jesus was the son of God as its "qualification". Moreover, Climacus himself explicitly makes a link between faith, objective uncertainty and the absurd towards the end of the *Postscript*:

Faith is the objective uncertainty with the repulsion of the absurd, held fast in the passion of inwardness, which is the relation of inwardness intensified to its highest. This formula fits only the one who has faith, no one else, not even a lover, or an enthusiast, or a thinker, but solely and only the one who

has faith, who relates himself to the absolute paradox (Kierkegaard 1992: 611).

### **Johannes Climacus as the “unhappy lover of subjectivity”?**

When Johannes Climacus distinguishes between a subjective and objective way of existence, he makes it clear that in the subjective way of existence the God-relationship is utterly personal, as is clear from his description of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing:

No, it pertains to something in which the knotty difficulty is precisely that one cannot come to admire him directly or by one's admiration enter into an immediate relation to him, for his merit consists precisely in having prevented this: he closed himself off in the isolation of subjectivity [i Subjektivitetens Isolation], did not allow himself to be tricked into becoming world-historical or systematic with regard to the religious, but he understood, and knew how to maintain, that the religious pertained to Lessing and Lessing alone, just as it pertains to every human being in the same way, understood that he had infinitely to do with God, but nothing, nothing directly to do with any human being (Kierkegaard 1992: 65).

The religious realm is thus related to “Lessing and Lessing alone”. Climacus makes it clear that no matter how good one's intentions are, it is wrong to become a “teacher” of Christianity because “every human being is essentially taught solely by God” (Kierkegaard 1992: 100f). Moreover, Climacus states that while objective thought is indifferent to the existence of the thinking subject, the subjective thinker is essentially interested in his *own* thinking (Kierkegaard 1992: 72f). Consequently, the thinking of the subjective subject has the reflection of “inwardness” and it belongs to no one but the subject himself (Kierkegaard 1992: 73). I believe that one is justified in asking whether Climacus' focus on the inwardness of the subjective thinker creates a gap between people. Do Climacus' thoughts about the subjective lay the foundation for a way of thinking where people become indifferent to each other's needs? If the religious realm represents something that is worth striving for, why should people not help and guide each other in their search for a relationship with God? And do Climacus' thoughts actually endorse an isolation of people when he mentions the

following: “In thinking, he [the subjective thinker] thinks the universal, but, as existing in this thinking, as acquiring this in his inwardness, he becomes more and more subjectively isolated” (Kierkegaard 1992: 73)? This idea of becoming ‘subjectively isolated’ can also be sensed in the above quote about Lessing where it is stated that Lessing had “nothing directly to do with any human being” (Kierkegaard 1992: 65).

However, Lessing does not only serve to exemplify the problems in Climacus’ account of the religious. This is because Climacus makes a certain reservation in regard to his understanding of Lessing:

Now, whether Lessing has accomplished this great thing, whether, humbling himself under the divine and loving the human, he has come to the assistance of the Deity by expressing his God-relationship in his relation to others in such a way that the meaningless situation would not develop that he would indeed have his own God-relationship, whereas some other person would have his God-relationship only through him – who knows this definitely? (Kierkegaard 1992: 67).

In Pia Søltoft’s (1996) article “The Unhappy Lover of Subjectivity: Is the Pseudonym Johannes Climacus an Unequivocal Figure?”, she argues that Johannes Climacus’ reservation about Lessing is not of great importance since it merely casts doubt on the role of Lessing in the *Postscript* and since the reservation does not contain anything that is of importance for Climacus who – in Søltoft’s account – is only interested in an isolated subjectivity (Søltoft 1996: 268f). Unlike Søltoft, I believe the above quote highlights a tendency in the *Postscript* of expressing one’s God-relationship by relating with love to other people in a positive sense; it is thus by “loving the human” and in “his relation to others” that Lessing in an actual manner expressed his “God-relationship”<sup>3</sup>. The important aspect

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<sup>3</sup> My interpretation of the quote becomes clearer if one turns to the original Danish version of the *Postscript*: “Om nu Lessing har gjort det Store, om han saaledes ydmygende sig under det Guddommelige, elskende det Menneskelige, er kommen Guddommen til Hjælp ved i sit Forhold til Andre at udtrykke sit Guds-Forhold, at ikke det Meningsløse skulde indtræde, at han skulle have sit Guds-Forhold, og noget andet Menneske kun gennem ham have sit Guds-Forhold: hvo veed det med Bestemthed? (Kierkegaard 2002: 69). A better translation of the quote can be found in Alastair Hannay’s translation of the *Postscript*: “Whether Lessing has done this great thing,

here is that Climacus (regardless of how Lessing actually was in his relation to the religious and to other people) believes that one can give one's (personal) love for God an outward expression through one's love for other people. One should, however, acknowledge that this is by far the only position that is given in the *Postscript* as regards sociality. It seems to stand in stark contrast to the quote wherein the state of being subjectively isolated in one's relation to God was emphasised, and it also stands in contrast to another statement by Climacus a few pages later. Here Climacus praises Lessing for being similar to Socrates by being one who was "without wishing to have people around one amid the perils of solitary thinking, since this is indeed the way" (Kierkegaard 1992: 69f). The description of Lessing does therefore serve well to illustrate the double-sidedness present as regards Climacus' stance towards sociality.

Søltoft (1996) believes that Climacus can be seen as an "unhappy lover of subjectivity" in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Whilst Johannes Climacus in the *Philosophical Fragments* presents a concept of subjectivity which enables him to relate reciprocally to other people, subjectivity is presented with such a consistent focus on "hidden inwardness" in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* so that genuine understanding between individuals has been precluded (Søltoft 1996: 260ff). And it is this change from the *Fragments* to the concept of hidden inwardness in the *Postscript* which makes the lover of subjectivity "unhappy" in the later work. Søltoft claims that Climacus performs a kind of thought experiment in both the *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in order to

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whether he has humbled himself under the deity and with love of the human come to the deity's aid by expressing his God-relationship in his relation to others, so as not to incur the meaningless consequence of his having his God-relationship and anyone else having a God-relationship only through him – who can know that for certain? (Kierkegaard 2009: 57).

understand the relation between speculation and Christianity<sup>4</sup>; the difference between the two books, however, is that the thought experiment fails in the *Fragments* whereas it is carried through in the *Postscript*<sup>5</sup>:

One's relation to God is associated in the *Fragments* with one's relation to other human beings in that both relations become essentially significant with respect to what it means to be a human in the genuine sense. There is, so to speak, a last waltz in the *Fragments* that causes the experiment itself to fail, but at the same time makes the lover of subjectivity happy. In the *Postscript*, on the other hand, the experiment is carried out consistently. That is, the concept of hidden inwardness inserts itself between one's relation to God and one's relation to other people, with the result that Climacus must take on the role of the unhappy lover of subjectivity (Søltoft 1996: 260).

As is shown by the quote above, Søltoft believes that Climacus in the *Philosophical Fragments* emphasises both the importance and relatedness between one's relation to God and one's relation to other human beings. According to Søltoft (1996: 266), Climacus presents a view of Christianity in the *Fragments* that encompasses a "happy relation" between the human and the divine, as well as between the Socratic and the Christian. This insight into a 'happy relation' is used to serve not only Climacus, but also to "awaken" the reader to an understanding of the significance of the divine and of the relation of the self to others (Søltoft 1996: 266). On the other hand, Søltoft believes that Climacus, in the *Concluding Unscientific*

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<sup>4</sup> More specifically, in the *Philosophical Fragments* the thought project concerns the question of whether the individual is in possession of the truth or whether the truth must be communicated to him from the outside (Søltoft 1996: 258). This theme is developed further in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as this book deals with how an individual comes into relation to the truth (Søltoft 1996: 258).

<sup>5</sup> According to Søltoft (1996: 258f), the basic premise of the thought experiments that Johannes Climacus conducts in the *Fragments* and the *Postscript* is that the experiments represent Climacus' personal and private observations and therefore they should not represent something of universal value. By transforming individuality into a higher form of the universal in the *Fragments*, Climacus transgresses the boundaries of the experiment (Søltoft 1996: 259). And the experiment ultimately fails in the *Fragments* because Climacus makes understanding between people, as well as between God and human beings, possible; the *Fragments* in this manner becomes a "tribute" to the "reciprocal relation between one human being and another and the relation, which this relation has to God, which is not only valid for Climacus, but which is supposed to serve to awaken the reader to an understanding of the divine and the significance this has for the relation which constitutes the self as well and the relation of the self to others" (Søltoft 1996: 264ff).

*Postscript*, is *solely* interested in isolated subjectivity understood as the inward transformation of the individual (Søltoft 1996: 268f). This isolated subjectivity, Søltoft claims, is not able to make the lover of subjectivity truly happy because happiness can only be achieved in a development which is characterised by a focus on reciprocity in the relation between people (Søltoft 1996: 261ff). Søltoft thus does not believe that a passionate, inward interest in an “eternal happiness” (which she believes is an important part of the *Postscript*) can make the lover of subjectivity happy – regardless of what Climacus believes about this matter – because there are problems in Climacus’ views of inwardness and in the “narrow” association he makes between ethics and inwardness as becoming subjective (Søltoft 1996: 269f). More specifically, Søltoft is concerned about the definition of the ethical in the second half of the *Postscript* as she believes this definition stands in contrast to what is said about the ethical in the first half of the book.

In Søltoft’s reading of the first half of the *Postscript*, Climacus here creates “a universality beneath individuality, an intersubjectivity beneath subjectivity” because the demand to become an ethical person, who is able to relate to himself and to God, is something that Climacus puts forward as an assignment that is common to us all, even though we have to carry out the assignment on an individual basis (Søltoft 1996: 271). I can follow Søltoft’s reading of the first half of the *Postscript* although I find it difficult to reconcile the fundamentally different statements given by Climacus here. There is a tension between such statements as:

[...] God, without doing any injustice and without denying his nature, which is love, could create a human being endowed with capacities unmatched by all others, place him in a remote spot, and say to him, ‘Now go and live the human life through with a strenuousness unmatched by all others; work so that one-half would be sufficient to transform an age, but you and I are alone in this. All your effort will have no importance whatsoever for any other human being, and yet you shall, do you understand, you shall will the ethical, and you shall, do you understand, you shall be enthusiastic, because this is the highest’ (Kierkegaard 1992: 137).

and:

The ethical is and remains the highest task assigned to every human being. It may also be required of a devotee of scholarship that he understand himself ethically before he dedicates himself to his intellectual discipline, that he continue to understand himself ethically in all his labor, because the ethical is the eternal drawing of breath and in the midst of solitude the reconciling fellowship with every human being (Kierkegaard 1992: 151f).

This tension, I believe, is a sign of the general tension in the *Postscript* as a whole in regard to whether such notions as the ethical and inwardness should isolate the individual in his path towards faith or commit the individual to relate to other people in a good manner. One can also note that even the two above quotes contain their own paradoxes. The nature of God is said to be love in the first quote while the second quote, which I believe emphasises the human need for a sense of sociality, mentions the importance of the ethical when the individual is placed in the midst of loneliness.

In regard to the second half of the *Postscript*, Søltoft focuses on three things that are interconnected, namely that the individual in the *Postscript* becomes characterised by sin, that the individual in this part of the *Postscript*, because of a shift in Climacus' view of the ethical, is now concerned "with other people only as possibilities and *not* as concrete actualities with which he comes into in the world", and that the individual's relation to God now works in a way which isolates him from other individuals, converting the individual into the unhappy lover of subjectivity (Søltoft 1996: 272ff). Concerning the first topic, Søltoft is quite right in claiming that the individual becomes characterised by sin in the *Postscript*. Johannes Climacus surprises the reader by saying that a more inward expression of subjectivity representing the truth is precisely that subjectivity is untruth (Kierkegaard 1992: 207). By creating a link between untruth and sin, Climacus in the *Postscript* creates a condition whereby the individual – even the religious person – will always be characterised by sin. The only thing the individual can strive for is to gain consciousness

about sin, but even this sin-consciousness is ultimately given by God (Kierkegaard 1992: 584). In the following, I will focus on the last-mentioned of the above topics, namely the results of the individual's relation to God even though I find Søltoft's reading of the consequences of Climacus' view of the ethical in the second half of the *Postscript* to be somewhat problematic<sup>6</sup>.

Søltoft (1996: 276) writes that the religious individual in Climacus' account ultimately becomes 'an unhappy lover of subjectivity' because this individual is given a choice of either becoming happily ignorant that others exist or unhappy of the awareness of this; Søltoft believes that the latter option is most likely to be followed if the God-relationship is to be successful when one follows the way of thinking that has been presented in the *Postscript*. The explanation of this choice is given by Climacus in connection to his description of religiousness B. While Søltoft does not elaborate on Climacus' distinction between religiousness A and religiousness B in her article, I believe that this distinction serves as a good example of the problems that lie in Climacus' understanding of Christianity in the *Postscript*. Religiousness A is a form of religiosity which is conducive to many kinds of religions, and it can be seen as a type of Christianity which is followed according to the common norms of society;

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<sup>6</sup>Søltoft (1996: 272ff) believes that genuine understanding between individuals has been precluded because Climacus (in the second half of the *Postscript*) stresses that one never can be related to another person as an experienced actuality, but only as a possibility. But maybe one does not lose the concreteness in relation to other people because one is concerned with them in terms of possibilities. The focus on possibility instead of actuality could instead be seen as an accentuation of the need to learn in a proper, existential manner from the deeds of other people. Climacus stresses that one goes wrong if one thinks that a focus on the actuality of another person's deed is truly inspiring; instead one needs to view the other person's deed as a possibility by which one then is able to relate oneself to the possibility of doing the same (deed): "What is great with regard to the universal must therefore not be presented as an object for admiration, but as 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 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" (Kierkegaard 1992: 358f).

therefore religiousness A does not cause any offense (Kierkegaard 1992: 585). Religiousness B, on the other hand, causes offense and it can be regarded as a more true form of Christianity that is connected to divine revelation. The passion that is connected to religiousness A must first be present before a person can enter the state of religiousness B (Kierkegaard 1992: 556f). What does Climacus have to say about the relation between humans in regard to religiousness B? The following excerpt from the *Postscript* deals with sympathy:

*The pain of sympathy*, because the believer does not, as in Religiousness A, latently sympathize and cannot sympathize with every human being *qua* human being, but essentially only with Christians. The person who with the passion of his whole soul bases his happiness on one condition, which is the relation to something historical, obviously cannot at the same time regard this condition as nonsense (Kierkegaard 1992: 585f).

According to Climacus, the believer of Christianity, who is in religiousness B, is thus only able to truly sympathise with other (true) Christians. The deep passion with which faith is grasped by the Christian believer and the deep relatedness to something historical (which must be God's incarnation in a human being, Jesus Christ) thereby works to exclude all who do not share a part in this passion. This example clearly shows that Climacus' thoughts on the religious way of life are able to create a tension, whereby Christians become indifferent to the needs of people of other kinds of orientations. Moreover, the indifference seems not only to be related to people who are not proper Christians; as Johannes Climacus emphasises, religiousness B is a kind of religiosity that in a general manner works hand in hand with the powers of exclusion: "Religiousness B is isolating [afsondrende], separating [udsondrende], is polemical. Only on this condition do I become blessed, and as I absolutely bind myself to it, I thereby exclude everyone else" (Kierkegaard 1992: 582). These powers of exclusion can become so strong for the Christian believer that it may become necessary to hate one's own father or mother if they are not able to relate to Christianity's (historical) condition (Kierkegaard 1992: 586).

Even though Johannes Climacus underlines that Christianity does not “enjoin” hate against one’s closest family, a hatred that arises from the demands of religiousness B is still possible: “He can be willing to do his utmost for them, to fulfill all the duties of a faithful son and a faithful lover with the greatest enthusiasm – in this way Christianity does not enjoin hating [saaledes byder Christendommen ikke at hade] – and yet, if this condition separates them, separates them forever, is this not as if he hated them?” (Kierkegaard 1992: 586). The Christian condition may thus work to separate a son from his parents. This is an example of the powers of exclusion that are at work in religiousness B, and it may therefore be regarded as another illustration of why Johannes Climacus to some extent can be seen as an ‘unhappy lover of subjectivity’.

Yet, it is not clear exactly what Climacus means when he says that the condition “separates them forever”. Is it a question of a (physical and mental) separation in their relationship whereby the believer tries to sever any kind of connection to his parents? Or is it rather a metaphorical expression of a ‘separation’ in which the believer feels estranged when he is with his parents because they do not share the same passion as him? If the latter is the case, that is, if the believer feels some kind of estrangement when he is with his parents without giving this sense of estrangement an outward form, then one may argue that we should be cautious in identifying Climacus as a writer who works in line with the powers of exclusion. Nevertheless, we can still clearly identify a tension in regard to human relations, which has risen out of faith’s demands to the individual. And if Christianity – even if only in a metaphorical sense – brings about separation of a child and its parents, then the task which Christianity presents for the individual can indeed become a task which in many ways functions as an exclusionary mechanism. The task of Christianity can thus disrupt the chance of achieving a genuine form of understanding between family members.

### **Faith as a continual, individual striving**

Maybe the stress upon the individual (and the individual's subjective relation to faith) in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is made precisely because Christianity cannot be grasped objectively and therefore cannot be learned through direct communication from one individual to another. And maybe a dismissal of direct communication in regard to faith is not a dismissal of all kinds of ordinary communication, let alone a dismissal of every kind of communication in regard to faith-related issues.

In regard to matters that deal with the religious, Johannes Climacus takes a clear stance against what he calls "objective thinking" and "direct communication" (Kierkegaard 1992: 72ff). While objective thinking is occupied with finding results that can be learned by rote and is interested in certainties, subjective thought is occupied with a continual striving and a mode of continuous becoming for the subject (Kierkegaard 1992: 73f). Climacus describes how the subjective thinker is embedded in a kind of "double-reflection"; namely, that this thinker, as described earlier, thinks the universal but becomes more and more subjectively isolated in this process (of thinking the universal and assimilating it in his inwardness) (Kierkegaard 1992: 73). This mode of 'double-reflection' in thinking also affects the mode of communication for the subjective thinker; he is obliged to communicate in a form of double-reflection wherein he, in an artistic and self-controlled manner, takes great care not to disclose the essential secrets that his subjective thinking has enabled him to relate to (Kierkegaard 1992: 73ff). While the subjective thinker may have realised that sociality and community are unthinkable as regards the life of eternity, he nevertheless may still want to communicate something personal; this contradiction cannot possibly, Climacus asserts, find expression in a direct form (Kierkegaard 1992: 73f). A lover, who is occupied in the inwardness of his love, should therefore not use a direct

form of communication (in regard to his love) since such a form “presupposes results and completion” (Kierkegaard 1992: 73). And since a God-relationship, as noted earlier, will always be marked by uncertainty, one cannot impart the significance of a God-relationship to others since such a direct disclosing would presuppose a certainty which is impossible to achieve for anyone who is in the process of becoming (Kierkegaard 1992: 73f).

It is worth noting that the indirect form of communication, which is inherent in the double-reflected kind of communication, is *also* a form of communication; it makes us relate to other people on important matters. The indirect form can contribute to inciting the receiver to strive for a kind of existence that is more related to existential and religious matters. While the indirect form of communication, being less logical and not based on objective thinking, may be more difficult to understand, I believe it can be compared with a work of art. The purpose of a work of art is precisely to awaken the observer and to present something which can inspire and which is open to individual interpretation. The real importance of a work of art thus lies in how the observer relates to the work; as Climacus writes, the actual meaning of a book lies in the reader himself (Kierkegaard 1992: 247). However, I still believe that the true purpose of such a communication, in Climacus’ account, to a great extent is to make the receiver approach an isolating kind of subjective striving. Socrates did want to help others, which is surely a movement that goes beyond the bounds of the individual; but, nevertheless, this help was intended to make others realise that they should become existing subjective thinkers who “isolated” themselves from “any and every relation” (Kierkegaard 1992: 80). As also noted by Søltoft (1996: 267f), the Socratic does thereby not in the same manner as in the *Philosophical Fragments* remain strongly associated with reciprocity in human relations in the *Postscript*. We are therefore able to criticise Climacus for delivering the task of faith in a way

that can isolate the believer from other individuals. But, as has already been shown, the focus on subjectivity and inwardness is not unambiguously negative as regards sociality in the *Postscript*. I believe that Climacus' description of Shakespeare's Brutus is a perfect example of this: Climacus is against the granting of oaths and outward expression of promises since such a "momentary outpouring of inwardness" can become "dangerous" (Kierkegaard 1992: 240). This does not, however, mean that inwardness cannot be related to something that is good and works in an outward sense. Climacus underlines that, as Brutus had shown, one can act in a way which "benefits the other person, prevents profanation of the sacred" and "prevents him from becoming bound by an oath" (Kierkegaard 1992: 240). If Brutus had prevented the making of an oath but instead "quietly dedicated himself", then it appears to Climacus that Brutus' "inwardness would had been even greater" (Kierkegaard 1992: 240). This clearly shows that the stress on subjectivity and inwardness does not only work in a negative manner in the *Postscript*. This is why we should be cautious in making a simple sign of equation between inwardness and isolation, although we seem unable to escape the risk of drowning in the sea of loneliness if we follow the task of faith as it is presented by Johannes Climacus in the *Postscript*.

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