The Offense of Reason and the Passion of Faith: Kierkegaard and Anti-Rationalism

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This essay considers and rejects both the irrationalist and the supra-rationalist interpretations of Kierkegaard, arguing that a new category—Kierkegaard as "anti-rationalist"—is needed. The irrationalist reading overemphasizes the subjectivism of Kierkegaard's thought, while the supra-rationalist reading underemphasizes the degree of tension between human reason (as corrupted by the will's desire to be autonomous and self-sustaining) and Christian faith. An anti-rationalist reading, I argue, is both faithful to Kierkegaard's metaphysical and alethiological realism, on the one hand, and his emphasis on the continuing opposition between reason and faith, on the other, as manifested in the ongoing possibility of offense (reason's rejection of the Christian message) in the life of the Christian.

I

Despite the number of works written on the subject, Kierkegaard's stance on the relationship between reason and faith remains an ongoing topic of debate. Some scholars argue that he is an irrationalist because he emphasizes that faith is passionate conviction to something which is not only objectively uncertain, but objectively absurd. Others argue that he is better thought of as a supra-rationalist, someone who distinguishes between, but does not finally oppose, reason and faith. Still others argue that Kierkegaard is a rationalist (albeit a somewhat peculiar one) who believes that there are good reasons for a Christian to prefer Christianity to all other religious paths.

While one can find evidence for each of these interpretations within Kierkegaard's writings, I believe that all three ultimately mischaracterize his understanding of religious faith. In different ways, both the supra-rationalist and the rationalist readings of Kierkegaard fail to recognize the depth of the antagonism between reason and genuine religious commitment and consequently ignore the persistent tension between reason and faith (a tension that continues even after the life of faith has been embraced). Despite this tension, however, I will argue that Kierkegaard does not regard reason as intrinsically hostile to religious truth, nor does he regard any passionately held belief to be true, as the irrationalist reading would have it.

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On my reading, Kierkegaard is best described as an anti-rationalist. By “anti-rationalist” I mean, following A.C. Graham, someone who denies “that reason is the right means to see things as they are,” while also denying that this “allows you to see things as you like.” An anti-rationalist, in other words, rejects the use of reason in the pursuit of religious truth but does not, in the same stroke, render truth simply a matter of subjective conviction, a product of the arbitrary will of the individual. Kierkegaard, I will argue, regards human reason not as irrelevant or indifferent to religious truth but as actively hostile to it in the life of an existing individual. This hostility, however, is not due to any logically necessary contradiction between reason and religious truth, but to the insidious influence of the sinning will of the individual, a will which seeks to be master of itself and thus disobedient to God. Faith, for Kierkegaard, is a fundamental reorientation of the self away from an always illusory autonomy toward genuine obedience and submission to the creator; this obedience is most clearly manifested in the individual’s ongoing refusal to respond with offense to a message that reason describes as absurd. Because reason can only lead one away from religious truth both before and after the commitment to Christianity has been made, Kierkegaard is neither a rationalist nor a supra-rationalist; at the same time, because the truth of Christianity (and, by extension, of faith) is in no way dependent on the subjective intensity of the believer (or on the paradoxical nature of its message), he is not an irrationalist. A new category—anti-rationalist—is needed.

II

Perhaps the most common element of the Kierkegaard-as-irrationalist interpretation is the claim that, for Kierkegaard, the sole determining factor in assessing the beliefs of an individual is the degree of passion with which the belief is held—the amount of evidence for or against any given belief is irrelevant. The passion factor measures, so this reading goes, not only the integrity of the believer but also the truth of his or her belief. In this vein, for example, Alastair MacIntyre writes that, for Kierkegaard, “the criterion of both choice and truth is intensity of feeling.” The passage from his work most often cited to support this comes from Concluding Unscientific Postscript. In that work, Kierkegaard, writing as Johannes Climacus, asks

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 [i.e., insincerely], 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.
Viewed in isolation from both the *Postscript* as a whole and Kierkegaard’s other works, this passage seems to suggest that as long as one believes sincerely—i.e., is committed one hundred percent to the object of one’s belief, with the “passion of infinity”—one believes truly. Thus there is no difference between the so-called “fanatic” and the “true believer;” anyone who believes sincerely, believes truly.

This claim is usually combined with a second, that for Kierkegaard passion and reason are mutually exclusive, that the more “reasons” one has for believing something, the less passionate and emotional will be the resulting belief. Here, too, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is usually cited as the best source for this view. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, argues that uncertainty is a necessary prerequisite for passionate belief, distinguishing quite sharply between reasonable knowledge and belief:

> The almost probable, the probable, the to-a-high-degree and exceedingly probable—that he can almost know, or as good as know, to a higher degree and exceedingly almost know—but believe it, that cannot be done, for the absurd is precisely the object of faith and only that can be believed (CUP, 211).

Thus, on this reading, belief is linked with passion, and passion requires the absence of reasons or justification for the belief; hence in order to believe passionately, there must not be adequate grounds for holding that belief—one’s belief must not be “probabilly true.”

From this it is a short step to the third component of the irrationalist reading: that the degree of passion in belief is negatively correlated with its reasonableness. That is, the more reasonable a belief is, the less passionately it is held (and the less it can be said to be believed, strictly speaking), while the more unreasonable a belief is, the greater the passion binding it to the believer. Here interpreters can point to the many references made by Kierkegaard, through the voice of Climacus and other pseudonyms, to the “absurd” and the “absolute paradox” as the true object of belief. According to the logic of this argument, then, the most passionate, and by extension the (at least subjectively) truest belief will be the least reasonable, bordering on, even passing over into, outright contradiction. The combined force of these three claims (first, that passion is the criterion of truth and belief; second, that reason is inimical to the intensity of passion; therefore, third, the best object for passion is absurd, a paradox) renders Kierkegaard a fairly strong irrationalist: reason cannot help you—in fact, it can only *hurt* you—in your search for truth, because truth is a function of the passion of the believer. By implication, whatever you intensely believe to be true, is true (at least for you) and the only things you can really *believe* (as opposed to “merely” know) to be true are irrational.

Although this reading does have some textual support, it has at least two serious shortcomings. First, this reading cannot account for the fact that Kierkegaard unquestionably believes that one path (the Christian-religious path) is superior to all others and is indeed the only true path,
not only for him but for others as well. Whatever praise the Climacus pseudonym might heap on the passion of the pagan, in the end for Kierkegaard only one objective absurdity, the Incarnation, corresponds to the truth. Despite the passage from the Postscript quoted above about the pagan, Kierkegaard—and for that matter, Climacus also—clearly distinguishes genuine passion from "aberrant" forms; the distinction does not rest upon the sincerity of the passion, but on the nature of its object. Don Quixote is cited several times within the Postscript as an example of "subjective lunacy." The irrationalist reading of Kierkegaard/Climacus cannot account for such a distinction other than to regard it as an unfortunate inconsistency in his position. Were Kierkegaard an irrationalist, he would be unable to distinguish between objects of faith—or, at the very least, between irrational objects of faith: any irrational belief would be equally good as any other. But for Kierkegaard, the truth of Christianity is not grounded in its being irrational, but only in its objective, empirical reality—only if God in fact became a man at a certain point in history is Christianity true, the subjective intensity of millions of believers notwithstanding. The fundamental, underlying realism of Kierkegaard’s thought is made quite clear in the non-pseudonymous On Authority and Revelation:

Christianity exists before any Christian exists, it must exist in order that one may become a Christian, it contains the determinant by which one may test whether one has become a Christian, it maintains its objective subsistence apart from all believers...[E]ven if no one had perceived that God had revealed himself in a human form in Christ, he nevertheless has revealed himself.

The second difficulty with the irrationalist reading is that it cannot account for the fact that Kierkegaard himself uses reason, in at least two ways. He uses it, first, to describe faith phenomenologically, i.e., without respect to the truth of its object. Kierkegaard cannot both reject reason as intrinsically hostile to religious truth and use it as a vehicle for characterizing faith without contradiction. If nothing else, the internal coherence of Kierkegaard’s position and the tightness of many of his arguments demonstrate a healthy respect for reason, properly employed. He uses reason, second, to show why reason cannot be a primary means of attaining faith, that its function is purely negative in the acquisition and realization of faith, if certain assumptions about the nature of human beings and, in particular, about their relationship to the creator and to themselves are accepted as true. Kierkegaard’s authorship can, in part, be understood as an attempt to offer a compelling and consistent model of religious faith in which reason, by definition, can play only a negative role. Thus, Kierkegaard uses reason on the meta-level, to describe what faith is and how it is realized; but part of that description, as we shall see below, involves a severe restriction and a redefinition of reason’s role vis-à-vis faith.
Dissatisfaction with the irrationalist interpretation has led a number of scholars to offer a supra-rationalist reading of Kierkegaard. Many proponents of this interpretation argue that the irrationalist reading relies too heavily on one pseudonymous author, Johannes Climacus, and identifies his words with those of Kierkegaard. Not only does such a move ignore Kierkegaard’s explicit disclaimer that in the Postscript “there is not a single word by me,” but it overlooks the fact that Johannes Climacus is a professed non-Christian, and thus views Christianity from the outside. Alastair McKinnon, for example, has argued at length that it is essential to treat the works written under the non-Christian pseudonyms quite differently from the Christian, and that when one does so one sees that the phrases so beloved of the Kierkegaard-as-irrationalist camp (“faith by virtue of the absurd,” “the absolute paradox”) essentially disappear in the Christian and non-pseudonymous works. On this reading, something fundamental happens to the Christian after he or she has embraced the cross and what appears absurd to the unbeliever does not so appear to the believer: “The object of faith is the absurd or paradox but only for one who sees it from the outside, for one who does not yet have faith. For the man of faith it is no longer absurd or paradoxical.” Timothy Jackson makes essentially the same point when he writes “...faith does not violate the intellect but rather sets it aside or supersedes it... Kierkegaardian faith embraces in passionate inwardness what reason alone is unable to demonstrate is not a genuine antimony. Reason is not contradicted, but neither is it given the last word.”

Further support for some version of the supra-rationalist reading can be found within the Climacus pseudonym itself, in the discussion in Philosophical Fragments of the relationship between the believer and the savior. C. Stephen Evans’s recent book, Passionate Reason, offers a compelling account of Climacus’s view of reason and its role in the process of faith formation. Through a close analysis of Climacus’s argument as it unfolds in the Fragments, Evans argues that the problem is not with reason per se but with its “imperialistic character” whereby it seeks to function as “an instrument of control or even domination.” This imperialistic reasoning confronts the paradox of the incarnation (understood by Evans not as a formal logical contradiction but as something resistant to human understanding, which appears to be a contradiction) and initially stands mute before it. On Evans’s reading, reason cannot even understand that the paradox is a paradox without being transformed—hence the distinction between a teacher (who merely helps the individual become aware of something he already knows) and the savior (who actively transforms the individual, providing him with the “condition” whereby he can grasp the truth). Once transformed, the individual is confronted with a choice: either to accept that reason has its limits, and accept the paradox in faith, or to be offended, and to dismiss it as absurd or contradictory.
For our purposes, what is crucial about Evans' reading is his emphasis that reason can and does play a positive role in this process, albeit of a limited nature. This positive role has two facets. First, Evans notes that "Although Climacus argues that the incarnation is something which cannot be rationally understood, he regards this claim as itself one which is subject to rational scrutiny. One cannot rationally understand the paradox, but one can hope rationally to understand why the paradox cannot be understood" (108). As a product of this recognition, second, reason can freely choose to "set itself aside." From this Evans concludes that "Climacus does not think that the tension between human reason and the paradox is a necessary tension...Faith is described as a happy passion in which reason and the paradox are on good terms...In other words, there is no conflict between faith and reason if reason can accept the limitations of reason" (108).

Evans has made a strong case that in the Fragments, at least, a suprarationalist model of faith is developed. I do not believe, however, that one can move from this to the broader claim that Kierkegaard himself is a suprarationalist—a claim, to be sure, that Evans does not make in this book—nor am I persuaded that even Climacus, in the end, embraces a suprarationalist view of faith. In order to understand Kierkegaard's position, one must supplement the treatment of reason and offense given in the Fragments with that given by the pseudonym Anti-Climacus in Sickness Unto Death and Practice in Christianity, two works in which the concept of offense (reason's response to Christianity) is discussed at length. When one further adds into the mix Climacus' discussion in the Postscript of how Christianity is distinct from "paganism," even the claim that Climacus is a suprarationalist becomes suspect. The conjunction of Sickness Unto Death, Practice in Christianity, and the Postscript results in a reading that sees reason operating in continuing opposition to faith even after the truth of Christianity has been embraced by the believer.

IV

The pseudonyms Anti-Climacus and Climacus clearly stand in a special relationship with one another. The fact that Climacus is expressly a non-Christian, while Anti-Climacus "regards himself as a Christian on an extraordinarily high level," coupled with a prefix usually suggesting antagonism, might lead one to infer that they represent divergent, even opposing points of view on the nature of faith. According to Howard and Edna Hong, however, "the prefix 'Anti'-does not mean 'against.' It is an old form of 'ante' (before), as in 'anticipate,' and 'before' also denotes a relation of rank, as in 'before me' in the First Commandment." This suggests that the works of Anti-Climacus and Climacus are complementary, possibly with a fuller and more complete picture of faith provided by Anti-Climacus. Kierkegaard himself explicitly stated that Climacus' Postscript and Anti-Climacus' Sickness Unto Death and Practice in Christianity convey most clearly his understanding of Christianity.
Of the two works attributed to Anti-Climacus, *Sickness Unto Death* is probably the more widely known. In it, the author develops first a psychological model of the self as a dynamic entity which is continually in the process of making and remaking itself, and then recasts the psychological model into a theological framework. Two assumptions drive Anti-Climacus’ discussion: first, that most people fail to be selves, either by never attempting to become a self at all, or by attempting to become the wrong kind of self. Second, that the human self is created by God (“the Power that posits it”) and thus always stands in a dependent relationship to him. As a result, even though I may be striving to be a self as I understand it to be, if I am not constantly relating myself to God in this process, I am attempting to be the wrong kind of self—to be a self that is self-sustaining, rather than dependent upon God.

After developing a typology of despair at some length, Anti-Climacus turns to his primary theme: that despair, or the failure to be a self or to be the right kind of self, is sin. More precisely, sin is despair “before God.” In connecting despair and sin he has provided a clarification of the classical Christian concept of sin as refusal to submit to God. In Anti-Climacus’s terms, we disobey God by refusing (either through indolence, weakness, or defiance) to be the kind of self he created us to be, a self which is both free to define itself and bound by its relation to its creator. The introduction of God (as the “establisher” of every human being, who thereby exists in a dependent relationship with him) ensures that no individual is able to free him- or herself of despair through his or her own efforts. Any such attempt is an attempt to define oneself by oneself—i.e., any such attempt is an example of defiant despair. Although we are all responsible for our despair, ultimately it is only God who can free us of it.

Anti-Climacus develops his picture of sin as “despair before God” by introducing the category of “offense.” Faced with Christianity—in particular, with its account of a God who so loves human beings that he died on the cross to atone for their sin—the despairing individual is offended: he proclaims the message of Christianity insane or ridiculous. He tells himself (and others) that Christianity makes no sense, that it is absurd. This is, for Anti-Climacus, a telling example of the defiance of the despairing individual—essentially this person has set up his own intellect, his own reason, as the arbiter of what is possible and what is true; he has forgotten, to borrow a phrase used by both the Anti-Climacus pseudonym and others, that with God “all things are possible.” What Christianity demands, according to Anti-Climacus, is obedience and submission; any attempt to understand it, to comprehend it, is an attempt to gain mastery over it. “The secret of all comprehending is that this comprehending is itself higher than any position it posits.” (SUD 97). Confronted with Christianity, the individual has, for Anti-Climacus, only two choices: “either it must be believed or one must be scandalized and offended by it” (SUD, 98); “...all Christianity turns on this, that it must be believed and not comprehended” (SUD 98).

To clarify his account of despair as sin, and the distinctively Christian nature of sin, he contrasts his model with the Socratic, a strategy also
employed by Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments*. On the Socratic model, sin is simple ignorance: One chooses evil out of the mistaken notion that it is really good. On the Christian model, by contrast, one chooses evil knowing it is evil, indeed, *because* it is evil. Sin is thus not a negation or a privation (as in the Socratic model, an absence of knowledge) but a position, an active force. There is a sense, Anti-Climacus suggests, in which Christian sin can be understood as ignorance, but it is a *willed* ignorance—and in that adjective lies a world of difference from the Socratic. To the extent that individual believes his evil choice to be the right one, it is because he has persuaded himself that this is the case.

Anti-Climacus describes this process as the corruption of the mind by the will:

> In the life of the spirit there is no standing still...therefore, if a person does not do what is right at the very second he knows it—then, first of all, knowing simmers down. Next comes the question of how willing appraises what is known...If willing does not agree with what is known, then it does not necessarily follow that willing goes ahead and does the opposite of what knowing understood...rather, willing allows some time to elapse, an interim called: 'We shall look at it tomorrow.' During all this time, knowing becomes more and more obscure, and the lower nature gains the upper hand more and more...And when knowing has become duly obscured, knowing and willing can better understand each other; eventually they agree completely, for now knowing has come over to the side of willing and admits that what it wants is absolutely right (SUD, 94).

Sin, then, is essentially a form of self-deception in which the individual willingly turns away from the good (a life “grounded transparently in the power that posits it”) and persuades himself that the evil he prefers is really good.

The parallel with self-deception is both important and instructive, for it helps to clarify why Anti-Climacus believes an individual to be incapable of thinking his or her way out of despair into faith. A person in the throes of self-deception is unable to heal him- or herself precisely because self-deception is a corruption of the reasoning process. Generally, we label another self-deceived because he or she believes something to be the case despite extremely compelling evidence to the contrary. We deem this other to be self-deceived, rather than simply ignorant (the Socratic model) because the contrary evidence seems impossible to ignore; thus we say the individual “knows,” in some sense, the falsity of what he or she believes, even while denying this to be the case. A self-deceived person doesn’t ignore the contrary evidence; he simply assesses it incorrectly (deeming it unimportant, for example), usually because of some great personal stake he has in what he believes being true. (Consider, for example, a woman who continues to assert that her husband “really” loves her despite his constant mental and physical abuse of her. She is not unaware of the abuse, but she may
construct an elaborate justification scheme in which the abuse becomes actual evidence of his love, rather than the obvious counter-indication it seems to others.) Because the reasoning process is impaired—and indeed, perpetuates its own impairment through its ongoing efforts at rationalization—the individual is simply not able to think his or her way to the truth so obvious to others. In the case of despair, the situation is, if anything, even worse because the self-deception occurs at such a fundamental level: the very definition of who and what the self is. One’s reasoning powers have always already been coopted by the sinning will; not only does reason fail to help us, it actively leads us astray through the pernicious influence of the will.

What, though, of an individual who has been transformed through grace by his or her confrontation with the savior? Granted, prior to the acceptance of Christianity, its message is an offense to one’s reasoning powers; but after one has responded with faith (after one’s will has been retooled, in effect) does the same tension between reason and the Christian truth exist?

I believe that it does, and this is why I think Kierkegaard is best thought of as an anti-rationalist, rather than as a supra-rationalist or a rationalist. While it is true that the believer is not offended by the paradox—that “when the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd,” to quote the journal entry often cited by proponents of the supra-rationalist interpretation—this does not mean that the believer comprehends the paradox, or that the tension between reason and faith is lessened. To suggest that it is, I will argue below, unintentionally collapses Christianity (or what Climacus in the Postscript refers to as Religiousness B) back into paganism (referred to by Climacus as Religiousness A); faith becomes an inward possession of the believer and Christianity loses what to Kierkegaard was its ultimate distinction: the crucifixion of the understanding.

V

Anti-Climacus continues the discussion of offense initiated in Sickness Unto Death in Practice in Christianity. Here offense is defined as “that which conflicts with all (human) reason.” Such a thing cannot, by definition, be proven or demonstrated true: “One can ‘demonstrate’ only that it conflicts with reason” (26). Does this then mean that the Christian knows nothing of Christ? In a word, yes: “...one cannot know anything at all about Christ; he is the paradox, the object of faith, exists only for faith” (25). Any attempt to come to a rational understanding of this object destroys it. “Jesus Christ is the object of faith; one must either believe in him or be offended; for to ‘know’ simply means that it is not about him....knowledge annihilates Jesus Christ” (33). The sharp dichotomy between knowledge and faith, in other words, developed by Johannes Climacus—who is a self-professed non-Christian—is expressed in much stronger terms by the Christian author Anti-Climacus. Perhaps even more important, the battle between offense and belief is not presented by Anti-Climacus as a single event after which
faith, having conquered, reigns victorious, without opposition. Rather, the battle is portrayed as a constant struggle in the life of the believing Christian: “faith conquers the world by conquering at every moment the enemy within one’s own inner being, the possibility of offense” (p. 76, my emphasis). The continuing precariousness of faith—and its ongoing relationship with offense—is one of this work’s most recurring themes. “Faith is carried in a fragile earthen vessel, in the possibility of offense” (76).

This clear indication that reason and faith remain in opposite and hostile corners even after one has committed oneself, in fear and trembling, to Christianity is reiterated by Kierkegaard in his journals. The same entry which acknowledges that the absurd “is not the absurd” to the believer also stresses that “the absurd and faith are inseparables,” that “true faith breathes healthfully and blessedly in the absurd.” The non-believer, in other words, dismisses Christianity as nonsense, as sheer folly or madness; the believer does not do so, and yet while he “expresses just the opposite of offense...he always has the possibility of offense as a negative category.”

The ongoing presence of the possibility of offense in the life of faith is closely connected to Kierkegaard’s conviction that religious faith is, above all else, an act of obedience and submission to God. Offense before Christianity is essentially refusal to obey the higher authority of God; to be offended before Christianity is to place one’s own standard of truth and “reasonableness” ahead of the divine reality. For Kierkegaard, “the matter is very simple: will you or will you not obey, will you submit in faith to his divine authority, or will you take offense—or will you perhaps not take sides—be careful, for that, too, is offense.”

Still, the question remains whether after one has been reborn in faith—transformed by the savior discussed in Philosophical Fragments—the tension between reason and faith remains. After all, couldn’t one argue that the possibility of offense is not the same as being offended, (just as the possibility of divorce, always present in marriage, is not the same as being divorced) and that therefore some sort of happy marriage between reason and faith then exists?

I think not, given the distinction that Kierkegaard always wished to maintain between Christianity and what he dubbed “paganism,” between the Religion of Paradox (Religiousness B, in the words of the Postscript) and the Religion of Immanence (Religiousness A), between Christ the Savior and Socrates the Teacher. Religiousness A, or paganism, teaches that the truth we need lies within ourselves; we need only recognize it. In Religiousness A, as Climacus puts it, “subjectivity is truth” and God may directly apprehended. Religiousness A is the religion of immediacy, of a direct relationship to God, unbroken and uncorrupted. This, for Kierkegaard as well as Climacus, is essentially the Socratic model, a model to which Christianity is consistently juxtaposed.

Religiousness B, in contrast, teaches that subjectivity is untruth, that one’s relationship with the divine is broken, corrupted. Because of this, God cannot be directly apprehended and the individual is unable to see and grasp the truth of his or her own accord. Revelation—one of the
distinctive marks of Christianity—is needed as well as the transforming influence of grace. Now, imagine that an individual transformed by grace is able to perceive the truth of Christianity directly—i.e., that there is no longer any tension between the believer's reason and his or her faith; what happens? Faith then becomes a possession, and there is no longer any meaningful distinction between Religiousness A and Religiousness B; if the man of faith is ever able to understand it on his own (even after being transformed by God) essentially Christianity becomes a religion of immanence. But this is precisely what Kierkegaard devoted himself to battling; this is precisely what he believed to be wrong with the religious views of his contemporaries:

What is commonly called Christendom (these thousands and millions) has made Christianity into utter nonsense.

But, in addition, established Christendom's orthodoxy has actually transformed Christianity to paganism.

Christ is the paradox; everything Christian is marked accordingly, or as the synthesis it is such that it is marked by the dialectical possibility of offense. Orthodoxy... has now taken this away and set in its place everywhere: the wonderful-glorious, the glorious, the incomparably glorious and deep etc.—in short direct categories.

Thus Christ acquires direct recognizability, but direct recognizability means Christ is not 'the sign'; with direct recognizability Christianity is paganism.23

Thus, even after embracing Christ, his paradoxical nature remains for the believer; the battle against what Evans calls "imperialistic reason" must be fought continually. Otherwise faith becomes a possession, God becomes directly apprehendable, and Christianity becomes indistinct from paganism.24 Kierkegaard's anti-rationalism, in other words, is a key component of his understanding of Christian faith.

VI

I have argued above that Kierkegaard's position on faith, offense, reason, and sin requires an anti-rationalist interpretation, that for Kierkegaard reason is always useless in, indeed at tension with, the realization and maintenance of faith. In this final section, I would like briefly to discuss three possible objections one could make to this interpretation.

The first objection concerns what this reading implies about Kierkegaard's picture of the believer's state of mind. Doesn't an anti-rationalist reading make the content of faith unintelligible to the believer? Doesn't it, in effect, make faith blind? And isn't the advantage of the supra-rationalist reading precisely that it preserves the tension between faith and reason prior to the believer's acceptance of Christianity without putting the believer in the position of affirming he knows not what?

I accept that the picture of faith that ensues from a supra-rationalist
reading of Kierkegaard is, for many, more attractive than the picture of faith I have outlined above, but I don’t believe that that is any ground for rejecting an anti-rationalist reading. Indeed, one could argue the reverse, that the attractiveness of the supra-rationalist model actually makes it suspect, given Kierkegaard’s constant indictment of those who wished to make Christianity more appealing. For Kierkegaard, being a Christian is both fundamentally strenuous and always ultimately solitary precisely because of the ongoing possibility of reason’s offense to its message. The obedience demanded of the Christian was, in his eyes, manifested (not solely but importantly) in the believer’s willingness to abandon the effort to make it comprehensible: “...what is it to believe? It is to will (what one ought and because one ought), God-fearingly and unconditionally obediently, to defend oneself against the vain thought of wanting to comprehend and against the vain imagination of being able to comprehend.”25 In fact, Kierkegaard suggests that one’s willingness not to comprehend, to become like the lover who is blinded by love, is the mark of genuine faith:

...Take an analogy. Love makes one blind. Yes, but it is nevertheless a cursed thing to become blind—well, then, you can just diminish the blindness a little so that one does not become entirely blind. But take care—for when you diminish the blindness, you also diminish the love, because true love makes one entirely blind.

And true faith breathes healthfully and blessedly in the absurd. The weaker faith must peer and speculate, just like the weaker love, which does not have the courage to become entirely blind, and for that reason remains a weaker love, or, because it is a weaker love, it does not become entirely blind.26

On my reading, Kierkegaard acknowledges the incomprehensibility of Christianity for the believer; but rather than regarding this as a defect, he sees it as symptom of faith’s intensity and depth.27 The second objection stems from the absence, in this essay, of any discussion of the historical context in which Kierkegaard’s view of faith was generated. Kierkegaard’s work clearly involved a polemic against Hegelian idealism, and thus one could argue (as have Louis Dupre and others) that his “theory of faith must be understood as a reaction against Hegel.”28 This in turn might suggest that Kierkegaard’s critique of reason must be understood not as a generally anti-rationalist stance, but rather as a specific indictment of a particular conception of reason. Other, less absolutist, uses of reason might well escape Kierkegaard’s disapprobation.

I recognize, of course, that Kierkegaard’s position on reason and its relationship to religious faith was distinctively and negatively shaped by the speculative idealism of his day; a longer essay would naturally discuss this influence in some detail. Simply because his views originated in that context, however, does not mean that their application should be limited to Hegelian thought (and its analogues), or that it was so limited
by Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard, the problem with reason is its cor-
ruption by a sinning will, a will that seeks to be autonomous and that
uses reason in its efforts to accomplish that end. Given both the perva-
siveness of sin and its self-deceptive powers, any use of reason in con-
junction with one's own religious faith (including those that might
appear quite humble and harmless) must be regarded as a temptation to
usurp the authority of God as the power upon whom humans depend
for their existence, a temptation against which the believer must con-
stantly struggle. Kierkegaard undoubtedly regarded Hegelianism as a
prime example of the corruption of reason by the will; but he did not
regard it either as the first or as the last.

This leads naturally into the third objection: How do I reconcile an
anti-rationalist reading of Kierkegaard with my earlier claim that he does
not view reason as intrinsically hostile to religious truth, with the fact
that Kierkegaard himself employs reason, albeit in an indirect and often
idiosyncratic fashion, to convey his position? If the content of faith
remains incomprehensible to the believer, if indeed reason invariably
leads one away from religious truth (both before and after it has been
embraced by the individual), doesn't this imply that Kierkegaard would
reject the use of reason in every realm? In other words, isn't "anti-ratio-
nalist" simply a nicer and less honest way of saying "misologist"?

To answer these questions, it is essential to remember that, on my
reading, Kierkegaard does not regard reason per se as the culprit pre-
venting us from having faith, although we might try to persuade our-
selves that it is; rather, the guilty party is always our disobedient will
which uses reason in its attempt to justify itself. I have argued that sin
for Kierkegaard is at root a dysfunction or breakdown in the process of
individual self-definition; when I sin I attempt to establish myself as an
independent being, a project always doomed to failure if I am in fact a
derived, created being. For Kierkegaard, one of the primary ways I seek
to define myself autonomously is through the use of my reason; rather
than submitting in obedience to God's message, I use my reason to
assess and pass judgment on it. In doing so, either I turn Christianity
into something else (something subject to my will) or I deem it nonsensi-
cal and impossible. In both cases, I am seeking to make my own mind
the final arbiter of truth; in both cases, I am in despair because the will
driving my reason forward is attempting to be self-grounding.

Does this mean then that on my reading Kierkegaard regards any and
every use of reason as suspect? Yes and no. The answer is yes, in the
area of self-definition, in the realm of what Climacus refers to as "essen-
tial truth, or the truth that is essentially related to [my individual] exis-
tence" (CUP, 199f/n). Here I must always resist the temptation of my will
to use reason to establish for myself that which only God can establish
for me—my own being. This remains as true for the Christian as for the
unbeliever, and so the believer must be willing to become as though he
were blind in faith. But no, reason is not suspect if we are not talking
about self-definition or the realm of essential truth. I may be in the most
severe state of despair and yet still use my reason with good effect to
prove, for example, the irrationality of the square root of two. More rel-
eventually, I might still be in despair and understand disinterestedly that if it is true that the Incarnation happened, if it is true that my salvation lies in believing that fact, if it is true that my will is corrupted by sin and uses reason to justify turning away from the truth, then it follows (quite rationally) that reason can be of no use to me in assessing any of these claims. I could write books describing what faith would look like, given these assumptions. I could paint the most glorious and internally consistent picture of the religious life founded on these assumptions. But I will never be able to use my reason to establish the truth of these hypotheticals; indeed, any attempt to do so will only drive me farther away from them.

Kierkegaard’s anti-rationalism, in other words, is distinct from misology in that his rejection of reason is in no way entire; it is limited to the individual’s private and personal pursuit of religious truth. As he himself demonstrates, it is possible to offer an internally consistent and coherent description of Christian faith, albeit one in which the role of reason is quite negatively portrayed. But from the fact that such third-person descriptions are possible it cannot be inferred that reason is in any way a positive influence in the first-person transformation from unbeliever to believer, or in the ongoing maintenance of faith in the life of the individual. The possibility of offense, like the pull of gravity, remains constant; this in turn implies that the cooption of reason by a disobedient will is also always a possibility and that therefore the struggle against such cooption never ceases. As Climacus puts is, Christianity does not “want to be the paradox for the believer, and then surreptitiously, little by little, provide him with understanding, because the martyrdom of faith (to crucify one’s understanding) is not a martyrdom of the moment, but the martyrdom of continuance (CUP, 559).”

NOTES

3. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) p.201. All further references to this work will be given in the text.
4. For a more detailed version of this argument, see Robert Merrihew Adams, “Kierkegaard’s Arguments Against Objective Reasoning in Religion” in *The Monist* 60 (1976): 228-43.
5. For example: “Don Quixote is the prototype of subjective lunacy in which the passion of inwardness grasps a particular fixed finite idea” (CUP, 195).

7. CUP, p. 626. This disclaimer applies not only to the Postscript, but to all the pseudonymous works published in or before 1846.


11. The heart of Evans’s argument here is that if the incarnation is understood as a formal contradiction, then humans must already possess “a clear understanding of what it means to be God and what it means to be a human being” in order to “know that the predicates ‘God’ and ‘human being’ are mutually exclusive” (Passionate Reason, 103). The entire strategy of the Fragments, however, presupposes that humans do not possess such knowledge and therefore require a savior.

12. Although I am emphasizing here the supra-rationalist elements of Evans’ interpretation, his reading also acknowledges that the paradox is not simply above reason, but is also, to some extent opposed, to it. He writes: “Is the paradox above reason or against reason? In a sense it is both. It is above reason in that finite human beings cannot understand how God could become a human person. It is against reason in that our concrete human thinking...judges the possibility as the ‘strangest of all things’” (117). Evans, in other words, recognizes the antagonism between reason and faith. Because he argues, however, that this antagonism effectively disappears in faith, I believe his interpretation can legitimately be characterized as an instance of supra-rationalism.


15. In response to an anonymous proposal that he write a dogmatic treatise clarifying his views, Kierkegaard asserted, “Instead of exhorting me to write a new work, the anonymous writer might rather...have exhorted my contemporaries to make themselves better acquainted with my earlier works, with the Concluding Postscript, Sickness Unto death, and especially with Training [or Practice] in Christianity.” In Attack Upon Christendom trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) p. 40.

16. Anti-Climacus also sees refusal to pass judgment on Christianity as a form of sinful despair, albeit of a less consciously hostile nature. See SUD, p. 86.

17. Journals and Papers, entry #10.


22. See especially Climacus’s discussion in CUP, pp. 555-61.

23. Journals and Papers, entry #3035.

24. In a similar vein, Robert Merrihew Adams has argued that the distinction between Religiousness A and B is essential if Climacus’s position is...
to avoid idolatry and fanaticism, i.e., if Climacus is to be able to distinguish between Don Quixote and the Christian. See his "Truth and Subjectivity" in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Strump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 15-41.


27. Consider also Johannes de Silentio's discussion of Abraham, who was great and yet could not be understood by others. As I read this work, Silentio's point is also that Abraham cannot make his actions comprehensible to himself—were he able to understand it, so too could others, at least in theory. But then his isolation would be lessened, and with that, both the intensity of his faith and the meaningfulness of God's test. For Silentio what distinguishes Abraham is not that he could speak (i.e., explain what he is doing) and chose to refrain, but that he *cannot* speak—there are no simply no words to describe what he is doing. See *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), especially pp. 112-20.


29. I would like to thank Peter Glick and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.