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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF LAW, ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCE

School of Humanities

**A Critical Comparison of William James and Søren Kierkegaard on
Religious Belief**

By

Jonathan Chipp

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 2009

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

Abstract

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A CRITICAL COMPARISON OF WILLIAM JAMES AND SØREN KIERKEGAARD
ON RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Jonathan Laurence Chipp

This thesis is a critical comparison of the accounts of religious belief proposed by William James and Søren Kierkegaard. Both James and Kierkegaard greatly emphasize the subjective aspects of religious belief. In view of this fact, surprisingly little comparative work has been done in this area. I contribute to this literature in two ways. Firstly, I make a brief assessment of what James knew of Kierkegaard's work. Secondly, I draw four comparisons between Kierkegaard and James. In Chapter One I examine the claim that Kierkegaard proposes a pragmatist account of faith of the kind that James sets out in his essay *The Will To Believe*. I argue that this claim rests on a misunderstanding of Kierkegaard's argument that to have faith is to take a risk. In the following chapter I discuss James's and Kierkegaard's views on formal proofs for the existence of God. Both philosophers reject the notion that faith can be based on such proofs. I distinguish between their positions, and argue in favour of Kierkegaard's. In the third chapter I compare Kierkegaard's and James's accounts of religious experience. James views religious experiences as a special kind of evidence for the existence of God. For Kierkegaard it is a mistake to view religious experiences as evidence. Such experiences should be understood in relation to the concept of religious authority. In the final chapter I examine Kierkegaard's conception of faith as a life-view. I argue that for Kierkegaard a life-view is a fundamental perspective on one's existence. I compare this conception with James's concept of philosophical temperament and in relation to his discussion of the sick soul.

Contents

<u>Declaration of Authorship</u>	vi
<u>Acknowledgements</u>	vii
<u>Introduction</u>	1
1) Why Compare Kierkegaard with James?	1
2) Kierkegaard's influence on James	5
3) Philosophical Comparisons and Biographical Comparisons	8
4) James, Kierkegaard and Philosophical Style	12
5) Design and Argument	14
<u>Chapter 1) Kierkegaard, James, Gambling and God</u>	17
Introduction	17
1) Emmanuel on Climacus, Risk and Faith	18
1.1) Sands on Climacus, Risk and Faith	22
1.2) Emmanuel and Sands on Risk and Faith	24
2) Climacus on Risk and Faith	25
2.1) Subjective Enquiry and Objective Enquiry	26
2.2) Subjective Truth and Essential Knowledge	30
3) Risk, Faith and Pragmatism	36
3.1) Emmanuel, Climacus, and The Will to Believe	37
3.2) Assessment of Emmanuel's Argument	40
3.3) Sands, James and Informed Gambling on God	42
3.4) Assessment of Sands' Argument	44
4) Conclusion	45
<u>Chapter 2) Proofs, Feelings, Philosophy</u>	47
Introduction	47
1) Preliminary Discussion	49
2) James on Feelings, Philosophy and the Justification of Faith	53

2.1) James on Formal Proofs for the existence of God	54
2.2) James and Science of Religions	62
3) Climacus on Proofs for the existence of God	64
3.1) Climacus on the Existence of People and Things	65
3.2) Climacus on Proofs for the existence of God	73
4) Critical Comparison of Climacus and James	77
4.1) God as a Concept	77
4.2) Concepts and Proofs	78
4.3) Proofs and Personal Conviction	79
5) Religious Feelings as Grounds for Religious Belief	80
5.1) Suckiel on James and Religious Feelings	80
5.2) Evaluation of Suckiel's arguments	84
5.3) Climacus on Religious Feelings	85
6) Conclusion	87
 <u>Chapter 3) Kierkegaard and James on Religious Experience</u>	 89
Introduction	89
1) Kierkegaard's remarks on Mysticism and Revelation	93
1.1) James's Remarks on Mysticism	98
2) Mysticism and Revelation in the lives of Kierkegaard and James	103
3) James on Mysticism and the 'Unseen Order'	109
3.1) Kierkegaard and the Unseen Order	113
4) Mysticism, Revelation and Evidence	116
4.1) Kierkegaard on Revelation and Evidence	118
5) Mysticism, Revelation and Authority	119
5.1) Kierkegaard on the Authority of Revelation	120
6) A Concluding Defence	124
7) Summary and Conclusion	124
 <u>Chapter 4) Life-views and Sick Souls</u>	 126
Introduction	126
1) Kierkegaard on Life-Views	130
2) James on the 'dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means.'	141

3) Comparison of Kierkegaard and James	144
4) James on Sick and Healthy Souls	146
5) Comparison of James and Kierkegaard on Sick Souls and Life-views	150
6) Conclusion	152
 <u>Conclusion</u>	 153
 <u>Bibliography</u>	 155

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Jonathan Chipp

declare that the thesis entitled *A Critical Comparison of William James and Søren Kierkegaard on Religious Belief* and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission

Signed:
Date:.....

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The circumstances in which this thesis was composed were unusually convoluted. And partly for that reason the impositions I have placed on those around me have been great. All of them were met with perfect grace by the following people: Hazel Chipp, John Chipp, Verena Coleman, Sara Kirkpatrick and Dena Kitson.

Introduction

1) Why Compare Kierkegaard with James?

Anybody setting out to make a comparative study of what Kierkegaard and James have to say about religious belief will soon entertain three concerns about the project. The first concern is whether there is good reason to compare the two philosophers at all. It is true that both men involved themselves deeply with philosophical issues of religious belief. But they are hardly alone in having done so. Moreover there are other candidates for philosophers with whom we might usefully compare either Kierkegaard or James. For example we might compare Kierkegaard with his philosophical *bête noire* Hegel, or with Socrates, for whom Kierkegaard often expresses his approval. Likewise it would make good sense to compare James with fellow pragmatist Dewey, or with Peirce, from whom James claimed to have borrowed important insights. The case for comparing Kierkegaard with James is less obvious. One of the reasons it is less obvious – and this is the second concern – is that Kierkegaard and James did not read each other's works. Kierkegaard was not exposed at all to the works of James. The Dane died in 1855, when the American was just thirteen years old. James, for his part, wasn't much interested in Kierkegaard, even in his later life. Furthermore, the fact that Kierkegaard and James did not read each other may go some way to explaining the third concern, which is that there is relatively little comparative literature on the two. Just three authors have penned long comparative studies of Kierkegaard and James in English. Thomas Gilmartin's work is an unpublished doctoral dissertation completed in 1974.¹ In the same year C. Stephen Evans completed a doctoral study entitled *Subjective Justifications of Religious Belief: A comparative Study of Kant, Kierkegaard, and James*.² However, as the title perhaps suggests, the primary focus of this work is the development of a justification of religious belief. There are few comparative remarks on Kierkegaard and James, and these appear in a short section after the principal arguments of the thesis have been set out. This lack of comparative content is reflected in the fact that when the thesis was published the title was altered, and the work was more accurately billed as an historical

¹ Gilmartin, T. (1974) *Soul-Sickness: A Comparison of William James and Søren Kierkegaard*, PhD thesis, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California.

² Evans, C.S. (1974) *Subjective Justifications of Religious Belief: A Comparative Study of Kant, Kierkegaard, and James*, PhD thesis, Yale University.

and critical study.³ More recently, Paul F. Sands has authored a doctoral thesis comparing the views of Kierkegaard, James and Newman on the justification of religious belief.⁴ This work forms the basis of his book on the same subject.⁵ But the brevity of this survey makes it clear that there is little long comparative literature on Kierkegaard and James. And noticing this lack inevitably ushers in the disconcerting suspicion that there may be little of substance to say on the matter, or that everything of substance has already been said. Moreover, although we may only suspect that there is nothing much to say, it is absolutely certain that there is little secondary material to work with.

Nonetheless, there are good reasons to compare Kierkegaard with James and we can begin to appreciate those reasons by addressing the three concerns I have just outlined. The fact that few detailed comparisons of Kierkegaard and James have been made does not establish that there is nothing much to say on the matter. Rather, it means that there is an opportunity to undertake original research in this area; there is a gap in the literature in which to file a contribution. Similarly, the fact that Kierkegaard and James were not acquainted with each other's works does not imply that there are no grounds on which to compare their philosophical accounts of religious belief. Since James didn't read Kierkegaard there isn't a great deal to say about the influence of the latter on the former. However, this in no way prevents us from comparing the arguments of the two philosophers. The point of making such a comparison is not to establish how far one thinker influenced the other. Rather, the point is to see how deep any apparent affinities between the arguments of Kierkegaard and James actually go, and to evaluate the relative strengths of their arguments where they differ. Kierkegaard and James are good candidates for a comparative project of this kind precisely because it is not *obvious* how much philosophical ground they have in common. There undoubtedly are some points of common interest that will strike any reader of Kierkegaard and James. Examples of these common interests include their vehement objection to Hegel, their rejection of the notion that faith can be grounded in formal

³ Evans, C.S. (1982) *Subjectivity and Religious Belief: An Historical, Critical Study*, Pennsylvania: University Press of America.

⁴ Sands, P. F. (2001) *A Christian Appraisal of the Justification of Religious Faith in Søren Kierkegaard, John Henry Newman, and William James*, PhD thesis, Religion Dept., Baylor University.

⁵ Sands, P.F. (2003) *The Justification of Religious Faith in Søren Kierkegaard, John Henry Newman, and William James*, New Jersey: Gorgias Press.

proofs for the existence of God, and their description of religious belief as a form of lived passionate commitment rather than a conviction in a scholarly thesis. Furthermore, while there is no highly developed comparative literature on Kierkegaard and James, some philosophers have taken the view that there are certain basic affinities between Kierkegaard and James. My interest in comparing Kierkegaard with James lies in rooting out whether apparent similarities between Kierkegaard and James are actual similarities.

Of the comparisons that have been drawn between Kierkegaard and James we can distinguish in a rough but useful way between what we might call constructive identifications and destructive identifications.⁶ By the former I mean arguments in which it is claimed that Kierkegaard and James take fundamentally similar philosophical views. An example of this kind of argument can be found in Karl-Otto Apel, who writes: ‘In his essay *The Will to Believe*, William James introduced Kierkegaard’s central concern – the individual’s subjective interest in fundamentally unprovable and therefore existentially relevant truth – into the context of the community of scientific experimenters, proposing such as the limit of this community.’⁷ This is a highly compressed remark; and because it is so compressed it is also rather puzzling. We should like to know, for example, what is meant by an ‘unprovable truth’ and why such truth must be ‘existentially relevant.’ What is perfectly clear, however, is that for Apel, James does not merely share some loose affinity with Kierkegaard. Rather, in *The Will to Believe* at least, James is taking a philosophical view profoundly similar to the one held by Kierkegaard.

We can contrast the kind of view held by Apel with a different, destructive identification of Kierkegaard and James. By a destructive identification I mean that Kierkegaard and James are not held to make identical arguments, but are, nonetheless, both accused of ending up in the same sinking philosophical boat. An example of this kind of argument can be found in William Alston, who writes:

⁶ In the following I am not suggesting that only these two kinds of comparison are possible. Furthermore the distinction between these two kinds of comparison is not hard and fast, but a matter of emphasis. Nonetheless I have employed the distinction here because it usefully reflects an important trend in the comparative literature on Kierkegaard and James.

⁷ Apel, K-O. (1981) *Charles S Peirce: From Pragmatism to Pragmaticism*, trans. J.M. Krois, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 4.

‘Consider the position of James in *The Will to Believe*, or the more extreme position of Kierkegaard, according to both of whom believing in God is somehow justifiable, even though no adequate reasons can be presented either for or against the proposition that God exists. (That is, even though we cannot discover adequate reasons in support of the proposition that God exists, we can discover adequate reasons for the proposition that it may be justifiable to believe that God exists.)’⁸

Alston doesn’t think that James and Kierkegaard make exactly the same arguments, and not only because the latter is ‘more extreme’ than the former. He notes that ‘James says that we are going to take some position on this problem without having adequate reasons for it in any event’, whereas Kierkegaard’s strategy is to present religious belief as ‘the only possible stance for one who resolutely faces the facts of the human situation.’⁹ Nonetheless Alston worries that if we accept what (in his view) either Kierkegaard or James have to say, then it is difficult to know what considerations are relevant to coming to a belief in God. ‘Perhaps if we have abandoned the attempt to show that the proposition is true or false and are still trying to decide whether it is all right to believe it, then anything goes.’ He goes on to conclude, ‘it might be quite pertinent, if not conclusive, in this sort of context to deny that theistic belief is justifiable, on the grounds that it involves acquiescing in a regression to an infantile mode of thought.’¹⁰ According to this view, then, the arguments of Kierkegaard and James do not stand shoulder to shoulder, but nonetheless the two men are sufficiently close that it is possible to tar them with the same critical brush.

My view is that neither of these kinds of comparison is quite on the money. Kierkegaard’s and James’s accounts of religious belief may look similar in certain respects. Their antagonism to Hegel, rejection of formal proofs for the existence of God, and denial that religious belief is primarily an intellectual conviction are all shared. But there are essential differences in their philosophical positions. The view that Kierkegaard and James give fundamentally similar accounts of religious belief is not correct. And because their views are fundamentally dissimilar and not just seemingly dissimilar, it is not correct or instructive to claim that they make similar kinds of

⁸ Alston, W. (1966) “Psychoanalytic Theory and Theistic Belief” in J. Hick (ed.) *Faith and the Philosophers*, London: Macmillan, 100.

⁹ Alston, *ibid.*, 100.

¹⁰ Alston, *ibid.*, 101.

philosophical blunders. My purpose, then, is to fill the gap in the literature I have identified, not with more comparisons of the kind I have reviewed, but with a careful elaboration of the differences between Kierkegaard and James and an appraisal of their arguments.

2) Kierkegaard's influence on James

Having acknowledged that there is little to say about Kierkegaard's influence on James I must also acknowledge that there is nonetheless *something* to say about it. James was no Kierkegaard scholar, but he was to some extent acquainted with Kierkegaard's thought. This is witnessed by the fact that James cites Kierkegaard in three well-known works.¹¹ Chronologically, the first citation occurs in chapter six of *Pragmatism* (1907), where James makes it clear he is borrowing an insight from Kierkegaard but withholds the latter's name: 'We live forwards, a Danish thinker has said, but we understand backwards. The present sheds a backward light on the world's previous processes.'¹² James's second citation of Kierkegaard occurs in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), and strongly resembles the first. 'We live forward, we understand backward, said a danish (*sic*) writer; and to understand life by concepts is to arrest its movement [...].'¹³ James borrows the same insight for a third time in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912). Referring to Harald Høffding's paper *A Philosophical Confession*, James writes:¹⁴

'In Professor Høffding's (*sic*) massive little article in The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods, he quotes a saying of Kierkegaard's to the effect that we live forwards, but we understand backwards. Understanding backwards is, it must be confessed, a very frequent weakness of philosophers, both of the rationalistic and of the ordinary empiricist type.'¹⁵

¹¹ Gilmartin claims that James's only reference to the work of Kierkegaard occurs in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Gilmartin is mistaken, for he has missed James's references to Kierkegaard in *Pragmatism* and *A Pluralistic Universe*. Gilmartin, op. cit., 2.

¹² James, W. (1995a) *Pragmatism*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 86. James also makes a slightly cryptic use of the distinction between living forwards and understanding backwards in the final chapter of *Pragmatism*. There he notes of one of his interlocutors 'But he believes himself to face backwards.' Ibid., 108.

¹³ James, W. (1996b) *A Pluralistic Universe*, London: University of Nebraska Press, 244.

¹⁴ Høffding, H. (1905a) "A Philosophical Confession," *The Journal of Philosophy Psychology and Scientific Methods* II, no. 4: 85-92. Hereafter *Confession*.

¹⁵ James, W. (1996a) *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 238.

Arguably, this passage is slightly more encouraging than the first two because here James at least cites Kierkegaard by name. However, it is also clear that he is dealing with Kierkegaard at second hand, through a reading of Høffding's paper. Høffding says little else about Kierkegaard in his paper, merely noting that, 'In my youth the influence of the Danish philosopher and religious thinker, Søren (*sic*) Kierkegaard, was decisive for me.'¹⁶ And to this he adds only the compressed yet sweeping observation that, 'He [Kierkegaard] waged a passionate war against speculation, with strong accentuation of the conditions of thought and the value of the single, real, personal life.'¹⁷ Clearly, then, James could not have gleaned a detailed understanding of Kierkegaard from Høffding's *Philosophical Confession*.

Nevertheless, James may have learnt more about Kierkegaard from Høffding than at first meets the eye. Høffding, a professor at the University of Copenhagen, certainly was more knowledgeable about Kierkegaard than his 1905 article suggests. In the 1860's Høffding had been acquainted with Kierkegaard's brother Peter Christian Kierkegaard, and had been a friend of, and university student with, Peter Christian's son Paul.¹⁸ Moreover, Høffding made a serious study of Kierkegaard's philosophy, resulting, in 1892, in the publication of his book on the subject.¹⁹ Over a decade later, in October 1904, Høffding visited Harvard at the invitation of James.^{20 21} At Harvard Høffding gave a lecture to James's students, which James attended.²² The 'massive little article' that James refers to in *Essays in Radical Empiricism* contains what Høffding himself calls the 'essential content' of that lecture.²³ It is likely, then, that in his lecture to James's students, Høffding made the same brief references to Kierkegaard that he

¹⁶ *Confession*, op. cit., 90.

¹⁷ *Confession*, op. cit., 90.

¹⁸ Poole, R. (1993) *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 285-286.

¹⁹ Høffding, H. (1892) *Kierkegaard som Filosof*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

²⁰ That James extended the invitation to Høffding is recorded by James's son Henry in his *The Letters of William James*. James, W. (1920b) *The Letters of William James edited by his son, Henry James* Volume 2, London: Longman, Green & co., 216.

²¹ A reference to Høffding in James's lecture notes shows that James had been aware of the work of Høffding since at least 1891. In James's Notes for Philosophy 20a: Psychological Seminary (1891-1892) there is a reference to Høffding's book *Outlines of Psychology* (1891). James, W. (1988) *Manuscript Lectures*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 210. Høffding, H. (1891) *Outlines of Psychology*, trans. M. E. Lowndes, London: Macmillan.

²² There are two pieces of evidence for the assertion that James attended Høffding's lecture. Firstly, in a letter to Ferdinand Schiller James recounts an anecdote that Høffding had recounted during the lecture. See *The Letters of William James*, op. cit., 216. Secondly, James made some notes relating to Høffding's lecture. See *Manuscript Lectures*, op. cit., 330.

²³ *Confession*, op. cit., 85.

made in his published ‘philosophical confession’. But it is also possible that, on the occasion of his visit to Harvard, Høffding and James may have discussed Kierkegaard in greater detail. James certainly ‘took to him [Høffding] immensely’,²⁴ and was sufficiently impressed with the latter’s work to arrange the translation into English of one of his books, *The Problems of Philosophy* (1905).²⁵ ²⁶ James penned a characteristically generous preface to the translation, but makes no reference to Kierkegaard there. We cannot know what James and Høffding discussed at Harvard, but at the very least it is certain that James had an opportunity to draw directly on Høffding’s knowledge of Kierkegaard’s intellectual milieu in Copenhagen, his family and his philosophy.

The fact remains, however, that nowhere in *Pragmatism*, or in *A Pluralistic Universe*, or in *Essays on Radical Empiricism*, or, indeed, anywhere else in his published works, does James develop any detailed thoughts on Kierkegaard. Even in his lecture notes James does not refer to Kierkegaard by name, merely referring once to the now familiar distinction between living forwards and understanding backwards, and without expanding on the observation.²⁷ Moreover, the philosophical connection between James and Kierkegaard looks even more flimsy when we note that Kierkegaard himself did not claim credit for the observation that we live forwards and understand backwards. In his early work *From the Papers of One Still Living*, Kierkegaard attributes the observation to Carl Daub.²⁸ Alastair Hannay has noted that Kierkegaard’s attribution is inaccurate. The distinction was in fact made by Fr. Baader in his *Lectures on Speculative Dogmatics*.²⁹ In *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard attributes to Daub the related and rather interesting idea that the historian is a prophet in reverse.³⁰ Whether Daub or Baader or both commanded Kierkegaard’s thoughts is not clear.³¹ But in any case Kierkegaard does not explicate the work of either of these men. He simply made his own use of the distinction between living forwards and understanding

²⁴ *The Letters of William James*, op. cit., 216.

²⁵ Høffding, H. (1905b) *The Problems of Philosophy*, trans. G.M. Fisher, New York: Macmillan.

²⁶ In his preface to Høffding’s *The Problems of Philosophy* James tells us that he arranged for its translation into English. He also tells us that he ‘carefully revised’ the translation himself. Ibid., v, xiv.

²⁷ *Manuscript Lectures*, op.cit., 363.

²⁸ Kierkegaard, S. (1990a) *Early Polemical Writings*, trans. J. Watkin, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 78.

²⁹ Hannay, A. (2003) *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 454.

³⁰ Kierkegaard, S. (1985) *Philosophical Fragments / Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 80.

³¹ In *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard refers to Baader in same paragraph as Daub. Ibid., 80.

backwards.³² To understand what Kierkegaard means when he engages the distinction between living forwards and understanding backwards, then, we must place his use of that distinction in the context of the work in which he uses it. But James simply did not do this. James merely borrowed for his own purposes ‘Kierkegaard’s’ distinction between living forwards and understanding backwards, just as Kierkegaard had borrowed the same distinction for his purposes. Accordingly, James’s scant references to Kierkegaard don’t suggest any profound influence of the latter on the former. For this reason I don’t think we can claim, as Gilmartin does, that ‘James himself recognized an affinity with Kierkegaard.’³³ The very best we can do is to say that on three occasions at least, James drew on a philosophical insight he found in Høffding’s rendition of Kierkegaard. Consequently David F. Swenson, one of the first Kierkegaard scholars based in the United States, was correct to warn against the idea that we could learn anything useful about Kierkegaard from James’s references to him. In an article first published in 1916 he insists on the following, ‘[...] I warn the reader that Kierkegaard resists a facile classification, and that one cannot, without danger of misunderstanding, transfer impressions derived from a study of James or Bergson, unmodified, to the interpretation of this most profound and original thinker.’³⁴

3) Philosophical Comparisons and Biographical Comparisons

The lives of Kierkegaard and James did not cross. Nonetheless it is important to address what bearing biographical studies should have on our understanding of their works. There is, as Steven M. Emmanuel has pointed out, ‘a long and respected tradition in Kierkegaard studies which is straightforwardly biographical in orientation.’³⁵ ³⁶ The

³² In his Journals Kierkegaard discusses the distinction between living forwards and understanding backwards in relation to his own philosophical preoccupations and without attributing the distinction to any particular author. I take this as further evidence that Kierkegaard was not interested in reconstructing or championing the thoughts of Baader or Daub, but in using the distinction as a vehicle for his own thinking. See Journal entries 1025 (1838) and 1030 (1843). Kierkegaard, S. (1967) *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers Volume 1, A-E*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

³³ Gilmartin, op. cit., 2.

³⁴ Swenson, D. F. (1970) “The Anti-intellectualism of Kierkegaard,” in L.A. Lawson (ed.) *Kierkegaard’s Presence in Contemporary American Life: Essays from Various Disciplines*, Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 23.

³⁵ Emmanuel, S.M. (1996) *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 3.

³⁶ Recent examples of work of this kind include the following:
Garff, J. (2005) *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. B.H. Kirmmse, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

same can be said of James scholarship, where the path was first forged in 1935 by Ralph Barton Perry's *The Thought and Character of William James*.³⁷ ³⁸ Gilmartin has a foot in each of these scholarly traditions when he claims that 'their [Kierkegaard's and James's] biographies are essential to understanding their works.'³⁹ But Gilmartin also seeks to unite these two traditions in a very provocative way, arguing that similarities between the philosophical arguments of Kierkegaard and James can be explained by reference to shared features of their biographies. Gilmartin's views seem to me unwarranted and I shall discuss them briefly, with a view to elaborating my own position.

Two central tenets of Gilmartin's case are that Kierkegaard and James both experienced psychological traumas, and that their philosophical works are a response to those traumas. It is because both men 'wrote out of suffering'⁴⁰ in this way that our understanding of their works must be grounded in an understanding of their lives. Gilmartin further speculates that Kierkegaard and James both suffered from the same psychological complaint, depression. He draws from this the conclusion that similarities between the philosophical arguments of Kierkegaard and James can be explained by reference to their shared experience of depression. 'The resemblance of their sufferings explains the resemblance between their solutions.'⁴¹

Gilmartin's case is, it seems to me, wildly speculative. It is one thing to recognise that both Kierkegaard and James were sometimes somewhat depressed and quite another to conclude firstly that both men suffered from some psychological illness, secondly, that they suffered from the same illness and, thirdly, that that illness was clinical depression. Moreover I see no reason to think that diagnosing someone with clinical depression would 'explain' their philosophical writings.

Stewart, J. (ed.) (2003) *Kierkegaard and His Contemporaries: The Culture of Golden Age Denmark*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.

Bukdahl, J.K. (2001) *Søren Kierkegaard and the Common Man*, trans. B.H. Kirmmse, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Kirmmse, B.H. (1990) *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

³⁷ Perry, R.B. (1935) *The Thought and Character of William James* (two volumes), Boston: Little Brown.

³⁸ Recent examples of work of this kind include the following:

Richardson, R.D. (2007) *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Menand, L. (2002) *The Metaphysical Club*, London: Flamingo.

Myers, G.E. (2001) *William James: His Life and Thought*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

³⁹ Gilmartin, op. cit., 10.

⁴⁰ Gilmartin, ibid., 1.

⁴¹ Gilmartin ibid., 299.

There are certain interesting parallels between the lives of Kierkegaard and James. For example, there is some evidence that both Kierkegaard and James considered themselves to be gloomy souls. In his journals Kierkegaard writes many times of his experiences of melancholy. In 1848, for example, he wrote, ‘The same thing has happened to me again that has happened so often before. While I am submerged in the deepest suffering of melancholy, some thought or other becomes so knotted up that I cannot disentangle it, and since it is connected with my own life I suffer incredibly.’⁴² Similarly, in a famous and thinly veiled autobiographical passage in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* James records his experience of having a ‘general depression of spirits’ and a ‘horrible fear of my own existence.’⁴³ Certainly some of their contemporaries also thought that Kierkegaard and James were more than averagely downhearted. Kierkegaard’s former fiancée Regine Schlegel (née Olsen) told Raphael Meyer that ‘Kierkegaard suffered frightfully from melancholia; many a time he sat by her [Regine] and wept.’⁴⁴ Likewise, John Jay Chapman wrote that ‘There was, in spite of his playfulness, a deep sadness about James. You felt that he had just stepped out of this sadness in order to meet you, and was to go back into it the moment you left him.’⁴⁵

Furthermore there are some famous and very engaging passages in Kierkegaard and in James that do encourage us to think of their philosophical works as responses to deeply felt personal issues. In a well known journal entry for 1st August 1835 Kierkegaard wonders whether pursuing his studies might ‘banish a certain restlessness’ that he suffers from. And he goes on to worry about not only what kind of a life he should lead, but how his philosophical work should relate to the conduct of his life.

‘And what use here would it be if I were to discover a so-called objective truth, or if I worked my way through all the philosophers’ systems and were able to call them all to account on request, point out inconsistencies in every single circle? And what use here would it be to be able to work out a theory of the state, and put all the pieces from so

⁴² Kierkegaard, S. (1951) *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. and trans. A. Dru, London: Oxford University Press, 259. The journal entry is number 807.

⁴³ James, W. (1982a) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 161.

⁴⁴ Kirmmse, B.H. (1996) *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, trans. B.H. Kirmmse and V.R. Laursen, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 40.

⁴⁵ Simon, L. (ed.) (1996) *William James Remembered*, London: University of Nebraska Press, 56.

many places into one whole, construct a world which, again, I myself did not inhabit but merely held up for others to see?’⁴⁶

In a similar vein, James sometimes discusses philosophical problems in strikingly personal terms. He worries, for example, that certain scholarly pursuits are, in some important sense, out of kilter with his constitution. ‘Today I touched rock bottom, and perceive plainly that I must face the choice with open eyes: shall I *frankly* throw the moral business overboard, as one unsuited to my innate aptitudes, or shall I follow it, and it alone, making everything else merely stuff for it? I will give the latter alternative a fair trial...’.⁴⁷ At other times James describes his philosophical problems as private emergencies.

‘I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier’s second *Essais* and see no reason why his definition of free will – “the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts” – need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present – until next year – that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.’⁴⁸

Here James makes it clear that the philosophical problem of free will is not for him an abstract issue. It is an issue that weighs heavily on James’s understanding of his own life. He proposes to solve the problem of free will by committing his life in a certain way, conducting his affairs upon the assumption that free will is not an illusion.

Nonetheless in spite of the parallels between the biographies of Kierkegaard and James I have mentioned, I don’t think we should make as much of them as Gilmartin would have us make. For one thing, in the biographical parallels I have reviewed, there are important differences as well as similarities. Kierkegaard’s worries about how his philosophical endeavours should tie up with the conduct of his life are quite different to those expressed by James. More important, however, is the fact that Gilmartin’s approach is not only speculative but unhelpfully reductive, resting, as it does, on the assumption that the meaning of Kierkegaard’s works and James’s works was somehow

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, S. (1996) *Papers and Journals: a selection*, trans. A. Hannay, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 32.

⁴⁷ Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, op. cit., 120.

⁴⁸ Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, ibid., 121.

dictated by their respective psychoses. This is not to deny that there isn't any place for biographical considerations in Kierkegaard scholarship or in James scholarship. The works of Kierkegaard and James can be usefully contextualized by reference to their lives, times and unpublished writings. But to contextualize works in this way is not to 'explain' them. Moreover it is important to give due attention to the distinction between material they chose to publish and material they chose to keep private, even if we are not obliged to respect that distinction.

4) James, Kierkegaard and Philosophical Style

It is commonly acknowledged that Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms and 'literary' styles raise important issues of interpretation. But there are also interpretive issues raised by James's writing style, which is, in its way, every bit as remarkable as Kierkegaard's. As Ruf has noted, '[n]early everyone who writes about James feels compelled to comment on the manner of his writing.'⁴⁹ Partly this is because James is often a wonderfully engaging but maddeningly imprecise writer. But it is also partly because there are in many of James's works, a great assortment of voices. This is perhaps most obvious in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which James reproduces many first person accounts of religious life and encounters. But James's multiple voices are not always documentary. Sometimes, for example, James acts as a ventriloquist for philosophical points of view he wants to bring within the orbit of his argument. Furthermore, multiple voices are by no means the only stylistic trick which James employs. As Ruf rightly points out, James also gives his reader 'laments, satires, hymns, meditations, exhortations, narratives and much else[...].'⁵⁰

Part of the explanation of James's style lies in the fact that many of his writings are popular lectures. James was acutely aware that popular talks require a less technical style. In the opening chapter of *Pragmatism*, for example, James complains, 'I have heard friends and colleagues try to popularize philosophy in this very hall, but they soon grew dry, then technical, and the results were only partially encouraging.'⁵¹ James himself was keen to avoid becoming dry and technical because much of his income depended on public engagements of this kind. But although this may explain the non-

⁴⁹ Ruf, F.J. (1991) *The Creation of Chaos: William James and the Stylistic Making of a Disorderly World*, Albany: State University of New York Press, xv.

⁵⁰ Ruf, *ibid.*, xvi.

⁵¹ *Pragmatism*, op. cit., 2.

technical quality of much of James's prose, I don't think this warrants our ignoring his stylistic invention or writing it off as a rhetorical blemish on an otherwise neat philosophical page. As James famously argues in *Varieties*, an explanation of the origin of something is not the same as a judgement on its value. This is not to say that we need develop a theory of James's style. Rather, it is only to acknowledge that we need to be attentive to ways in which James advances his arguments. And this is something we can do on a piecemeal basis.

Unlike James, some of Kierkegaard's thoughts are distributed among a number of pseudonyms, while others appear under his own name. Anybody who reads Kierkegaard must wonder at the significance of this. One approach to this issue has been to ask how far the pseudonymous writings express Kierkegaard's own views. Paul Sands, for example, asks 'does Johannes Climacus speak for Kierkegaard?'⁵² The point of this question, I take it, is to establish how far the views expressed by the pseudonym Johannes Climacus approximate to the views actually held by Kierkegaard. In one sense this appears misguided, since what Kierkegaard 'really thought' is expressed by the totality of his works, including the pseudonymous ones. But this objection won't suffice since it rests on the assumption that Kierkegaard held a view simply because he expressed it. Since Kierkegaard is at pains to avoid being identified with his pseudonyms this hardly seems reasonable. That is not to say that views expressed by the pseudonyms never coincide with those of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's insistence that the pseudonyms be taken seriously does not imply that there can be no agreement in views between himself and his creations. But to ask how far the pseudonyms agree with or contest the views of Kierkegaard is only part of the story. What we must also ask is what role the pseudonyms play in Kierkegaard's thinking. That issue is, I think, best addressed by looking at what each of the pseudonyms actually says. I do not propose, therefore, to construct a general theory of Kierkegaard's writing strategy in advance of actually reading Kierkegaard. My practice when reading Kierkegaard will be to address the significance of Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms and of his own name in the light of what is said in the work I am considering.

⁵² Sands, op. cit., 21

5) Design and Argument

The two lengthy comparative studies of Kierkegaard and James that have been published are organized in a similar fashion. Both Evans and Sands set out long critical synoptic chapters about Kierkegaard and James in turn, before adding a comparative appraisal in a later chapter. There are two advantages to this system. Firstly, it separates out the business of interpreting Kierkegaard and James from the business of comparing them, thereby facilitating a clear presentation of both the interpretation and the comparison. Secondly, the comparative remarks are well-founded in the sense that they are supported by the lengthy discussions of Kierkegaard and James that precede them. But there are also disadvantages. Chief amongst these is that the comparative work, when it comes, is rather remote from the interpretive work upon which it is notionally based. To put it bluntly, it is hard to make a compelling comparative case when the nuts, bolts and minutiae of the argument are printed tens or even hundreds of pages away. Conversely, comparing aspects of Kierkegaard and James within each chapter facilitates a much more immediate depiction of the philosophical exchange that transpires between them. And this allows a more detailed and more nuanced comparative account to emerge. This leaves us with the difficulty that the interpretive and comparative aspects of the study are not so cleanly separated as they are in the system adopted by Evans and Sands. But I do not think we should make too much of this. Insofar as it is a problem it is one that can be resolved locally by the careful structuring of individual chapters. For these reasons I have elected not to place my interpretive claims in separate chapters from my comparative remarks. My strategy in each chapter will be to compare particular arguments in Kierkegaard and James.

In the first chapter I discuss claims made by Emmanuel and Sands regarding similarities between Kierkegaard's doctrine of subjective truth and James's argument in the essay *The Will to Believe*. Both Emmanuel and Sands agree that, for Kierkegaard, to adopt a religious belief is to take an epistemic risk. That is to say that one doesn't know that God exists, but one is prepared to risk believing a falsehood. Emmanuel argues that Kierkegaard offers a pragmatic defence of this kind of risk-taking, similar to the case that James makes in *The Will to Believe*. Sands argues that Kierkegaard's emphasis on epistemic risk-taking in relation to religious beliefs is unwarranted and self-defeating. James's account of religious belief avoids both of these errors. Against both Emmanuel

and Sands I argue that Kierkegaard does not think that in order to have a religious belief one must take an epistemic risk. And for this reason the comparisons that both Emmanuel and Sands draw between Kierkegaard and James are inappropriate.

One important reason why we might mistakenly think that Kierkegaard advocates epistemic risk-taking is that he vehemently opposes the view that it is possible to demonstrate the existence of God. James also held that it is not possible formally to demonstrate the existence of God. In the second chapter I examine whether Kierkegaard and James oppose demonstrations for the existence of God for similar reasons. I argue that their positions are only superficially similar. The root of their dissimilarity lies in their different understandings of religious concepts. For James, religious concepts fail to capture the visceral quality of religious experiences. And for this reason conceptual proofs for the existence of God are never compelling in the way that personal religious experiences are. For Kierkegaard, religious concepts are not poor reproductions of religious experiences. His argument is that if we understand religious concepts correctly we shall see that it makes no sense to try to demonstrate whether or not God exists. Having distinguished Kierkegaard's position from James's, I argue that the former's position is better than the latter's.

Although James does not think that it is possible to compose a compelling formal proof for the existence of God, he does think that faith can be supported by a certain kind of evidence. As I noted above, James argues that personal encounters with God – such as mystical visions and dreams – can serve to ground the faith of the person who experiences them. Kierkegaard does not hold that mystical visions or revelations can ground religious belief. In the third chapter I compare the arguments of Kierkegaard and James on this matter. I argue that Kierkegaard's view is that to treat the occurrence of such visions as evidence for the existence of the divine is to misunderstand them. I also argue in favour of Kierkegaard's position.

In the final chapter I consider Kierkegaard's proposal that religious belief is a 'life-view.' I characterise Kierkegaard's notion of a life-view as a fundamental perspective by means of which people understand themselves and their lives. I compare this conception with two aspects of James's thought. Firstly, in *Pragmatism* James draws attention to the fact that people have a 'dumb sense' of what life means. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James argues that the melancholy suffered by

‘divided selves’ can be cured by adopting a religious perspective on life. I argue that Kierkegaard’s notion of a life-view is different from both of James’s proposals.

Chapter 1

Kierkegaard, James, Gambling and God

Introduction

Few detailed comparisons have been made between Kierkegaard's account of religious belief and James's account of religious belief. Steven M. Emmanuel and Paul F. Sands are notable for having taken up this challenge.^{1 2} Emmanuel argues that Kierkegaard makes a pragmatist argument, broadly of the kind that James develops in his essay *The Will to Believe*. In common with Emmanuel, Sands argues that Kierkegaard and James give accounts of religious belief that are similar in important respects. But rather than concluding, as Emmanuel does, that Kierkegaard is broadly a Jamesian pragmatist, Sands argues that Kierkegaard is not pragmatic enough. Sands thinks that Kierkegaard's account of religious belief is not viable, and that James can show us where Kierkegaard goes wrong. Furthermore, according to Sands, 'James is able to incorporate the strengths of Kierkegaard's justification of religious faith without succumbing to its weaknesses.'³

In this chapter I evaluate the claims of Emmanuel and Sands. I argue that Emmanuel and Sands misunderstand Kierkegaard's conception of faith, and in particular his claim that faith is risky. Emmanuel and Sands argue that for Kierkegaard faith is risky because we cannot demonstrate the objective truth of Christianity. According to this interpretation of Kierkegaard, to have faith is to believe that Christianity is objectively true in spite of the fact that we cannot know that it is objectively true. Against this view I argue that Kierkegaard does not advocate epistemic risk-taking of this kind. Rather, Kierkegaard doesn't think that it makes sense to ask whether Christianity is objectively true. And for this reason having faith does not boil down to gambling that Christianity is objectively true even though we cannot know whether it is objectively true.

I also argue that because Emmanuel and Sands have misunderstood Kierkegaard's conception of faith, the comparisons that they draw between Kierkegaard

¹ Emmanuel, S.M. (1996) *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

² Sands, P.F (2003) *The Justification of Religious Faith in Søren Kierkegaard, John Henry Newman, and William James*, New Jersey: Georgias Press.

³ Sands, *ibid.*, 243.

and James are misleading. Emmanuel argues that Kierkegaard provides a Jamesian pragmatic justification for epistemic risk-taking. According to Emmanuel, Kierkegaard's argument is that if we cannot know that Christianity is true we can at least find good practical reasons for believing that it is true. I counter this interpretation by pointing out that no such pragmatic argument is to be found in Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard doesn't think that to have faith is to take an epistemic risk; and accordingly he doesn't seek to justify faith by showing that there are sound practical reasons for engaging in this kind of risk taking. Contrary to Emmanuel, Sands thinks that it is a mistake to read Kierkegaard 'as if he were a full-blown pragmatist.'⁴ Moreover, according to Sands, James improves upon Kierkegaard's position precisely by providing a pragmatic justification for epistemic risk-taking. But against Sands I argue that far from improving upon Kierkegaard's position, James's arguments are irrelevant. Kierkegaard doesn't think that Christians take an epistemic risk, and accordingly it follows that he has no need to justify epistemic risk-taking on pragmatic or any other grounds.

I begin by sketching the interpretations of Kierkegaard's conception of faith offered by Emmanuel and Sands. I then show that both Emmanuel and Sands misunderstand Kierkegaard's claim that faith is risky. Thirdly, I criticize the comparisons that Emmanuel and Sands draw between Kierkegaard and James. I conclude by remarking that I have identified in Emmanuel and Sands a misinterpretation of Kierkegaard's conception of faith, but have not set out a defence of Kierkegaard's conception.

1) Emmanuel on Climacus, Risk and Faith

Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus sometimes characterizes religious belief as a 'venture.' Emmanuel understands Climacus' claim to mean that faith, '[...] is a venture in the sense that the decision to believe must be taken without objective assurances. In faith, the believer stakes his entire existence on the *mere possibility* of an eternal happiness.'⁵ According to this reading of Climacus, then, Christians know only that Christianity is *possibly* true; but they nonetheless choose to believe that it is *actually* true. To believe that something is true when we have no relevant 'objective

⁴ Sands, *ibid.*, 88.

⁵ Emmanuel, *op. cit.*, 60. My emphasis.

assurances' that it is true is to risk believing a falsehood. Consequently, Christian faith is a venture in the sense that it requires the faithful to believe that Christianity is true in spite of the possibility that it is not. In what follows I shall briefly elucidate this conception of faith, and also sketch Emmanuel's reasons for attributing it to Climacus.

Emmanuel's view that having faith entails the risk of believing a falsehood stems from his analysis of what Climacus has to say about the impossibility of objectively proving the truth of Christianity. The reason Climacus thinks that there can be no objective proof for the truth of Christianity has to do with what Christians believe. Christians believe that Christ is both man and God. Climacus famously remarks that the idea that Christ is both man and God is, in some important sense, 'absurd' and 'paradoxical.' Some commentators have taken Climacus to mean that the idea that Christ is both man and God is a formal contradiction. One cannot be a man and a God, since to be a man is precisely not to be a God, and vice versa. The notion that Christ is both man and God, then, appears to be 'absurd' in the sense that it is a contradiction in terms. Furthermore if Christ is a contradiction in terms then he, and therefore Christianity, are, from a formal point of view, impossible. And what is formally impossible cannot be shown to be objectively true. But Emmanuel argues against this interpretation of Climacus' remarks on the absurdity of Christ, noting that if Christ is a contradiction in terms then what Christians believe is strictly nonsensical. Nonetheless, Emmanuel does not ignore or explain away what Climacus has to say about the absurd and paradoxical nature of Christ. Emmanuel's solution is to interpret these remarks differently, arguing that Christ is not absurd in the sense that he is a contradiction in terms, but rather in the sense that he is 'beyond the reach of our cognitive resources.'⁶ Emmanuel writes: 'The terms paradox and absurd are thus introduced [by Climacus] as a conceptual means of indicating that God's appearance in the temporal order transcends the possibilities of human knowledge, and that it cannot be grasped at a purely intellectual level.'⁷ Explaining the sense in which Christ lies beyond the compass of our 'cognitive resources' Emmanuel writes:

'A paradox in the sense of a logical contradiction occurs within the sphere of reason; it is a point at which reason collides with itself and is thereby brought to a standstill. But

⁶ Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 50.

⁷ Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 42.

Kierkegaard's paradox occurs outside the sphere of reason, it is a point at which reason collides with something foreign to itself, something other.'⁸

From a human perspective, then, Christ is 'absurd' not because the very idea of him is a contradiction in terms that confounds our logic, but because he is, in some important sense, altogether beyond our cognition.

Nonetheless, according to Emmanuel, the fact that Christ is 'absurd' in this sense does not mean that it is unreasonable to believe that Christianity is true. Rather, it simply means that we should not look for objective guarantees for the truth of Christianity. Emmanuel notes, 'Kierkegaard's strategy is clearly not to demonstrate the impossibility of accepting the truth of Christianity, but the impossibility of appropriating that truth on purely objective or intellectual terms.'⁹ Furthermore, the impossibility of establishing the truth of Christianity by means of objective enquiry means that each of us must reach a personal decision whether to accept that Christianity is true. Emmanuel writes:

'Revelation is not a logical contradiction but a mystery which claims to hold the solution to the riddle of human existence. It does not present itself as an object for scientific scrutiny, but as the point of departure for a new life. It does this by foreclosing on the objective way, by forcing the individual into himself, into the realm of subjectivity, where the decision must be made.'¹⁰

Regardless of whether we choose to turn our lives around in accordance with Christian scripture or not, we cannot know whether Christianity is objectively true. Whether Christianity is objectively true remains a question that cannot be answered by rational argument, for Christ is always 'beyond' the compass of our cognitive skills. Emmanuel argues that Climacus does not seek to resolve or overcome the problem of whether Christianity is objectively true. Rather, Climacus advances a pragmatic argument to the effect that although we cannot know whether Christianity is objectively true there are sufficient practical reasons to make belief in Christianity a rational course of action. I shall look at this argument later. For now, however, I want only to draw

⁸ Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 45.

⁹ Emmanuel, *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰ Emmanuel, *Ibid.*, 58-9.

attention to the fact that Emmanuel thinks that because we cannot know whether Christianity is objectively true, those who believe that it is true risk believing a falsehood. There may be pragmatic reasons for believing in Christ, but these pragmatic reasons do not guarantee the truth of what we believe. Emmanuel concludes that we have a choice between withholding our judgement about the truth of Christianity, thereby avoiding the risk of believing a falsehood, or we can believe in Christianity and run the risk that what we believe is untrue. Emmanuel attributes this dilemma to Climacus in the following way:

‘In the *Fragments*, he [Climacus] explains that belief and doubt are not “two kinds of knowledge that can be defined in continuity with each other, for ... they are opposite passions.” To the skeptical mind, it is better to risk the loss of truth than to be in error. And so the skeptic wills to remain in a state of suspended belief. (*isotheneia*, *epochē*). The believer, on the other hand, thinks it is better to risk the chance of being in error than to suffer the loss of truth.’¹¹

To summarise Emmanuel’s reading of Climacus, then, we cannot know whether Christianity is true because Christ lies beyond the compass of our ability to reason. And because we cannot know whether Christianity is true we must each of us make a personal decision between having faith and not having faith. To have faith is to turn one’s life around in accordance with scripture in spite of the fact that we cannot know whether Christianity is true. Those who do not believe in Christianity do not run the risk of believing a falsehood, but they will miss out on eternal life and happiness if Christianity does turn out to be true. As we shall see, Sands also attributes to Climacus the view that one must either risk believing a falsehood or forgo the possibility of attaining eternal life. But Sand’s reasons for attributing this view to Climacus are different to those given by Emmanuel. For this reason I shall briefly review Sands’ argument.

¹¹ Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 54-5.

1.1) Sands on Climacus, Risk and Faith

In common with Emmanuel, Sands notes that for Climacus Christ is an absolute paradox. Also in common with Emmanuel, Sands argues that because Christ is an absolute paradox he is ‘beyond’ the scope of our ability to reason. ‘Climacus never tires of emphasizing that the incarnation is opaque to human understanding.’¹² Christ is ‘rationally impenetrable’¹³, and this has the important consequence that he – and by extension Christianity – is incomprehensible. Furthermore, because it is not possible to comprehend Christianity, it is not possible to make a reasoned judgement about whether Christianity is true. It follows that from a rational point of view it is uncertain whether Christianity is true or false.

Sands argues that this radical uncertainty about the truthfulness of Christianity is at the heart of Climacus’ conception of Christian faith. Climacus elucidates this conception of Christian faith by comparing it to Socratic faith. Socrates did not know whether there is eternal life, but nonetheless believed that there is eternal life. Accordingly, Socrates knowingly risked believing a falsehood. Sands comments that ‘Socratic faith ventures in the face of objective uncertainty.’¹⁴ But a Christian not only does not know whether Christianity is true, but also cannot comprehend what he or she believes. Sands explains: ‘Faith *sensu eminentiori* – Christian faith – differs from Socratic faith in that it goes beyond embracing the objectively uncertain. It ventures everything on the basis of an objective absurdity, namely, the rationally impenetrable paradox of the incarnation.’¹⁵

In spite of this difference between Socratic and Christian faith, however, it is clear that they nonetheless have something important in common, namely an element of risk. Practitioners of Socratic faith and practitioners of Christian faith do not know whether their beliefs are true, and therefore run the risk that their beliefs are false. Furthermore, Climacus thinks that risk of error is a defining feature of religious belief. ‘Since Climacus repudiates every effort to establish religious faith on a foundation of evidence, it comes as no surprise that the *riskiness* of faith is prominently featured in his writings.’¹⁶ People who practice Christian faith knowingly accept the risk of error by

¹² Sands, op. cit., 57.

¹³ Sands, *ibid.*, 57.

¹⁴ Sands, *ibid.*, 60.

¹⁵ Sands, *ibid.*, 61.

¹⁶ Sands, *ibid.*, 59.

choosing to believe something that might be false. Sands notes that, ‘Here [in faith] is a “resolve” and a will to believe that amounts to a *willingness to run the risk of error*.’¹⁷ Resolving to run the risk of error does not of course remove that risk. But, according to Sands, Climacus thinks that faith is maintained not by eradicating risk but by remaining keenly aware of the risk that one is taking. ‘Climacus goes on to say that one can only remain in faith by keeping alive the feeling of risk associated with objective uncertainty.’¹⁸ Keeping alive the ‘feeling of risk’ that Climacus refers to cannot be accomplished by disinterested reflection on uncertainty. It can only be achieved by passionate commitment to actual risk taking. And greater risks require greater passionate commitment. Glossing Climacus’ position, Sands writes: ‘The operative rule is the more objectively certain a truth, the less passion one has for the truth; conversely, the more objectively uncertain a truth, the more intense the passion. Since faith is a passion, it follows that objective uncertainty actually *promotes* faith.’¹⁹

It is by applying this ‘operative rule’ that Climacus establishes the most important differences between Socratic faith and Christian faith. Both Christians and people practicing Socratic faith run the risk that what they believe to be true is actually false. People practicing Socratic faith can comprehend what it is that they believe to be true. But Christians cannot comprehend Christianity, and therefore do not understand what it is that they believe to be true. Christian faith is therefore more risky than Socratic faith. For not only is it uncertain whether it is true, it is also incomprehensible. Since Christian faith is more risky than Socratic faith, it requires greater passion to be a Christian than it does to be a practitioner of Socratic faith. Accordingly, ‘[I]n comparison with this “risk” of faith, Socratic venturing “resembles Greek nonchalance.”’²⁰

Like Emmanuel, Sands concludes that for Climacus we have a choice between withholding our judgement about the truth of Christianity, thereby avoiding the risk of believing a falsehood, or believing in Christianity and thereby running the risk that what we believe is untrue. Sands summarises his case in the following way:

¹⁷ Sands, *ibid.*, 77. Emphasis original.

¹⁸ Sands, *ibid.*, 45.

¹⁹ Sands, *ibid.*, 45.

²⁰ Sands, *ibid.*, 61.

‘When Climacus says that belief is “an act of freedom, an expression of will,” he must be interpreted to mean that, unlike the skeptic, the believer is willing to risk error. Similarly, when he says that belief is a *resolution* rather than a *conclusion*, he is contrasting the decisiveness of the believer with the cautiousness of sceptics who “restrained” themselves through dialectical arguments lest they embrace error.’²¹

1.2) Emmanuel and Sands on Risk and Faith

There are important differences between Emmanuel and Sands. Most notably Sands seems to think that for Climacus Christianity is incomprehensible, a conclusion that Emmanuel seeks to avoid. Nonetheless it is also clear that both Emmanuel and Sands think that Climacus proposes a conception of faith according to which, ‘[...] the individual must risk decision with no assurance that the right choice will be made.’²² Emmanuel and Sands both think that Climacus reasons that because it is not possible - and indeed undesirable - to prove the objective truth of Christianity it follows that to believe in Christianity is to risk believing something that may be objectively untrue. Furthermore, Emmanuel and Sands also both think that for Climacus whether we are prepared to believe in Christianity boils down to whether we are prepared to risk being duped. Indeed, Sands’ formulation of this argument could hardly be any closer to Emmanuel’s:

‘Skeptics resolve to withhold belief out of fear of being deceived. They may thus be said to *choose doubt*. Believers, on the other hand, resolve to risk error, and may thus be said to *choose belief*.’²³

We must decide whether it is better to believe in Christianity and thereby risk believing a falsehood, or to refuse to draw any conclusions about the truth or falsity of Christianity and thereby risk losing out on eternal salvation. According to this conception of faith, then, Christianity is not so much a national lottery as a spiritual lottery; and the accompanying slogan is not ‘it could be you’ but rather, ‘it could be true.’

²¹ Sands, *ibid.*, 76-7.

²² Sands, *ibid.*, 34-5.

²³ Sands, *ibid.*, 77.

2) Climacus on Risk and Faith

It is undeniable that Climacus often remarks that to have faith is to take a risk. Furthermore it is also undeniable that Climacus often claims that the truth of Christianity is objectively uncertain. He asserts, for example, the following: ‘Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty.’²⁴ But although it is undeniable that Climacus remarks that faith is risky and that the truth of Christianity is objectively uncertain, I don’t think that these remarks can be understood in the way that Emmanuel and Sands propose. They argue that if, as Climacus suggests, the truth of Christianity is objectively uncertain, then it follows that faith is risky in the sense that one must believe something that one knows may be objectively untrue. But a careful examination of Climacus’ remarks shows that he does not think it makes any *sense* to enquire into the objective truth of Christianity. And if that is the case the proposals of Emmanuel and Sands cannot stand. For if there is no sense in asking *whether* Christianity is objectively true it also cannot make sense to assert that Christians must run the risk of believing something that may be objectively untrue. Accordingly Climacus is actually opposed to the view that Emmanuel and Sands attribute to him. This does not mean that we must explain away Climacus’ assertion that faith is risky. But it does mean that the kind of risk Climacus associates with Christian faith is not at all like the racy jolt of adrenaline one might experience at a gaming table. For Climacus, faith is risky because it requires a personal commitment to live and understand one’s life from a Christian point of view. Taking a Christian stand with regard to oneself and the world opens the possibility of various kinds of conflict. It requires, for example, rigorous ‘self-examination’ in order to determine whether one really understands one’s life in Christian categories, or whether one is deluded about this in some way. And this is risky not only in the sense that one may find oneself falling short of the Christian stand one thought one was taking, but also in the sense that self-examination of this kind may require that one overturns certain deep-seated ways of relating to oneself and to the world. To have faith, then, is to risk turning one’s life around. And this means that the risk involved pertains not to whether or not Christianity will turn out to be objectively true, but to how one stands subjectively in relation to Christianity.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, S. (1992b) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 204. Hereafter *Postscript*.

In what follows, then, I advance a description of Climacus' case with a view to showing two things. Firstly, that Climacus doesn't think that there is any sense in asking whether Christianity is objectively true. And secondly, that Climacus thinks faith is risky because it requires that one leads a Christian life, not because Christians may have been duped regarding the objective truth of what they believe.

2.1) Subjective Enquiry and Objective Enquiry

In order to see why it is that Climacus thinks there is no sense in asking whether Christianity is objectively true, we first need to understand what he means by objective enquiry. Climacus' discussion is most informative when he differentiates between objective enquiry and subjective enquiry. Accordingly I shall start by looking at this distinction. Climacus' distinction between objective and subjective enquiry rests on the observation that in order to enquire into truth in an objective fashion we must abstract from our personal point of view. Climacus writes:

'For the existing spirit *qua* existing spirit, the question about truth persists, because the abstract answer is only for that *abstractum* which an existing spirit becomes by abstracting from himself *qua* existing, which he can only do momentarily, although at such moments he still pays his debt to existence by existing nevertheless. Consequently, it is an existing spirit who asks about truth, presumably because he wants to exist in it, but in any case the questioner is conscious of being an existing individual human being.'²⁵

It is important to note that Climacus is *not* making the claim that objective knowledge is impossible because we are all stuck with our own profoundly personal outlook on life. And neither is Climacus arguing for a solipsistic conception of truth according to which what counts as true is whatever seems to each of us to be true. Rather, Climacus is making the uncontroversial point that we can make claims about what is objectively true only by leaving aside our personal concerns and conducting our enquiries in a disinterested fashion. Furthermore, Climacus is also drawing attention to the fact that leaving aside one's personal concerns is a particular kind of research strategy. We do not arrive at a disinterested point of view by default, but must work towards it by

²⁵ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 190-1.

actively excluding our specifically personal interests. This strategy is not arbitrary, for it underwrites the validity of objective truth claims. To claim that something is objectively true is to claim that its truth is not grounded on any personal interest. As Climacus explains in a much cited passage:

‘The way to objective truth goes away from the subject, and while the subject and subjectivity become indifferent, the truth also becomes indifferent and that is precisely its objective validity, because the interest, just like the decision, is subjectivity.’²⁶

By choosing to exclude any strictly personal concerns from our research, then, we can make claims that purport to be objectively true. But, importantly, Climacus does not conclude from this that we should *always* exclude personal concerns from our enquiries into truth. Nor does he conclude that we can only talk about truth in relation to objective research. Rather, Climacus is concerned to elucidate the important differences between talking about truth in the context of objective enquiry and talking about truth in the context of a strictly personal or subjective enquiry²⁷. As Climacus points out, a great deal of his discussion is an attempt to ‘clarify the divergence of objective and subjective reflection [...]’²⁸

What is immediately apparent from Climacus’ remarks on the difference between subjective enquiry and objective enquiry is that there is - in Climacus’ own parlance - a *qualitative* difference between these two ways of pursuing truth. That is to say that objective enquiry is different in kind from subjective enquiry. Subjective enquiry is not a more or less adequate approximation of objective enquiry or vice versa. And accordingly talk about truth in the context of objective research amounts to something different in kind from talk about truth in the context of subjective research. Climacus makes this point by adumbrating the difference between objective truth and subjective truth in the following way:

²⁶ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 193.

²⁷ The phrase ‘subjective enquiry’ is not totally satisfactory for the simple reason that the word ‘enquiry’ seems to suggest just the kind of disinterested stance that the word ‘subjective’ is supposed to put out of court. The result is that the phrase is seemingly an oxymoron. Climacus employs the phrase ‘subjective reflection’ which arguably suffers the same fate. However, I don’t think that this amounts to a compelling case for withdrawing either phrase. For it is clear that in the context of subjective truth the terms ‘enquiry’ and ‘reflection’ cannot have the disinterested aspect that we often associate with them. Furthermore, there is no reason to think that these terms are *always* used to denote disinterested investigation and no reason to think that they *should* always be used in that way.

²⁸ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 198.

‘To objective reflection, truth becomes something objective, an object, and the point is to disregard the subject. To subjective reflection, truth becomes appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the point is to immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity.’²⁹

We are, I think, entitled to be somewhat thrown by Climacus’ engagingly suggestive but unhelpfully vague claim that to reflect subjectively is to ‘immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity.’ But the important point here is that Climacus is indicating something of the way that talk about truth in the context of objective enquiry – ‘truth becomes something objective’ – is *completely* different to talk about truth in the context of subjective enquiry – ‘truth becomes appropriation, inwardness.’ Climacus expands on this difference between objective truth and subjective truth in the following somewhat figurative passage.

‘When subjectivity is truth, the definition of truth must also contain in itself an expression of the antithesis to objectivity, a memento of that fork in the road, and this expression will at the same time indicate the resilience of the inwardness. Here is such a definition of truth: *An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth*, the highest truth there is for an *existing* person. At the point where the road swings off (and where that is cannot be stated objectively, since it is precisely subjectivity), objective knowledge is suspended. Objectively he has only uncertainty, but this is precisely what intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness, and truth is precisely a daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite.’³⁰

Climacus’ suggestion that there is a ‘fork in the road’ between subjective truth and objective truth is, I think, related to his earlier observation that objective enquiry is a research strategy that we may or may not elect to execute. Climacus’ claim is simply that we must choose between enquiring in an objective fashion or a subjective fashion. For the disinterested stance characteristic of objective enquiry is achieved by excluding the personal, interested stance characteristic of subjective enquiry, and vice versa.

²⁹ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 192.

³⁰ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 203.

Climacus underscores the mutual exclusivity of the two kinds of enquiry by noting that once we are committed to subjective enquiry ‘objective knowledge is suspended.’ If we are enquiring into truth by means of subjective reflection then we must leave aside disinterested objective enquiry and any claims to objective knowledge.

This last point is particularly important if we are to avoid misunderstanding Climacus’ claim that subjective truth is ‘an objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness [...]’³¹ We might take Climacus to mean by this that something is ‘subjectively true’ if we know it may not be true but are prepared to believe it anyway. If that were Climacus’ meaning then subjective truth would be something like a gambler’s ‘gut instinct’ with regard to the future outcome of some gaming event. But this reading leaves aside Climacus’ careful differentiation between objective truth and subjective truth. A gambler chooses to back one of several possible objective outcomes. Accordingly the truth or falsity of his or her ‘gut’ belief is established when the actual objective outcome is known. But this means that a gambler’s gut instinct cannot be an example of subjective truth. For, as we have seen, Climacus holds that objective enquiry bears *no* relevance to subjective enquiry and its attendant truth claims. The Gambler doesn’t leave objective enquiry behind, but merely tries to anticipate the outcome of an objective enquiry.

We might still wonder why Climacus insists that subjective truth involves the passionate appropriation of an objective uncertainty. But the answer to that lies in Climacus’ obsession with drawing out the dialectical relations between concepts. When Climacus says that subjective truth is the passionate appropriation of an objective uncertainty he is showing us two sides of the same conceptual coin. Considered from the point of view of objective enquiry no certainty can be attached to subjective truths. That is why Climacus says of a person who has a subjective truth that ‘*objectively* he has only uncertainty’.³² The reason that no objective certainty can be attached to subjective truths is not that subjective truth is somehow unreliable. Rather, objective enquiry simply stands on a completely different footing to subjective enquiry. Objective enquiry is valid only insofar as it abstracts from all purely personal concerns. But, of course, what is characteristic of subjective enquiries and their attendant truth claims is that they are personal. From the point of view of objective enquiry, then, all that one can

³¹ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 203.

³² *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 203. My emphasis.

say about subjective truths is that their truth or falsity is ‘uncertain’ in the sense that objective enquiry has no purchase on the issue. Considered from the point of view of subjective enquiry, truth is not the result of a disinterested enquiry, but of a personal interest. And it is for this reason that Climacus describes subjective truth as a passionate appropriation. When Climacus tells us that subjective truth is the passionate appropriation of something that is objectively uncertain he is simply placing the objective and subjective aspects together in one formulation. But his meaning can be just as well expressed in two formulations: Considered objectively, a subjective truth cannot be said to be either true or false. And what one believes to be subjectively true one believes by virtue of passion and not by virtue of disinterested, objective enquiry.

So far, then, I have argued that Climacus makes a qualitative distinction between subjective truth and objective truth. What remains to be seen is why it is that Climacus thinks the notion of objective truth has no application with regard to Christianity.

2.2) Subjective Truth and Essential Knowledge

If, as Climacus argues, there is a qualitative difference between subjective enquiry and objective enquiry, it is natural to ask in what kinds of situations it is legitimate to apply these approaches. For, on the face of it at least, it seems that subjective enquiry must often be a disastrously inappropriate method of investigation. Nobody would want a marine engineer to suspend his or her capacity for objective knowledge before deciding whether to issue a certificate of seaworthiness. Furthermore, it is hard to know in what sense a subjectively oriented ship inspector would be dealing in truth at all. The safety of the ship is an objective engineering proposition, and to say whether the ship is fit to sail is to assess the truth of that proposition. But the subjectively oriented inspector’s evaluation would have nothing to do with engineering, only with his or her strictly personal convictions. And since his or her evaluation of the ship’s seaworthiness couldn’t bear on the veracity of the matter in any relevant way, it seems at best odd and at worse wilfully perverse to insist that he or she is dealing in truth claims at all.

However, it is clear that Climacus would not object to the idea that the seaworthiness of ships is not a suitable candidate for subjective enquiry. And he also would not object to the idea that there are many areas of enquiry where subjective investigation is inappropriate. For Climacus recognizes that there are certain areas of scholarship – mathematics and historical research, for example – where it can only

make sense to talk about truth in relation to objective enquiry. What is interesting about Climacus' discussion, however, is that more often than not he puts the boot on the other foot. That is to say that Climacus spends a great deal of time pointing out not where subjective enquiry is inappropriate but where objective enquiry is inappropriate. We are perhaps generally more inclined to be sensitive to the unhelpful encroachment of strictly personal concerns into areas of objective enquiry than we are to the unhelpful encroachment of strictly objective concerns into areas of subjective enquiry. But Climacus warns that inappropriate objective enquiry is just as misleading as inappropriate subjective enquiry. And, for Climacus, objective enquiry is inappropriate when we are dealing with what he calls 'essential knowledge.' By essential knowledge Climacus means ethical and religious knowledge.

Climacus connects 'essential' ethical and religious knowledge to subjective enquiry in the following way:

'All essential knowing pertains to existence, or only the knowing whose relation to existence is essential knowing. Essentially viewed, the knowing that does not inwardly in the reflection of inwardness pertain to existence is accidental knowing, and its degree and scope, essentially viewed, are a matter of indifference. That essential knowing is essentially related to existence [...] means that the knowledge is related to the knower, who is an existing person, and that all essential knowing is therefore essentially related to existence and to existing. Therefore, only ethical and ethical-religious knowledge is essential knowing. But all ethical and ethical-religious knowing is essentially a relating to the existing of the knower.'³³

Like much of Climacus' discussion of subjective enquiry and subjective truth, this is a disappointingly thorny way of putting things. Nonetheless I think we can make perfectly good sense of it if we bear in mind Climacus' remarks on the validity of objective truth and of subjective truth. We saw earlier that Climacus argues that objective truth claims are valid insofar as they are not based on strictly personal reflection. In the passage above Climacus elaborates on this point by noting that there is a sense in which objective truth claims are only 'accidentally' related to the person who affirms them. Climacus' claim here is not that it is only by chance that we come to know what is

³³ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 197-8.

objectively true. His point is that by definition true objective claims are true regardless of who articulates them. But this is not the case with regard to subjective truth claims. Subjective truth claims occur in the context of subjective enquiry. And subjective enquiry is personal in the sense that it is conducted from the interested first person perspective. To say that something is subjectively true, then, is to express a personal conviction. Consequently subjective truth claims are not ‘indifferent’ in the sense that they are not true regardless of who articulates them. To claim that something is subjectively true is to say something about oneself; and when it comes to saying something about oneself we are all, so to speak, on our own and cannot substitute for one another. Climacus makes this point by noting that subjective truth claims are *essentially* related to the person who makes them. What Climacus calls ‘essential knowledge’, then, is the kind of knowledge that belongs to subjective enquiry and which is articulated by subjective truth claims. Climacus concludes – admittedly with alarming brevity – that ethical and religious knowledge are examples of such ‘essential knowledge’, because ‘all ethical and ethical-religious knowing is essentially a relating to the existing of the knower.’ That is to say that ethical convictions and religious convictions are personal. My neighbour and I may share the same religious conviction, but we cannot hold that conviction on behalf of each other. If my neighbour decides not to observe his religious belief for a week I cannot agree to cover his shift for him. Similarly, James sometimes notes with refreshing honesty that he enjoys taking ‘moral holidays’.³⁴ But clearly even if James had booked a holiday from his moral convictions well in advance, no arrangements could be made to cover his absence.

We have seen, then, that for Climacus religious knowledge is something that properly falls into the domain of subjective enquiry. In one sense the connection between religious truth claims and subjective enquiry seems obvious. Religious belief is something that we must each make up our mind about. One is either a Christian or else one is not; and, furthermore, one cannot be a Christian or an atheist by proxy. But it is important to notice that the fact that one cannot be a Christian by proxy need not imply that Christianity falls within the compass of subjective enquiry rather than objective enquiry. For example, someone may argue that even if our religious convictions must be personal and cannot be held by proxy it remains the case that Christianity is either objectively true or objectively untrue. Climacus would not agree with this proposal. His

³⁴ James, W. (1995a) *Pragmatism*, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 29-30.

claim is that when we consider the truth of Christianity *all* objective truth claims are suspended or left behind at the fork in the road. The best way to appreciate Climacus' thinking on this issue is to revisit his claims about the 'absurd' nature of Christianity.

As Emmanuel and Sands point out, Climacus claims that Christianity is absurd because Christ is both man and God, temporal and eternal. But although Christ is marked by his absurdity, it is also his absurd nature that renders him, in an important sense, hidden. As Climacus explains:

'What, then, is 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 recognizability is pre-Socratic paganism and from the Jewish point of view is idolatry.'³⁵

Insofar as he is a man it is possible to recognize Christ's humanity. But the same does not hold true for his divinity, which cannot be observed and can only be believed. It is important to note, however, that the reason that the divinity of Christ is something that can only be believed is *not* that we lack the expertise or wherewithal to make the relevant objective observations. In other words Climacus' point is not that when Christ was on earth he was 'indistinguishable from any other human being' because relevant objective tests had not been developed to detect and demonstrate his divinity. Climacus' point is that it belongs to the specifically Christian concept of God that he is not an object that can be observed. This is not the case with all concepts of God. As Climacus notes, 'All paganism consists in this, that God is related directly to a human being, as the remarkably striking to the amazed.'³⁶ The pseudonym's point here, I take it, is that pagan gods are understood in terms that also apply to humanity. In other words, it is possible to relate to pagan gods 'directly' in the sense that they are fundamentally like people – albeit extraordinary people. And since they are akin to extraordinary people we stand in a relation of amazement to them: rather in the way that I might be in awe of the achievements of a fine sprinter, or of an exceptionally gifted spin bowler. Moreover, relating 'directly' to pagan gods in this way is fundamentally a way of observing them.

³⁵ *Postscript*, op. cit., 210.

³⁶ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 245.

To relate ‘directly’ to pagan gods is to observe how extraordinary they are, humanly speaking. But the Christian claim is that there is a qualitative difference between humans and God. As Climacus notes: ‘But the absolute paradox, precisely because it is absolute, can be related only to the absolute difference by which a human being differs from God; it cannot be related to relative bickering between one human being and another about whether one is a little smarter than the other.’³⁷ To think that Christ’s divinity is shown by his human talents, then, is a mistake. For looking at Christ’s human talents will only tell us about his humanity. Christ’s divinity is mysterious or hidden in the sense that it is not shown in anything that we can observe about him as a man.

It is for this reason that Climacus strongly opposes the view that the divinity of Christ can be demonstrated by any kind of objective enquiry into his life on earth. Climacus explains himself in the following way:

‘Inasmuch as the absurd contains the element of coming into existence, the road of approximation will also be that which confuses the absurd fact of coming into existence, which is the object of faith, with a simple historical fact, and then seeks historical certainty for that which is absurd precisely because it contains the contradiction that something that can become historical only in direct opposition to all human understanding has become historical. This contradiction is the absurd, which can only be believed.’³⁸

When Climacus says that ‘the absurd contains the element of coming into existence’, I take it that he means that Christ is a paradox because he is both temporal and eternal. In other words, as God he is eternal, but as a man he ‘comes into existence’ and lives a temporal life on earth. The claim that Christ lived on earth seems promising in the sense that it suggests that it is possible, in principle, to look for objective evidence of his existence. If we could prove that it is objectively true that Christ did live on earth, then we would have an objective ground on which to base our faith in him. But, of course, this strategy loses sight of Christ’s paradoxical nature. For the life of Christ is no ordinary historical fact. And the reason that it is no ordinary historical fact is precisely because he is human and divine, temporal and eternal. It simply makes no sense to look

³⁷ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 217.

³⁸ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 211.

for evidence for the existence of a 'person' who is both temporal and eternal. Furthermore, if we were to demonstrate the existence of a person who fits the description of Christ's human aspects, then we still would not have demonstrated the existence of Christ *qua* Christ. For it remains the case that we have only demonstrated the existence of a person; we have not demonstrated the existence of a person who is also, and at the same time, God.

For Climacus, then, in Christianity there can be no 'direct' relation to God in the sense that it is impossible to objectively *observe* Christ *qua* Christ. But, importantly, for Climacus this is not a failing. For Christian faith does not consist of objective knowledge about Christ. As Climacus notes, 'Objectively there is no truth; an objective knowledge about the truth or truths of Christianity is precisely untruth.'³⁹ In other words, it is precisely because Christ is a paradox, and his divinity is hidden and cannot be observed, that objective knowledge about God is irrelevant. In relation to Christianity the important question is whether one is personally able and willing to accept that Christ is both man and God. As Climacus explains:

'Suppose that Christianity does not at all want to be understood; suppose that, in order to express this and to prevent anyone, misguided, from taking the road of objectivity, it has proclaimed itself to be the paradox. Suppose that it wants to be only for existing persons and essentially for persons existing in inwardness, in the inwardness of faith, which cannot be expressed more definitely than this: it is the absurd, adhered to firmly with the passion of the infinite.'⁴⁰

We are now able to appreciate why it is that Climacus doesn't think it makes any sense to enquire into the objective truth of Christianity, and also to appreciate the sense in which he thinks that faith is risky. We have seen that Climacus argues that Christianity is constituted in such a way that objective enquiry cannot establish its truth in any relevant sense. To make a disinterested study of Christ is, precisely, to remain blind to Christ's divinity. Christianity is not something that can be known objectively, but only subjectively. To say that Christianity is subjectively true is to say that one believes in the divinity of Christ. This is not a *speculation* about an objective state of

³⁹ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 224.

⁴⁰ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 214

affairs, for subjective truth is different in kind from objective truth. On the contrary, to say that one believes in the divinity of Christ is not to speculate but to commit oneself to a point of view. And it is this commitment that Climacus associates with risk. For the point of view in question is not an intellectual position but a commitment to love Christ, worship him and live one's life in accordance with his will. The kind of risk involved in faith, then, has nothing to do with believing something that one thinks may be false. Rather, it is more analogous to the kind of risk that we take when we fall in love.

3) Risk, Faith and Pragmatism

At this point it will be useful to briefly state the differences between my description of Climacus' argument and the descriptions proposed by Emmanuel and Sands. As I argued in section 1, Emmanuel and Sands both attribute to Climacus the view that faith involves taking an epistemic risk. Christianity is either objectively true or objectively false. We cannot know whether it is objectively true or false either because, as Emmanuel suggests, this knowledge is beyond the compass of our cognitive abilities, or because, as Sands suggests, Christianity is incomprehensible. As a result if we choose to believe that Christianity is true we risk believing a falsehood.

Against this interpretation I have argued that Climacus does not claim that in order to have faith one must believe something that one knows might be false. Climacus does not think that it makes sense to enquire whether Christianity is objectively true. And because it does not make sense to ask whether Christianity is objectively true it also does not make sense to claim that Christians must believe something which they know may be false. Christianity does not involve taking an epistemic risk of this kind. Christian faith is risky in the sense that it requires that one lives according to one's Christian convictions.

Having argued against the account of risk proposed by Emmanuel and Sands I now want to examine the implications of my criticisms for their comparisons between Climacus and James. I shall argue that their comparisons are wide of the mark. Emmanuel takes the view that Climacus offers a Jamesian pragmatic justification for taking the epistemic risk required by Christian faith. Against this I shall argue that because Climacus does not think that to have faith one must take an epistemic risk he does not provide any justification for taking such a risk. Sands argues that because Climacus thinks we should not attempt to prove the objective truth of Christianity he

thereby makes Christian faith unnecessarily risky. James provides a superior account of faith because he argues that although we can be justified in having faith without first having established the objective truth of what we believe we should nonetheless continue to enquire into the objective truth of what we do believe. Moreover we should be prepared to alter our beliefs in accordance with the results of this enquiry. Against this I counter that Climacus doesn't rule out objective enquiry into the truth of Christianity because he wishes to preserve the 'risky' quality of faith. Climacus rules out objective enquiry into the truth of Christianity because he thinks that it is irrelevant to the conduct of Christian faith. Accordingly the kind of 'risk management' policy proposed by James is irrelevant to Climacus' conception of faith.

3.1) Emmanuel, Climacus, and The Will to Believe

Emmanuel's argument is that for Climacus, Christ is 'beyond' the scope of our ability to reason. And because Christ is 'beyond' the compass of our reasoning skills we cannot know whether Christianity is objectively true or false. But if we cannot know whether Christianity is objectively true or false, how can Christian faith be justified? Emmanuel argues that Climacus argues for a pragmatic justification of Christian faith, broadly of the kind that James develops in his essay *The Will to Believe*.

In *The Will to Believe*, James famously argues that when we are confronted by a 'genuine' option between two hypotheses we are entitled to settle the option according to the promptings of our 'passional' nature. Emmanuel argues that for Climacus the choice between believing in Christ and not believing in Christ is a 'genuine option' of this kind. In order to illustrate his case, Emmanuel asks us to consider a woman who is lost in a cave. The lost woman comes across an exit, but does not know whether it leads to the surface or further into the underground system. Running short on lantern fuel, the caver must decide whether to take the exit or remain where she is. The woman's situation has three features that, taken together, constitute a Jamesian 'genuine option.' Firstly, she has a choice between two hypotheses – that the exit leads to the surface and that the exit does not lead to the surface – both of which are 'live' in the sense that they both strike her as reasonable. Secondly, her choice is 'momentous' in the sense that it has very high stakes. The choice she makes will determine whether she lives or dies. Finally, her choice is 'forced' in the sense that failing to choose between taking the exit and not taking the exit is the practical equivalent of deciding not to take the exit.

Following James, Emmanuel reasons that it would not be rational for the caver to suspend her judgement about what to do on the grounds that she does not have enough evidence to make an informed choice. For if she suspends her judgement she will do nothing and will thereby be condemned to remain in the cave until she, like her lantern, expires. Accordingly, 'Strict adherence to the evidentialist rule of thinking would be no less than suicidal.'⁴¹ The caver must choose whether to take the exit or not in spite of having no relevant evidence to inform that choice. However, this does not imply that there are no rational considerations that are relevant to the lost woman's choice. For although she cannot know whether the exit leads to the surface or deeper into the cave system, she *can* consider whether it is in her best interest to believe that the exit does lead to the surface or to believe that it does not. Emmanuel writes:

'The pragmatist view assumes that rational agents always pursue their interests whenever this is feasible. Moreover, it assumes that in certain practical situations where cognitive reason cannot decide an issue one way or the other, and where a decision is nevertheless forced, there must be some recourse to a procedure of rational deliberation which assures us that there is a warrant for the course of action we take.'⁴²

Clearly it is in the woman's best interest to escape from the cave rather than to die there. So her choice will be rational if it maximises her chance of escape and irrational if it does not. Emmanuel reasons as follows: 'Because we affirm that prompt rescue is a more desirable end than perishing (or being trapped in the bowels of a cave for an indefinite period of time), and because we affirm the general principle that an act is rational if it conduces to desirable ends (and irrational if it gives rise to undesirable ones), then in this case we must affirm that the belief that p [the exit leads to the surface] would indeed be rational.'⁴³ The upshot of James's argument, then, is that when we are confronted by a genuine option that cannot be settled by theoretical reflection we need not conclude that the only course of action is to suspend our judgement. Rather, we can analyse how it is in our interest to act in relation to the choice that confronts us, and, furthermore, it is rational to act on the basis of that analysis.

⁴¹ Emmanuel, *op. cit.*, 54.

⁴² Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 54.

⁴³ Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 54.

Emmanuel believes that, for Climacus, the situation of the would-be Christian is analogous to that of the lost caver. We cannot know whether Christianity is objectively true; but we must choose between the hypothesis that it is true and the hypothesis that it is not true. This choice is 'live' insofar as both hypotheses – that Christianity is objectively true, and that Christianity is not objectively true – are reasonable. It is 'momentous' because the stakes are nothing less than eternal life. And it is 'forced' because failing or refusing to choose between the hypotheses is the practical equivalent of choosing the hypothesis that Christianity is not true. Emmanuel summarises his case in the following way:

'As I read Kierkegaard, the absolute paradox lies in the fact that ordinary human standards of truth and knowledge are inadequate to assess the possibility of revelation. God lies beyond the reach of our cognitive resources. In this way, the paradox clears logical space for faith by showing that theoretical reason is incapable of deciding the issue one way or the other. But where theoretical reason cannot decide the option between belief and unbelief, and where eternal happiness hangs in the balance, the venture to believe may be validated on practical grounds.'⁴⁴

According to this analysis the choice between believing that Christianity is true and that Christianity is not true is not so much a choice between propositions as it is a choice between courses of action. Just as the caver must decide what it is in her best interests to do, the would-be Christian must decide what it is in his or her best interest to believe. Emmanuel explains:

'The rationality of belief is usually determined by examining the relation of belief to the evidence in its support, while the rationality of actions is usually determined by reference to the actual or expected consequences. But for Kierkegaard, as for James, belief choices are actions, and so the criteria of rationality that apply to actions apply to beliefs as well. Thus he affirms that, as a rational being, he must believe despite the insufficiency of evidence. As a genuine option, the decision to believe in Christianity is properly decidable in the realm of interest and passion.'⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁵ Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 57.

However, Emmanuel recognises that in order to become a Christian one must do more than simply recognize where one's best interests lie. 'To overcome paradox,' Claims Emmanuel, 'one must do more than recognize the practical value of believing. What is required is an act (or attitude) of repentance.'⁴⁶ But this recognition in no way impacts on Emmanuel's insistence that Climacus is peddling a Jamesian pragmatist conception of faith. 'But nothing that has been said here [about repentance] diminishes the fact that Christianity presents the existing individual with a genuine option, or that it may be rational to accept the verdict of revelation and seek salvation through faith.'⁴⁷

To summarise, then, we can say that according to Emmanuel, Climacus argues that faith is an informed gamble. We cannot *know* that Christianity is true; but we are, nonetheless, entitled to guess whether it is or is not true, provided our guess reflects our best practical interests. According to this view, then, Climacus defends a 'pragmatist faith' that 'does not avoid risk, but provides a practical justification for taking risks in view of the actual or expected consequences.'⁴⁸

3.2) Assessment of Emmanuel's Argument

Before addressing the question of whether Emmanuel is right to claim that Climacus defends a 'pragmatist faith' it will be useful to discuss in more detail the meaning of Emmanuel's argument. For on the face of it there are at least two ways in which we might interpret Emmanuel's case. Emmanuel may simply be claiming that when we are confronted by a Jamesian 'genuine option' we are entitled to settle that option without waiting to gather more evidence about which hypothesis is correct. However, Emmanuel may be arguing that when we are confronted by a genuine option it is more rational to believe that one of the hypotheses is true and less rational to believe that the alternative hypothesis is true. Emmanuel argues, for example, that it is rational for the caver to believe that the exit leads to the surface, and that it is rational for Climacus to believe that Christianity is true. But does he thereby mean to imply that it would be *less rational* for the caver to believe that the exit does not lead to the surface and that it would be less rational for Climacus to believe that Christianity is not true?

⁴⁶ Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁷ Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁸ Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 52.

There is reason to think that Emmanuel does *not* mean to imply that when we are confronted by a genuine option it is more rational to believe one hypothesis rather than the other. The reason is that Emmanuel distinguishes between his argument and the kind of *wager* argument proposed by Pascal. Pascal argues that although we cannot know whether Christianity is true, it is in our best interest to believe that it is true. So, for Pascal, although we cannot know whether Christianity is true or false it is not equally rational to believe either of these hypotheses. It is more rational to believe that Christianity is true. Emmanuel argues that Climacus' argument is not like Pascal's. 'He [Climacus] does not argue that it must be rational to accept Christianity, despite the insufficiency of evidence, on the grounds that the resulting sacrifice of worldly pleasure is but a finite loss, whereas eternal happiness represents an infinite gain.'⁴⁹

Nonetheless, Emmanuel sometimes does express his argument in terms that suggest it is more rational to wager on the side of Christian faith than against it. For example he writes the following: 'Because we affirm that an eternal happiness is more desirable than eternal lostness, and because we affirm the principle that an act is rational if it conduces to desirable ends (and irrational if it gives rise to undesirable ones), we must affirm that belief in Christianity is in fact rational on practical grounds.'⁵⁰ Since *eternal* happiness is on offer only from Christianity and not from atheism this argument would seem to stack up in favour of believing that Christianity is true rather than it is not true.

The difficulty of understanding Emmanuel's position might be explained in two ways. Firstly, it has been much debated whether James meant his argument in *The Will to Believe* to be a defence of one's right to settle the option between religious belief and unbelief or a recommendation that one ought to adopt a religious belief.⁵¹ I don't intend to enter that debate here. My point is simply that Emmanuel is not clear about where *he* stands on this issue. The second explanation relates to Emmanuel's choice of analogy. Emmanuel thinks that the situation of the lost caver is analogous to that of the would-be Christian. But there is at least one important difference between these two scenarios. If the lost caver decides not to take the exit then she is definitely going to die. But should

⁴⁹ Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁰ Emmanuel, *ibid.*, 57.

⁵¹ An extended treatment of this issue is given by Wernham. Wernham, J.C.S. (1987) *James's Will-to-Believe Doctrine: A Heretical View*, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

the would-be Christian opt instead for atheism then – according to Emmanuel’s own analysis - he or she only *might* miss out on eternal happiness. For if Christianity is not true then there is no eternal life to miss out on. So it appears that the lost caver really only has one rational course of action, which is to take the exit; but the situation of the would-be Christian is much less clear-cut.

However, regardless of whether we take Emmanuel to be arguing that we have a right to adopt a religious belief or that we *should* adopt a religious belief, his argument fails for the same reason. For Emmanuel’s claim is that Climacus thinks that in the absence of proof for the objective truth of Christianity, faith in Christianity can be justified on pragmatic grounds. Pragmatic arguments do not remove the risk that what we choose to believe is true is actually not true. Rather, they provide a way of negotiating that risk in an informed manner. But, as I have argued above, Climacus does not think that Christianity is either objectively true or objectively untrue. And if this is the case then the choice between religious belief and unbelief is not a gamble on whether Christianity really is objectively true or not. Furthermore if the choice between religious belief and unbelief is not a gamble of this kind, then there is no risk to pragmatically manage. We don’t have to guess whether Christianity is objectively true, not because we *know* that it is or that it isn’t, but because it makes no sense to say that it objectively true or that it isn’t. Since we don’t have to guess whether Christianity is objectively true we don’t have to pragmatically manage the risk of guessing the wrong way.

3.3) Sands, James and Informed Gambling on God

Sands gives short shrift to Emmanuel’s suggestion that Climacus argues for a pragmatist conception of faith.⁵² However, what Sands does not reject is the notion that for Kierkegaard the choice between religious belief and unbelief is a gamble. In this respect religious beliefs are quite different to beliefs about empirical states of affairs, for which we do commonly seek at least some assurance that they are correct. We secure that assurance by conducting relevant objective research, and we proportion the confidence we have in our beliefs according to the amount of evidence in favour of the beliefs in question. For Climacus, however, faith is a gamble precisely because it is not based on evidence derived from objective enquiry. Rather, faith is grounded in

⁵² Sands, op. cit., 88, footnote 26.

subjective passion. According to Sands, Climacus severs the link between religious belief and evidence in order to preserve the link between religious faith and subjective passion. The more uncertain it is that something is objectively true the more passion it requires to maintain the belief that it is true. If there can be no evidence for the objective truth of Christianity then it is *completely* uncertain whether Christianity is objectively true. Accordingly to have faith in Christianity is to be passionately committed to the view that Christianity is objectively true in spite of the fact that one knows it is completely uncertain whether Christianity really is objectively true.

Sands thinks that one advantage of distinguishing between religious and empirical beliefs in this way is that it means that people can get on with the business of conducting their faith without first having to conduct complex and perhaps interminable research into the existence of God. However, Sands argues that the problem with distinguishing religious beliefs from empirical beliefs in this way is that it makes it difficult to differentiate genuine faith from lunacy. For grounding religious belief merely in subjective passion licences us to worship anything that takes our fancy. Sands writes: ‘If the quest for evidence is disavowed, then reason has no criterion for distinguishing truth from lunacy. Worshipping a dog is on a par with worshipping Christ.’⁵³ The advantage of Climacus’ position – that the faithful need not wait for proofs before practicing their devotion – is cancelled by the drawback that it cannot guarantee the truth of what is believed. And since Climacus has no means to guarantee the truth of a religious belief, he also has no means by which to adjudicate between the truth claims of different religions. Lovers of Christ may have their God and lovers of dogs may have theirs, but lovers of freewheeling relativism, it seems, will do best to love Climacus.

Sands argues that the solution to this difficulty can be found in James. Sands thinks that there is a deep affinity between Kierkegaard and James insofar as both men argue that we have a right to adopt a religious belief without having first attained conclusive evidence in support of that belief. ‘No less than Kierkegaard, James liberates religious faith to venture beyond the warrants of evidence.’⁵⁴ However, James differs from Kierkegaard in at least one important respect. ‘James does not distinguish sharply

⁵³ Sands, *ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁴ Sands, *ibid.*, 243.

between religious faith and evidentially based faith [...]’⁵⁵ So although James argues that it is permissible to adopt a religious belief without having objective evidence in support of that belief, he does not hold that such evidence is irrelevant. Accordingly we should keep an eye out for evidence that supports or falsifies the religious belief we have adopted.

Sands argues that James’s position retains what is attractive about Climacus’ position whilst steering clear of the relativism into which it collapses. James allows that we can commit to a religious belief without first having conclusive evidence for the objective truth of that belief. And because we don’t have conclusive evidence for the objective truth of our belief, it is objectively uncertain whether that belief is true. This means that holding a religious belief is a risky business that requires the kind of passionate commitment that is appropriate to faith. However, unlike Climacus, James does not sever the link between religious beliefs and evidence completely. And for this reason we are not free to hold a religious belief simply because we want to hold it. We can only hold a religious belief if there is no evidence that decisively counts against it. Moreover, we should keep an eye out for relevant evidence and be prepared to revise our religious belief in the light of new discoveries.

3.4) Assessment of Sands’ Argument

The key problem with Sands’ position is that it hinges on a misunderstanding of Climacus’ view of the relation between religious belief and evidence. Sands thinks that Climacus removes the connection between belief and evidence in order to make faith maximally risky. According to this analysis, Climacus thinks that faith is a passion and that passion is encouraged by uncertainty over the objective truth of the object of one’s faith. Furthermore, this has the uncomfortable consequence that one may believe something to be objectively true that is, in fact, objectively false. But Climacus simply doesn’t argue that faith involves a risk of *this* kind at all. As we saw above, Climacus doesn’t think it makes sense to say that Christianity is objectively true or that it is objectively false. Consequently, objective enquiry into the truth of Christianity is both irrelevant and misleading. Clearly, then, Climacus does not reject the notion that there can be evidence for the objective truth of Christianity on the grounds that he thinks that this will make Christian faith into a more risky and therefore more exciting and

⁵⁵ Sands, *ibid.*, 243.

‘passionate’ wager. Rather, he rejects such evidence on the grounds that it cannot make any relevant contribution to our decision whether or not to have faith.

Sands’ suggestion that James improves upon Kierkegaard’s position rests upon the same misunderstanding of Climacus’ position. Sands takes it that, for Kierkegaard, to have faith is to gamble that Christianity is objectively true when it may be objectively false. James improves on this position by allowing that we should continue to monitor evidence for the objective truth or falsity of Christianity even after we have placed our bet. In other words, for James, we can take some of the risk out of our gamble by continuing to investigate whether our religious belief is objectively true or objectively false. But, of course, Climacus doesn’t think that Christianity is objectively true or objectively false. And for this reason he doesn’t think that faith is a gamble of the kind that Sands attributes to him. As a result James’ position, though clearly different to Kierkegaard’s, doesn’t improve on the Dane’s position in the way that Sands’ thinks. For Sands’ claim is that James is a more responsible gambler than Kierkegaard. But Kierkegaard is not advocating gambling at all.

4) Conclusion

I have argued that Emmanuel and Sands both attribute to Climacus the view that in order to have faith one must believe something that one knows may not be objectively true. I have countered that Climacus makes no such claim. Climacus argues that it does not make sense to ask whether or not Christianity is objectively true. Accordingly it makes no sense to claim that for Climacus in order to have faith one must risk believing something that is objectively false.

I also argued that because Emmanuel and Sands have misunderstood Kierkegaard, the comparisons that they draw between Kierkegaard and James are misleading. Emmanuel argues that for Climacus the question of whether or not to believe in God has the form of a Jamesian ‘genuine option.’ Christianity is either objectively true or objectively untrue and we must decide which hypothesis to back. But Climacus cannot be proposing an argument of this kind simply because he does not think it makes sense to say that Christianity is objectively true or objectively untrue. Sands argues that Climacus goes too far in weakening the requirement to have evidence in support of one’s religious belief. To believe in God without any evidence for the existence of God is to take a risk, and that risk motivates the ‘feeling of uncertainty’

characteristic of faith. But, again, this argument hinges on a misunderstanding of Climacus' claim that faith is risky. For Climacus a Christian is not uncertain whether what he or she believes is true; a Christian risks committing his or her life to the love of Christ.

Finally, it is I think worth remarking on the scope of my argument, and in particular to distinguish between what I have sought to show and what I have not sought to show. My argument has been that Emmanuel and Sands both misunderstand Climacus' concept of faith in the same way, and that this misunderstanding undermines their comparisons between Climacus and James. I have not examined the interpretations of James set out by Emmanuel and Sands. Neither have I given a defence of Climacus' concept of faith. It would no doubt be interesting to do both of these things. They are, however, strictly superfluous to my case. My task has been only to point out misunderstandings of Climacus' argument, not to argue in addition that Climacus is right. Furthermore, the fact that Emmanuel and Sands misunderstand Climacus is enough to throw into doubt their comparisons between Climacus and James. If it were shown in addition that they have misunderstood James in some way this would only lead us to the conclusion we have already reached; namely that Climacus and James cannot be compared in the ways that Emmanuel and Sands think they can. Finally, somebody might object that I have discussed Climacus' conception of faith, but have not discussed whether this is Kierkegaard's conception of faith. However for the purposes of this chapter there is no need for me to enter this debate. For Emmanuel and Sands both hold that Climacus' expresses the views of Kierkegaard. Accordingly my criticisms of their readings of Climacus are also criticisms of their readings of Kierkegaard.

Chapter 2

Proofs, Feelings, Philosophy

“Whether God exists or not is not the problem,”

Reb Yasri admitted, scandalizing his audience.

“If I believe God exists, it does not prove He does.

“Not believing so in no way proves that He does not. [...]”

(Edmond Jabès *The Book of Resemblances*)¹

Introduction

On the face of it there is, as Jabès’ Reb Yasri illustrates, something engagingly scandalous about claiming that nothing important can be achieved by trying to demonstrate the existence of God. For there does seem to be plenty of room to doubt that God exists. Of course some people claim that God does exist; but this claim doesn’t seem quite as reliable as, say, the claim that my grandmother exists. After all, God never drops in on us in the way that our relatives drop by for a cup of tea. And because there is room to doubt whether God exists this seems to imply that we should try to prove the issue one way or the other. For if we had only ever heard about some very distant relation, we should do well to find out if she *really* exists before putting on the kettle and attending to the cakes. Dismissing this kind of enquiry into the existence of distant relatives and of God seems either sloppy or plain shocking. Nonetheless, both Kierkegaard and James sympathize with the notion that nothing important can be achieved by trying to prove the existence of God. Indeed, Kierkegaard doesn’t think that we could even prove the existence of a relative. But it is with Kierkegaard’s and James’s views on proofs for the existence of God that I shall be concerned with in this chapter.

There is a marked difference in tone between the way in which Kierkegaard and James express their views on this subject. James begins his eighteenth lecture in *Varieties* by asking whether philosophy can prove the existence of God. But before

¹ Jabès, E. (1992) *The Book of Resemblances 3: The Ineffaceable The Unperceived*, trans. R. Waldrop, Hanover: University Press of New England, 22.

proceeding to make his arguments, he spends a few paragraphs speculating on what he thinks his audience expects to hear. Reflecting on his theme James notes: ‘I have undermined the authority of mysticism, you say, and the next thing I shall probably do is seek to discredit that of philosophy.’² Continuing this thought on the following page, James confesses: ‘To a certain extent I have to admit that you guess rightly.’³ James seems to assume that his audience will hold the view that philosophy should be in the business of proving the existence or non-existence of God. The fact that James *confesses* his opposition to this view, rather than simply contesting it, suggests, perhaps, that he too is wary of discounting it. In any case James’s tone is markedly different to that adopted by Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus. Climacus is far from apologetic and shows no sign of being tempted by the view that philosophy can or should prove the existence of God. Climacus simply ridicules the idea that philosophers should be in that line of business at all. With characteristic brio and irony he writes: ‘For the fool says in his heart that there is no God, but he who says in his heart or to others: Just wait a little and I shall demonstrate it – ah, what a rare wise man he is!’⁴ Proving the existence or non-existence of God would, in Climacus’ estimation, make ‘a superb theme for a comedy!’⁵ For Climacus, then, the real scandal is that anybody should think that it makes sense to try to prove the existence of God in the first place. Where James is polite and cautious, Climacus is palpably confrontational.

Despite the difference in tone between Climacus and James, however, both men do reject the idea that we can, by means of philosophy, prove the existence of God. And accordingly it is both natural and pertinent to ask whether Climacus and James are substantially in agreement with one another on this issue, and whether the difference between them is merely one of presentation or tone. In this chapter I assess whether or not Climacus and James are in substantive agreement, and evaluate their respective arguments. I argue that Climacus’ position is both different to and better than James’s. I also defend Climacus, arguing that his position is compelling and is not at all as scandalous as we may at first think. I set the stage by making some brief remarks about

² James, W. (1982) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 430. Hereafter *Varieties*.

³ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 431.

⁴ Kierkegaard, S. (1985) *Philosophical Fragments / Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 43. Hereafter *Fragments*

⁵ *Fragments*, *ibid.*, footnote on page 43.

the apparent similarities between the two philosophers. At the end of this preliminary discussion I set out the scheme of my arguments.

1) Preliminary Discussion

It certainly is true, then, that both James and Climacus reject the notion that philosophy can prove the existence of God. However it does not follow from this that James and Climacus share the same view. For they can only be said to share the same view if they mean similar things by ‘philosophy’ and ‘God’, and account similarly for why the former cannot demonstrate the existence of the latter. My view is that Climacus and James understand ‘philosophy’ and ‘God’ quite differently, and, for that reason, their cases are dissimilar. But, nonetheless, there *are* arguments in Climacus and James, which, on the face of it at least, look sufficiently similar for us to ask whether they really are similar.

In particular, both James and Climacus argue that philosophical proofs for the existence of God are irrelevant to one’s personal decision whether to believe in God. James expresses this position in the following remark: ‘I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.’^{6 7} In matters of religion, philosophy merely states differently what is first put to us by our feelings. Consequently philosophy cannot persuade us that God exists, or that God does not exist. For philosophy merely restates in formal terms the conviction that religious or atheistic feelings have already brought about in us. If philosophical arguments contradict our religious or atheistic feelings, then – to continue with James’s linguistic figure – they will fall on deaf ears. Summarising these points, James writes: ‘If you have a God already whom you believe in, these arguments [of philosophy] confirm you. If you are atheistic, they fail to set you right.’⁸

⁶*Varieties*, op. cit., 431.

⁷This passage by James brings to mind an equally suggestive passage by Simone Weil. ‘Personally, I should never give even as much as sixpence towards any missionary enterprise. I think that for any man a change of religion is as dangerous a thing as a change of language is for a writer. It may turn out a success, but it can also have disastrous consequences.’ Weil S. (2002) *Letter to a Priest*, London: Routledge, 18. Both writers liken religious difficulties to difficulties of linguistic translation. Weil’s emphasis on how a change of religion may ‘turn out’ and whether it is ‘successful’ or ‘disastrous’ for a person also has a surprisingly pragmatic ring to it.

⁸*Varieties*, op. cit., 437.

Climacus similarly thinks that philosophical proofs of the existence of God are irrelevant to one's personal decision whether to believe in God. In *Philosophical Fragments*, for example, Climacus writes: 'If at the moment he is supposed to begin the demonstration it is not totally undecided whether the God exists or not, then of course, he does not demonstrate it, and if that is not the situation in the beginning, then he never does make a beginning – partly for fear that he will not succeed because the god may not exist, and partly because he has nothing with which to begin.'⁹ Here Climacus repeats in (slightly) more formal terms much of James's view. James's point was that philosophy cannot *demonstrate* the existence of God because philosophy merely elucidates the conviction about God's existence that one already has. Climacus makes a comparable point by noting that if philosophy *is* to demonstrate the existence of God it must *not* merely elucidate the philosopher's personal conviction on this matter.¹⁰ But if a philosopher is 'totally undecided' about whether God exists then he or she has no conviction from which to argue. Such a philosopher has 'nothing with which to begin', and therefore never manages to 'make a beginning' on his or her philosophical demonstration. James no doubt would insist that a philosopher who is 'totally undecided' as to whether God exists has no relevant feelings that he or she can translate into philosophical discourse. In any case, James and Climacus seem to agree that personal conviction precedes philosophical proof when it comes to settling the question of whether there is a God.

Furthermore, this shared emphasis on personal conviction over philosophical demonstration is perhaps not unexpected in view of Climacus' and James's broader philosophical commitments. Particularly relevant here are Climacus' and James's claims that philosophical problems are best understood and addressed in the concrete, practical contexts in which they arise. James's attitude on this point is well captured in an anecdote that he recounts in *Pragmatism*. The story concerns his meeting with a young man, 'a graduate of some Western college'.

⁹*Fragments*, op. cit., 43-44.

¹⁰ I say that Climacus makes a comparable point, not the same point because Climacus is not committed to the view that philosophical proofs for the existence of God *only* 'translate' religious sentiment into formal terms. Climacus agrees with James that if philosophy is to demonstrate the existence of God it must not simply spell out in formal terms one's private conviction on the matter.

‘[He] began by saying that he had always taken for granted that when you entered a philosophic classroom you had to open relations with a universe entirely distinct from the one you left behind you in the street. The two were supposed, he said, to have little to do with each other, that you could not possibly occupy your mind with them at the same time. The world of concrete personal experiences to which the street belongs is multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed. The world to which your philosophy-professor introduces you is simple, clean and noble.’¹¹

James, of course, was not the kind of professor who liked to introduce his students to a simple, clean and noble world immune from the difficulties of quotidian life. And the point of James’s anecdote is that there is some important sense in which philosophical reflection should track the ‘tangled, muddy, painful’ everyday world in which people worry in a multitude of ways about issues such as how to live their lives and whether to believe in God. In *Varieties* James even develops this point by suggesting that philosophers who keep philosophy at arms length from daily life are lacking in character. ‘All-inclusive, yet simple; noble, clean, luminous, stable, rigorous, true; - what more ideal refuge could there be than such a [philosophical] system would offer to spirits vexed by the muddiness and accidentality of the world of sensible things?’¹²

And in a similar vein, Climacus is often given to criticize, and indeed ridicule, the kind speculative metaphysics that James’s western interlocutor would of no doubt found ‘noble’. For example, Climacus notes that, ‘Even if a man his whole life through occupies himself exclusively with logic, he still does not become logic; he himself therefore exists in other categories.’¹³ Of course, even the young man immortalized by James recognizes that outside of the philosophic classroom one does not live in the categories of formal logic. But while Climacus and the young graduate seem to agree on this point, they react to it in markedly different ways. For where the young man thinks that philosophy should stick to the business of formal argumentation, Climacus does not. Climacus is avowedly in the business of getting to grips with the categories in which people actually do exist, not with purely formal concepts, however ‘simple, clean and noble’ they may be. And in this regard Climacus and James are united against the young man. What James and Climacus both do, then, is to draw the question of whether

¹¹ James, W. (1995a) *Pragmatism*, New York: Dover Publications inc., 21.

¹² *Varieties*, op. cit., 433-4.

¹³ *Postscript*, op. cit., 93.

there is a God away from formal philosophical speculation and return it to the context of the untidy, quotidian, lives of people who are vexed by that question. And this would seem to suggest that Climacus and James might have something important in common.

Nonetheless, I don't think that this similarity between Climacus and James is profound. If, as I have observed, Climacus and James both claim that the question of whether there is a God is a matter of personal conviction that should be viewed in the concrete practical contexts in which it arises, this observation also draws attention to where such a comparison breaks down. For when we pay attention to the manner in which Climacus and James think we should recover the question of God's existence from the unhelpful attention of metaphysicians, we find that they execute very different strategies. The apparent similarities between Climacus and James turn out to be superficial.

As we shall see, James and Climacus propose quite different reasons for the view that the existence or non-existence of God is a matter of personal conviction rather than metaphysical speculation. For James, reclaiming from metaphysicians the question of whether there is a God comes down to two things. Firstly, he argues that religious belief is grounded not in philosophical speculation but in personal feeling. And secondly, he argues that the business of philosophy should be to make judgements about which religious feelings can be taken seriously and which cannot. According to James, then, philosophy cannot ground religious belief, which rests solely on personal religious feelings. But philosophy can tell us which of our religious feelings are misleading or inappropriate as grounds for religious belief.

All of this stands in marked contrast to Climacus' treatment of the question of whether it is possible to demonstrate the existence of God. Climacus' procedure is to give an elucidation of the concept of God. His point is that if we understand how this concept is actually used – rather than how metaphysicians and 'speculative philosophers' have used it - we shall also come to understand why it is that it makes no sense to try to prove the existence of God. According to Climacus, then, the business of philosophy is not to propose metaphysical speculations, and nor is it to ground religious belief. It is to elucidate concepts in such a way that we can command a clear view of their use and meaning.

From the foregoing brief descriptions it is clear that Climacus and James make very different arguments. But in what follows I shall go beyond differentiating their

views and argue that Climacus' view can be used to criticize James's. My argument is that Climacus' method of conceptual elucidation shows why it is that religious belief cannot be grounded in feeling in the way that James thinks it can. James strongly differentiates between conceptual understanding of religion and religious feeling, arguing that the immediacy of the latter can ground religion in a way that the former cannot. According to this view, concepts, and the arguments constructed from concepts, are but pale imitations of what is given in immediate religious feelings. Climacus would, I think, object to the notion that religious concepts are mere shadows of religious experiences. For Climacus' point is that we have to command a clear view of the relevant concepts in order to know which experiences are religious and which are of some other kind. This is not to say that Climacus is arguing that philosophers should draw up formal criteria that might subsequently be applied to the emotional content of people's lives. This would be to side with the young graduate who so infuriated James by wanting to oppose the serene machinations of the philosophical classroom to the multitudinous concrete experiences of the street. Climacus does not oppose concepts to the concrete experiences of quotidian life. On the contrary, when Climacus claims that we must command a clear view of religious concepts, he means that we must understand how they are used in the context of our 'tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed' lives.

In order to make this argument I start by setting out critical accounts of James's and Climacus' reasons for thinking that philosophy cannot prove the existence of God. Secondly, I give a comparative evaluation of the arguments of Climacus and James. Thirdly, I propose a Kierkegaardian criticism of James's view that 'religious feelings' can ground religious belief. James's view has attracted support from Ellen Kappy Suckiel, and I shall also address her arguments. I conclude by summarising my account; and by indicating how my arguments serve to introduce the issue of mystical experience, to which I turn in the following chapter.

2) James on Feelings, Philosophy and the Justification of Faith

In chapter eighteen of *Varieties* James develops various arguments concerning the philosophical justification of faith. These arguments can be divided roughly but usefully into two groups. The first group contains arguments in which James seeks to demonstrate that it is a mistake to look for philosophical grounds for religious belief. To

this end James criticises traditional proofs for the existence of God – such as the cosmological argument and the argument from design – as well as the arguments of ‘modern’ (absolute) idealism. The second group contains arguments in which James ascribes a positive role for philosophy in relation to the justification of religious belief. Here James commends the further development of the new ‘Science of Religions’, and outlines the kind of role that this science can play in our thinking about religion.¹⁴

On the face of it we might think that since James both rejects and commends philosophy in relation to the justification of religious belief he is peddling a confused position. It seems that the arguments of the first group must flatly contradict the arguments of the second group. But this isn’t the case. As we shall see, James’s argument against the philosophical justification of faith informs his views on the positive role that philosophy can play with regard to the justification of faith. Consequently, James doesn’t contradict himself. Rather, he distinguishes between the kind of justification that philosophy can give to religious belief and the kind of justification that it cannot. But the fact that James’s position is more consistent than it might at first appear does not imply that it is correct. In what follows I shall critically review the first and second groups of James’s arguments, bringing pressure to bear on the first group in particular.

2.1) James on Formal Proofs for the existence of God

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about James’s treatment of proofs for the existence of God is its extreme brevity. It takes James just two paragraphs to dismiss the idea that it is possible to formulate a philosophical demonstration of the existence of God. This certainly is audacious, but just as certainly it is not an oversight. James thinks that there is a good reason why a long analysis is not required. He reasons that he need not make a detailed assessment of the proofs because, as a matter of historical record, those arguments have not been persuasive. So, in order to come to terms with James’s key brace of paragraphs, we first need to understand why it is that he thinks that the historical fate of a proof frees us from the burden of scrutinizing it closely.

James’s thinking on this matter has its roots in the contrast that he draws – rather sketchily - between philosophical argumentation and religious feeling. James

¹⁴ In Chapter eighteen of *Varieties* James also develops some arguments regarding philosophical accounts of the nature of God. I shall not address these here because I am mostly concerned with James’s views on the justification of religious belief.

argues that feelings are essentially personal and cannot be disclosed to another person. 'Feeling is private and dumb, and unable to give an account of itself.'¹⁵ Consequently, religious feeling cannot act as a universal ground for belief in God. Only the person who experiences a religious feeling can ground his or her belief in God on that feeling. Philosophical argumentation, however, holds out the promise of delivering public, universal grounds on which to ground religious belief. 'To redeem religion from unwholesome privacy, and to give public status and universal right of way to its deliverances, has been reason's task.'¹⁶ Furthermore, there are two ways in which philosophers can approach this task. One is to bring philosophical reflection to bear on peoples' religious feelings, and thereby 'attempt to extract from the privacies of religious experience some general facts which can be defined in formulas upon which everybody may agree.'¹⁷ This kind of philosophical reflection is at the heart of what James calls the Science of Religions, and I shall return to it below. However, another philosophical approach is to abandon any appeal to religious feelings at all, and to construct purely formal arguments in support of religious belief. James characterises this approach, which he associates with dogmatic theology and absolute idealism, in the following way: 'It assumes to construct religious objects out of the resources of logical reasons alone, or of logical reason drawing rigorous inference from non-subjective facts.'¹⁸ Furthermore, the authority of this kind of argument precisely stems from the fact that it makes no appeal to the species of 'obscure and wayward personal persuasion'¹⁹ afforded by religious feelings. In contrast to such appeals to religious feelings, purely formal arguments drive at objective truth by means of inferences that are repeatable and which are available for public inspection.

And it is this difference in the kind of authority that attaches to formal philosophical arguments and to religious feelings which informs James's thinking on how we might choose between these two approaches. Appeals to religious feelings can only carry authority for the person who has those feelings. But if a formal argument is correct, then it has authority for everybody. The dilemma that we have, then, is to choose between these two kinds of authority. James spells this out in his commentary on

¹⁵ *Varieties*, op. cit., 432.

¹⁶ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 432.

¹⁷ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 433.

¹⁸ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 433.

¹⁹ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 432.

some passages from Principal John Caird and from Cardinal Newman, writing: ‘In both these extracts we have the issue clearly set before us: Feeling valid only for the individual is pitted against reason valid universally.’²⁰ The way out of this dilemma, according to James, is to see which of the two approaches under consideration – private religious feeling and universal reason - delivers on its promises with respect to the kind of authority that it carries. And, of course, formal philosophical argumentation has a great deal more to live up to than appeals to religious feeling; for the former is supposed to carry universal authority, whereas the latter is not. Accordingly the burden of proof lies with advocates of formal philosophical arguments, who must show that their arguments do carry the universal authority that they claim for them. James puts this in the following way:

‘The test is a perfectly plain one of fact. Theology based on pure reason must in point of fact convince men universally. If it did not, wherein would its superiority consist? If it only formed sects and schools, even as sentiment and mysticisms form them, how would it fulfil its programme of freeing us from personal caprice and waywardness? This perfectly definite and practical test of the pretensions of philosophy to found religion on universal reason simplifies my procedure to-day. I need not discredit philosophy by laborious criticism of its arguments. It will suffice if I show that as a matter of history it fails to prove its pretension to be ‘objectively’ convincing.’²¹

James, of course, takes the view that, ‘[i]n fact philosophy does so fail’ to prove its pretension to be ‘objectively’ convincing.²² His reason for this conclusion is that formal proofs for the existence of God simply have not commanded universal assent.

‘The bare fact that all idealists since Kant have felt entitled either to scout or to neglect them [formal proofs for the existence of God] shows that they are not solid enough to serve as religion’s all-sufficient foundation. Absolutely impersonal reasons would be in duty bound to show more general convincingness.’²³

²⁰ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 435.

²¹ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 436.

²² *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 436.

²³ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 437.

Formal philosophical argumentation fails James's 'perfectly plain' test of fact, then, in the sense that in practice it fails to command the universal authority that is claimed for it.

There are, I think, a number of problems with the practical test that James proposes. The first of these is that James's position is made less clear by his equivocation between the terms 'universal' and 'objective'. When James introduces the dilemma of choosing between grounding religious belief on religious feeling or on formal arguments, he tells us that the choice is between the private authority of the former and the universal authority of the latter. But the 'practical test' that he proposes in order to negotiate this dilemma is to determine whether formal arguments are objectively convincing, not whether they are universally convincing. This equivocation seems to be a problem because having universal authority and having objective authority need not come to the same thing. If a proposal has universal authority, this may only mean that it is binding on every member of some community. If a proposal has objective authority, this implies that it is true regardless of who formulates, inspects or proclaims it. But the fact that a proposal is universally binding on the members of some community need not imply anything about its objective truth. For example a club may be set up for people who think that Elvis is still alive and living on the moon. The proposition that Elvis is alive and living on the moon is binding on every member of that club. But we would have to be exceptionally broad minded – or indeed a potential member of the club – to think that this proposition might be objectively true. And if a proposal can have universal authority without having objective authority this suggests that there is a mismatch between the dilemma that James sets up and the means by which he proposes to resolve it.

Somebody may counter that James's apparent equivocation between objective authority and universal authority need not damage his position. It is true that universal authority need not imply objective authority; but there is a perfectly good sense in which objective authority implies universal authority. To claim that a proposal is objectively true is to claim that it is universally true, in the sense that it is true regardless of who formulates, inspects or proclaims it. And in this sense, having objective authority does come to the same thing as having universal authority. So if we take it that James's practical test is to establish whether formal arguments for the existence of God are objectively true, then no difficulty arises. If it can be shown that such arguments are

objectively true we can also say that those arguments are also universally true. Consequently, James's equivocation between objective authority and universal authority presents us with a problem that is merely verbal.

The difficulty with this solution, however, is that it runs counter to the way in which James actually conducts his 'practical test'. James does not try to establish whether the formal arguments for the existence of God are objectively true, and then conclude from this whether or not they have universal authority. Establishing the objective truth of these arguments would require exactly the kind of detailed, technical philosophical appraisal that James thinks is unnecessary. On the contrary, James's practice is to look to see if such arguments carry universal authority. And, as we have seen, universal authority need not imply objective authority. Furthermore, the manner in which James executes his 'practical test' for universal authority introduces a further difficulty into his case. Rather than *analysing* the arguments in order to see whether there is some sense in which they can be said to have universal authority, James looks to see whether, as a matter of historical record, they have had universal authority. His argument is that if, as a matter of historical record formal arguments for the existence of God have not enjoyed universal authority, then there is a sense in which they are not true. And the problem with this argument is that it conflates veracity with approval.

Simply because the public has not been convinced by arguments proposed by philosophers, it does not follow that those arguments are bad. The proposals made by philosophers may not have been understood. And given that a proof is a formal, technical account there is plenty of room for misunderstanding. This is not to take the - frankly rather snobbish - view that the public could never get to grips with philosophical material. Rather, it is to point out that many people don't happen to be in a position to do so. Similarly, because I lack the relevant training and expertise I am not in a position to pronounce on the veracity of papers on freshwater biology and quantum mechanics. And, of course, while we all lack the skills and training necessary to participate in certain forms of debate, this is to say nothing of the overwhelming indifference that we all feel with regard to some kinds of technical discourse. Even if in principle everybody could get to grips with philosophical proofs for the existence of God, it is doubtful that everybody would have the inclination to do so. Yet it would be not only incorrect but surely also churlish to conclude that simply because somebody is uninterested in an argument it follows that the argument is wrong.

Someone might object that James may only mean to claim that as a matter of fact professional philosophers have not been able to convince one another whether or not God exists. James's remark that since Kant idealist *philosophers* have not felt the need to engage with proofs for the existence of God suggests that this is indeed what he does mean. And, similarly, in his discussion of modern idealism it is the opinion of philosophers that James appeals to. 'And again, I can be excused from proving technically that the transcendentalist reasonings fail to make religion universal, for I can point to the plain fact that a majority of scholars, even religiously disposed ones, stubbornly refuse to treat them as convincing.'²⁴ Arguably professional philosophers ought to be both sufficiently well trained and motivated to understand the proofs that have been canvassed. And this seems to nullify the problems noted above in relation to the public: namely that they are in no position to judge whether proofs for the existence of God are successful. But, of course, the mere fact that a person is a professional philosopher does not guarantee that he or she *is* sufficiently trained and motivated to understand the proofs. Indeed, philosophers commonly complain that their colleagues have misunderstood them. So the fact that professional philosophers have not agreed on whether or not the existence of God has been demonstrated does not support the inference that such proofs are mistaken. It could be that the philosophers are mistaken in their judgements about the proofs. Moreover, the claim that philosophers don't agree whether or not there is a God leaves open the possibility, however remote, that in the future they might come to an agreement on this matter. In principle, then, philosophers *could* demonstrate the existence of God, at least to one another.

James's claim that 'as a matter of history' philosophers have failed to prove the existence of God suggests that he would accept that in principle an effective proof could be formulated in the future. But, in fact, James does not think that this is the case. For although he holds that the development of the 'Science of Religions' will lead to a better philosophical account of religious belief, he does not hold that religious belief can *ever* be based on proofs for the existence of God. And this brings into focus another important problem with James's case, closely related to the difficulty I have just discussed. The problem is that James draws an unwarranted philosophical conclusion from a strictly historical inference. It may or may not be the case that proofs for the existence of God haven't enjoyed much success since Kant. But this alone does not

²⁴ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 454.

demonstrate that it is never possible to give a philosophical demonstration of the existence of God. To hold otherwise would be akin to claiming that, say, the long history of failed attempts at powered flight demonstrated that powered flight is not possible. In view of the history of powered aviation this inference is of course not only unwarranted but also demonstrably wrong. It would be a different matter, of course, if it could be shown that there was some reason why the ambition to achieve powered flight could *never* be realized. Presumably if this were indeed the case, and physicists had demonstrated it, then the Wright brothers would rightly have stuck to the bicycle trade. But as it was they correctly understood that the history of failed attempts at powered flight did not imply that powered flight could never be achieved. Similarly, a philosopher need not conclude from the fact that many proofs have failed that his or her proof *must* also fail.

This last criticism of James may perhaps be met by the observation that he does provide at least one reason why it is that the existence of God can *never* be given a philosophical demonstration. The reason is that religious belief is grounded on religious feelings and not on philosophical arguments. Explaining this point James writes: ‘What religion reports, you must remember, always purports to be a fact of experience: the divine is actually present, religion says, and between it and ourselves relations of give and take are actual.’²⁵

Furthermore, the notion that belief in God is grounded in religious feelings goes some way to explaining why there has been a history of failed philosophical proofs for the existence of God. James contends that the reason that proofs for the existence of God have been and continue to be formulated and discussed is that such proofs are inspired by the same religious experiences and feelings that actually do ground faith. He writes:

‘I believe, in fact, that the logical reason of man operates in this field of divinity exactly as it has always operated in love, or in patriotism, or in politics, or in any other of the wider affairs of life, in which our passions or our mystical intuitions fix our beliefs beforehand. It finds arguments for our conviction, for indeed it *has* to find them. It

²⁵ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 454.

amplifies and defines our faith, and dignifies it and lends it words and plausibility. It hardly ever engenders it; it cannot now secure it.’²⁶

For James, the fact that philosophers have been motivated by ‘subjective facts’ does not imply that their proofs are convincing. On the contrary, since our religious convictions are founded on ‘subjective facts’, it is a mistake to think that they can or should be founded on such proofs. To return to the passage from James quoted in the introduction, we can say that proofs for the existence of God are translations of religious experiences, and the convictions they engender, into the conceptual vocabulary used by philosophers. And because proofs for the existence of God merely translate the convictions we already have, they do not *prove* anything.

‘The fact is that these arguments do but follow the combined suggestions of the facts and of our feeling. They prove nothing rigorously. They only corroborate our pre-existent partialities.’²⁷

It is for this reason that James is able to dismiss not only the doctrines of dogmatic theology, but also the modern idealism of Caird. According to James, for all his philosophical ingenuity, Caird still fails to prove the existence of God and has merely elaborated on the suggestion of religious feelings: ‘he [Caird] has simply reaffirmed the individual’s experiences in a more generalized vocabulary.’²⁸ So, although the fact that people have religious feelings and experiences to some extent explains why proofs for the existence of God are still formulated and discussed, it also shows why those formulations and discussions are inappropriate. For they misleadingly draw our attention away from the real source of our convictions; namely our religious feelings and experiences.

We have seen, then, that James’s claim that religious belief is based on feeling is central to his argument. It allows James to make the claim that it is never possible to give a philosophical demonstration of the existence of God. And it also provides the basis of an explanation for the past and continued formulation of these proofs. But although James’s claim that religious belief is based on religious feelings solves some

²⁶ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 436.

²⁷ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 439.

²⁸ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 453.

difficulties with his argument, it also creates a further problem. In particular it is not clear how we are to understand James's 'practical test' in the light of this claim. For if James means to claim that it is *never* possible to give a philosophical demonstration of the existence of God because religious belief is rooted in religious feelings, then his 'practical test' is unnecessary. That is to say that if it can be shown that belief in God *can never* be grounded in argument then it is besides the point to conduct a test to see whether as a matter of fact it has been grounded in argument. Alternatively, we might take it that James's argument does hinge on his 'practical test'. Looked at in this way James is only claiming that as a matter of historical fact religious belief is based on feeling and not on argument. As we have seen, however, James is also committed to the claim that philosophers can never prove the existence of God. Accordingly he is guilty of drawing a philosophical conclusion – that it is not possible to prove the existence of God - from an historical inference – that it has not yet been done.

2.2) James and Science of Religions

As I noted above, James does not hold the view that philosophy has no role to play in furthering our understanding of religious belief. On the contrary, James views *Varieties* as a contribution to a philosophical 'Science of Religions.' 'We have the beginnings of a 'Science of Religions,' so-called; and if these lectures could ever be accounted a crumb-like contribution to such a science, I should be very happy.'²⁹ James argues that the Science of Religions can perform two tasks. Firstly, it can provide a conceptual vocabulary by means of which it is possible to communicate and discuss the private religious experiences upon which religious belief is grounded. The second task of the Science of Religions is to evaluate whether particular religious beliefs are true or false. James describes these two tasks in the following way:

'We are thinking beings, and we cannot exclude the intellect from participating in any of our functions. Even in soliloquising with ourselves, we construe our feelings intellectually. Both our personal ideals and our religious and mystical experiences must be interpreted congruously with the kind of scenery which our thinking mind inhabits. The philosophic climate of our time inevitably forces its own clothing on us. Moreover, we must exchange our feelings with one another, and in so doing we have to speak, and

²⁹ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 433.

to use general and abstract verbal formulas. Conceptions and constructions are thus a necessary part for our religion; and as moderator amid the clash of hypotheses, and mediator among the criticisms of one man's constructions by another, philosophy will always have much to do.'³⁰

It is clear from this that James thinks that the conceptual expression of religious sentiments is inevitable. That is to say that if we are to converse about our religious feelings – even with ourselves – then we *must* employ concepts to do so. And the business of the Science of Religions is to adjudicate between the different conceptual arguments that are based on different religious feelings.

James makes it clear that the evaluative work of the Science of Religions should be modelled on the critical procedures of the empirical sciences. Philosophy must 'abandon metaphysics and deduction for criticism and induction.'³¹ Furthermore, the point of subjecting religious claims to the examination of empirical science is to discredit those religious claims that do not have a scientific basis: 'By confronting the spontaneous religious constructions with the results of natural science, philosophy can also eliminate doctrines that are now known to be scientifically absurd or incongruous.'³² By clearing the field of claims that are scientifically ungrounded, the Science of Religions leaves us only with religious claims that are *possibly* true and which can be tested by means of further scientific operations.

'Sifting out in this way unworthy formulations, she can leave a residuum of conceptions that at least are possible. With these she can deal as *hypotheses*, testing them in all the manners, whether negative or positive, by which hypotheses are ever tested.'³³

Once the Science of Religions has investigated all reasonable looking religious hypotheses, it can identify and lend support to the *most* reasonable looking religious hypothesis:

³⁰ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 432.

³¹ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 455.

³² *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 455.

³³ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 455-6.

‘She [the Science of Religions] can perhaps become the champion of one which she picks out as the most closely verified or verifiable. She can refine upon the definition of this hypothesis, distinguishing between what is innocent over-belief and symbolism in the expression of it and what is to be literally taken. As a result, she can offer mediation between different believers, and help to bring about consensus of opinion. She can do this more successfully, the better she discriminates the common and essential from the individual and local elements of the religious beliefs which she compares.’³⁴

But if the point of the Science of Religions is to elucidate what is ‘common and essential’ in various religious beliefs, it is nonetheless the ‘individual and local elements’ of religious beliefs that secure conviction. For although the Science of Religions can establish which religious beliefs are plausible hypotheses, only personal religious feelings can tell us which religious beliefs are true. ‘In the religious sphere, in particular, belief that formulas are true can never wholly take the place of personal experience.’³⁵ Philosophical concepts may allow us to discuss our religious feelings, but by enabling this discussion they also take us away from the private immediacy of sentiment by which religious conviction is achieved. As James puts it:

‘Philosophy lives in words, but truth and fact well up into our lives in ways that exceed verbal formulation. There is in the living act of perception always something that glimmers and twinkles and will not be caught, and for which reflection comes too late.’³⁶

3) Climacus on Proofs for the existence of God

In *Fragments* Climacus makes two kinds of comments with regard to formal proofs.³⁷ The first kind is comments relating to philosophical proofs for the existence of people and things. The second kind is comments relating to philosophical proofs for the existence of God. These two streams of thought can be traced back to a distinction that

³⁴ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 456.

³⁵ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 457.

³⁶ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 456-7.

³⁷ My account of Climacus’ position draws on the work of John H. Whittaker and Genia Schönbaumsfeld. Whittaker, J. H. (1979) “Kierkegaard on Names, Concepts and Proofs for the existence of God,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 10, no. 1-3: 117-129. Schönbaumsfeld, G. (2007) *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Climacus makes – rather abruptly – between proving the existence of something that can be named and proving the existence of a concept. When Climacus opens his discussion of philosophical proofs he posits the existence of an ‘unknown’ and asks himself if it is possible to demonstrate the existence of such a thing. In the early part of his discussion Climacus refers to the unknown as ‘the god’, adding that this is ‘only a name we give to it.’³⁸ But in the discussion that immediately follows, Climacus does not discuss the existence of things that are *completely* unknown. On the contrary, his discussion relates to the existence of things – such as stones – and people – such as Napoleon. Here, then, Climacus seems to allow the arbitrary name ‘the god’ to stand for any noun or proper name. But a short way into his argument Climacus makes what appears to be a startling reversal, asserting that, ‘God is not a name but a concept.’³⁹ So having used ‘the god’ to stand for any noun or proper name, Climacus then asserts that ‘the god’ is not a name at all. And having asserted this Climacus directs his thoughts to the business of proving the existence of ‘the god’ where ‘the god’ is understood as a concept. But although, as I have noted, Climacus changes rather abruptly from discussing ‘the god’ taken as any noun or proper name to discussing ‘the god’ taken as a concept, I don’t think this change itself is an oversight. In fact Climacus contrasts these two kinds of discussion in order to make his case. The best way to appreciate this is to start by looking at Climacus’ remarks on the existence of people and things before turning to his remarks on the existence of God.

3.1) Climacus on the Existence of People and Things

Climacus is firmly opposed to the view that we can demonstrate the existence of people and things. On the face of it this is a troubling and counter-intuitive position. After all we do commonly infer the existence of things from relevant evidence. It hardly seems unreasonable, for example, to claim that the terrible state of my lettuce proves the existence of slugs. Similarly, catching sight of some rare animal – a river dolphin, for example - surely demonstrates that the species still exists and that it is not extinct. It is important to note, however, that nothing that Climacus says indicates that he would oppose this kind of talk. He does not cast doubt on the notion that it makes sense to look for evidence of slugs or of river dolphins or indeed anything else where relevant

³⁸ *Fragments*, op. cit., 39.

³⁹ *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 41.

evidence could in principle be found. However, Climacus does object to the idea that this kind of enquiry actually *demonstrates* existence. And the reason for this is that the enquiry must presuppose that its object does exist. Climacus makes this claim in the following way.

‘The whole process of demonstration continually becomes something entirely different, becomes an expanded concluding development of what I conclude from having presupposed that the object of investigation exists. Therefore, whether I am moving in the world of sensate palpability or in the world of thought, I never reason in conclusion to existence, but I reason in conclusion from existence. For example I do not demonstrate that a stone exists, but that what exists is a stone.’⁴⁰

In order to get to grips with Climacus’ position let us stay for a moment with the examples of slugs and river dolphins. If I survey my lettuce for signs of slug damage then what is in doubt is not whether slugs exist per se, but whether they happen to be in my garden. And in a similar vein if I go looking for river dolphins I don’t doubt at all that they have existed, but only seek to ascertain whether there are any left. In these cases, then, there is an important sense in which existence of what we are looking for – slugs and river dolphins – is never in doubt. And because the existence of these things is never in doubt it is therefore the case that their existence is never demonstrated. It is true that these enquiries do show something; namely whether slugs reside in my garden and whether river dolphins are extinct. And we can if we wish express these results by saying that slugs do or do not exist in my garden and that river dolphins do or do not continue to exist at all. But although it makes perfect sense to talk in this way, we still cannot draw the conclusion that we have *demonstrated* existence, or indeed non-existence. For, as we have seen, the enquiries that underpin these conclusions must presuppose the existence of slugs and dolphins. And by definition one cannot demonstrate what one presupposes.

This argument is perhaps more difficult to appreciate in the case of a potentially extinct animal than in the case of slugs. Suppose, for example, that we could show that there are no living river dolphins. This surely entitles us to claim that river dolphins do not exist. And, furthermore, we did not presuppose this. In fact we presupposed the

⁴⁰ *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 40.

opposite – namely that river dolphins do exist – otherwise we would not have bothered looking for them. And since we did not presuppose what we concluded, it seems that we have been able to demonstrate the non-existence of river dolphins. But, of course, what we mean by this is that river dolphins no longer exist. And it only makes sense to say that river dolphins no longer exist if we accept that at some point they did exist. However, at no point in our enquiry did we prove that dolphins have existed. We presupposed that dolphins have existed in order to enquire whether they continue to do so.

Somebody may object that things would be different if we did come across a river dolphin. If a river dolphin swam alongside my boat then I would know that they exist and would not have to presuppose this fact, and nor would I need to look for evidence from which to infer their existence. Similarly, if I caught a slug on my lettuce I wouldn't have to presuppose that slugs exist, and I wouldn't have to infer their presence in my garden. I'd simply know that slugs exist and that they do so in my garden. However, Climacus does not think that things are so straightforward. This is indicated by his remark that, 'I do not demonstrate that a stone exists, but that what exists is a stone.'⁴¹ Stones, like slugs, are things that we come across quite regularly. So it is clear that Climacus does not think that simply because we have come across some empirical object this implies that we have demonstrated that it exists. Simply coming across something, for example by seeing it, or by picking it up, does not *demonstrate* anything about the existence of what I see or pick up. That is to say that the business of looking at something does not describe a philosophical trajectory from a premise about what we see to a conclusion about the existence of what we see. I can of course demonstrate my ability to see things and to pick them up, for example by taking an eye test or by carrying a hod. But there is nothing about reading an eye chart that formally proves that eye charts exist and there is nothing about lugging bricks that formally proves they exist either.

Naturally we can reflect upon the business of seeing a stone, say, or picking it up. And somebody may argue that by reflecting on those actions we can infer that the stone I saw and picked up must exist. Here, I take it the argument would be that sense-experience alone cannot demonstrate anything because it is immediate and not reflective. But by bringing reflection to bear on immediate sense-experience we can

⁴¹ *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 40.

order it in such a way that it demonstrates the existence of whatever it was that we experienced. This argument seems particularly promising because if it is the case that sense-experience is purely immediate it cannot, as it were, smuggle in any presuppositions about the existence of the things we encounter. We either immediately experience things or we do not, but either way we do not presuppose anything about existence.

However, the argument that we experience something and subsequently reflect on that experience in order to establish whether the thing we experienced exists is not compelling. In order to ask myself ‘does the stone in my hand exist?’ I must already know what a stone is. And the criteria that are relevant to claiming that the stone exists or does not exist are drawn from our extant understanding of what stones are. In other words part of what it means to know *what* stones are is to understand the contexts in which it makes sense to say *that* they are. For example if somebody were to ask what a stone is we might point to an example of a stone, or tell them to look for them at the base of a cliff or describe the geological processes in which stones are made. But, importantly, pointing to an example of a stone, indicating where stones are found and how they are made are all contexts in which it makes sense to say that stones exist. When we elucidate our understanding of what stones are, then, we also elucidate the contexts in which it makes sense to claim that stones exist. Furthermore these are not *arbitrary* ways of talking about the existence of stones. If we said that ‘stones are formed by music’ this would make no sense, except perhaps in the context of an excruciating pun about ‘rock n roll’ or the Rolling Stones. However, even these puns would only come off if we already understood what it *does* make sense to say about the formation of stones. And if we already understand the contexts in which it makes sense to claim that stones exist then we do not entertain any *general* doubt about the existence of stones. Consequently the issue I am faced with is not whether stones in general do or do not exist but whether what I have in my hand is a stone. This is also captured in Climacus’ remark that, ‘I do not demonstrate that a stone exists, but that what exists is a stone.’⁴² When I grasp and examine the stone in my hand I do not first gather some sensations and then reflect on whether those sensations indicate that the stone exists. I don’t make any inferences from sense experience – for example by experiencing reaching-for-the-stone and then reflecting a bit on that and then experiencing closing-

⁴² *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 40.

my-fingers-on-the-stone and then reflecting a bit on that. Rather, when I take a stone in my hand I already understand that this is a context in which it makes sense to say that the stone exists.

The difficulty I have been discussing, then, is that by identifying what it is that we wish to prove exists we also identify the senses in which it does exist. Consequently we presuppose what we want to prove, namely the existence of the thing in question. But suppose we did not start out by identifying what it is that we wish to prove exists. For example we might take Climacus at his word when, near the beginning of his discussion, he posits ‘the god’ that is ‘not a human being insofar as he knows man, or anything else he knows.’⁴³ Here Climacus seems to be saying that ‘the god’, whom he posits, is completely mysterious to us. The god is, so to speak, of another, wholly unimaginable, world. Since we do not know anything about ‘the god’ we cannot say what ‘it’ is. And because we cannot say what the god is we cannot know the contexts in which it makes sense to say that ‘it’ exists or that ‘it’ does not exist. Consequently not knowing what ‘it’ is that we are dealing with brings with it the advantage that we do not presuppose that ‘it’ exists. And since we do not presuppose that ‘it’ exists we thereby afford ourselves the opportunity to demonstrate whether or not ‘it’ does exist.

Once again, however, things are not so straightforward. In order to formulate our demonstration we must start by declaring that ‘something’ – we do not say what – may or may not exist – we do not say which. But if we do not say *what* it is we are dealing with we cannot have any way of determining whether or not ‘it’ exists. We couldn’t know what must be the case if ‘it’ does exist or if ‘it’ does not exist. As a result we couldn’t know what we need to establish in order to show that ‘it’ does or does not exist. Furthermore, even if we were undeterred by this problem and wrote a proof anyway, we could never know whether our proof is successful. For if we cannot know what we must establish then we cannot make any judgement about whether we have been successful in establishing it. Trying to prove the existence of ‘something’ without presupposing anything is doubly senseless, then. We simply won’t know what to say or how to judge what we do say. And this is the case whether we choose to compose an empirical proof or a purely formal proof. For since we cannot know what it is that needs to be shown then we cannot know which of these two kinds of proofs is relevant or judge how successful they are.

⁴³ *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 39.

In the foregoing I have looked at Climacus' arguments about proofs for the existence of various kinds of things but not at his arguments about proofs for the existence of people. In fact Climacus' opening remarks about proving the existence of people are largely of a piece with his remarks on proving the existence of things. In order to demonstrate that some person exists, we must presuppose that he or she does exist. Climacus makes this point in a discussion of Napoleon.

'If one wanted to demonstrate Napoleon's existence from Napoleon's works, would it not be most curious, since his existence certainly explains the works but the works do not demonstrate *his* existence unless I have already in advance interpreted the word "his" in such a way as to have assumed that he exists.'⁴⁴

However, Climacus also voices a different criticism of the notion that it is possible to demonstrate the existence of Napoleon from Napoleon's works. Climacus notes, 'But Napoleon is only an individual, and to that extent there is no absolute relation between him and his works – thus someone else could have done the same works.'⁴⁵ Here Climacus seems to imply that although it is certain that *somebody* executed Napoleon's works – for example by commanding the French army – in principle we can never be sure whether we have identified the correct person as Napoleon. Understood in this way Climacus' point is rather weak. After all there simply isn't any significant scholarly doubt about the identity of Napoleon. Similarly, if I catch a slug munching on my lettuce there really is no room to doubt which slug is the guilty party. In order to doubt either that we have identified the correct man as Napoleon or the correct slug as the lettuce loving gourmet we should need to posit eccentric theoretical possibilities. For example we might assert that it is always possible that the man who we think of as Napoleon was in fact an impostor. Or, even more fancifully, we might say that it is always possible that, although it is not recognised, pairs of slugs can swap places instantaneously. But in order to take these proposals seriously we should first need to overturn large areas of existing scholarship. Indeed it wouldn't make sense even to look for evidence that slugs simultaneously swap positions unless we first abandoned our whole way of looking at animal biology. So although it is theoretically

⁴⁴ *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁵ *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 40.

possible that we have the wrong Napoleon or the wrong slug these are not well founded possibilities. I do not doubt that the identities of some historical people and animals are hard to pin down. But in the cases of Napoleon and my slugs it seems ridiculous to suppose that we have made a mistake.

It is for this reason that Climacus' remark is perhaps best understood in another way. In fact the point of Climacus' observation that somebody else could have done Napoleon's works seems to be to facilitate an important contrast between people and God. For while it is true that in principle another person could have executed Napoleon's works, the same is not true of God and his works. As Climacus puts it, 'However, between the god and his works there is an absolute relation.'⁴⁶ That is to say that it wouldn't make sense to claim that somebody or some other spiritual entity could substitute for God in the execution of his works. And this difference between people and God is a point of principle. We have seen that it is always possible to doubt whether we have identified the correct Napoleon, even if, pragmatically, such doubt seems exaggerated and inappropriate. But in relation to God there is, as it were, no room *at all* for such doubt. It is not merely *unlikely* that God did not perform God's works, it is perfectly *impossible*.

And it is in view of this distinction between Napoleon and God that Climacus goes on to posit a further, more general distinction between names and concepts. 'Napoleon' is of course a name. And it is not possible to infer anything about the relationship between a person and his works simply from the fact that he is called 'Napoleon'. We might say that the name 'Napoleon' does not convey anything about the logical relations between the man that bears the name and the works that he does. And nor does it tell us what the man is like, whether he is kind or is given to vituperative outbursts and so on. In order to discover how the man relates to his works and what he is like we should have to look at the man himself and not at his name. However, this is not the case with God. The concept God does tell us about what God is like and about his relation to his works. That is to say that when we use the concept God certain things follow about what God is like that do not follow when we use the name Napoleon. For example, a man named Napoleon may or may not be gracious, but God

⁴⁶ *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 41.

simply is gracious, and eminently so. Climacus expresses this difference by saying that ‘God is not a name but a concept [...]’⁴⁷

This has far-reaching implications, one of which is that if we are to understand what God is like we need to attend to the concept of God. That is to say that we need to understand how this concept relates to other concepts, in what contexts it makes sense to use it, and how it is used in those contexts. Climacus appeals to such an understanding when he points out that only God can do God’s works. To claim that somebody else could do God’s works just as somebody else could do Napoleon’s works is to misunderstand the concept ‘God.’ And, just as I noted above that we are not free to talk in arbitrary ways about stones, so too we are not free to talk in arbitrary ways about God. If we could say *anything* at all about God then, of course, there is an important sense in which we wouldn’t have a concept of God. All we would have is a cacophony of unrelated expressions featuring the word God. Furthermore, if we had no concept of God, and were free to use the word God however we wish, then it would not be possible to use it incorrectly. But clearly it *is* possible to make blunders when we talk about God. Consider, for example, the following letter penned by a young girl.

Dear God,
Are you real?
Some people
don’t not believe
it. If you are you
better do something
quick. Harriet Ann⁴⁸

The reason that this is funny, or at the very least peculiar, is that it shows a misunderstanding of what is meant by the word ‘God’. Anybody who does understand the concept of God would hardly be letting God know what people think of him, or offering him advice. The concept of God, then, is not up for grabs. And it is with this in mind that Climacus discusses proofs for the existence of God, to which I will now turn.

⁴⁷ *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁸ Marshall, E., Hample, S. (1967) *Children’s Letters To God*, London: Collins. No pagination.

3.2) Climacus on Proofs for the existence of God

Climacus opens his case by considering whether it is possible to demonstrate the existence of God from God's works. Attempting a demonstration on this basis seems like a particularly promising strategy in view of Climacus' earlier claim that only God can do God's works. For this would seem to imply that we have only to identify God's works in order to demonstrate that God exists. After all, if they are God's works then by definition they could not have been the works of somebody or something else. If God's works exist then so must God. However, once again, Climacus does not think things are so straightforward.

'God's works, therefore, only the god can do. Quite correct. But, then, what are the god's works?' [...] Do we not encounter the most terrible spiritual trials here, and is it ever possible to be finished with all these trials?'⁴⁹

The works of God are not something that can be observed in the same way that weather patterns or prices can be observed. No meteorologist would dispute that a warm front is exactly that, and no stockbroker would argue that the figures in the *Financial Times* show anything other than the trade value of stock. But whether one sees a weather system or a financial crash as a work of God is a completely different matter. No doubt people will reach different views. And no doubt people will change their views. For it is one thing to see the world as God's work when the sun is shining and money is easy to come by, but it is quite another thing when natural disasters strike and poverty hits home. I take it that this is why Climacus says that looking for God's works is a spiritual trial. It is a test of faith to see the hand of God in what is abhorrent as well as what is fine. And, as Climacus points out, this test is never completed. For one's faith will *always* have to face the challenge of accommodating whatever abhorrent events tomorrow brings. And for this reason, as Climacus also points out, I could never finally conclude from an examination of God's works that God exists. 'But I still do not demonstrate God's existence from such an order of things, and even if I began, I would

⁴⁹ *Fragments*, op. cit., 42.

never finish and also would be obliged continually to live *in suspenso* lest something so terrible happen that my fragment of demonstration would be ruined.’⁵⁰

But suppose somebody were to bypass this kind of spiritual trial by simply declaring that whatever happens, whether pleasing or abhorrent, is all down to the hand of God. If everything that happens in the world is an act of God, and only God can do God’s works, this surely would demonstrate that God exists. Here again, however, Climacus sees important difficulties. To claim that everything that happens in the world must be the work of God is not to judge the unfolding events of the world as they occur. It is to prejudge all possible events so as to determine in advance that they are the works of God. In other words the works are, as Climacus puts it, ‘regarded ideally.’⁵¹ However, once this step has been taken it is no longer possible to prove the existence of God from God’s works. For in order to prejudge all the events in the world as works of God I must first presuppose that God exists. And if I start by presupposing that God exists I cannot demonstrate that God exists. As Climacus explains:

‘But then I do not demonstrate it [the existence of the god] from the works, after all, but only develop the ideality I have presupposed; trusting in *that*, I even dare to defy all objections, even those that have not yet arisen. By beginning, then, I have presupposed the ideality, have presupposed that I will succeed in accomplishing it, but what else is that but presupposing that the god exists and actually beginning with trust in him.’⁵²

Simply elucidating the concept of God’s works, then, will not demonstrate that God exists. However, Climacus does not draw from this the conclusion that there is no point in elucidating the concept of God at all. In fact Climacus holds that elucidating the concept of God helps us to deepen our understanding of why it is not possible to demonstrate that God exists. In this regard one important aspect of the concept of God is precisely that it is a concept. As we have seen, Climacus distinguishes strongly between concepts and names. Climacus thinks of names as appellations that we attach to people and things. Consequently the fact that God is not a name implies that God is neither a person nor a thing. And if it is the case that God is neither a person nor a thing it follows that none of the techniques that we have for demonstrating the existence of

⁵⁰ *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 42.

⁵¹ *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 42.

⁵² *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 42.

people and things are relevant to demonstrating the existence of God. So while I might reasonably look for slugs in my garden, or for river dolphins in the Yangtze River, or for evidence of the birth of Napoleon in historical records, it wouldn't be reasonable to conduct similar kinds of survey for God.

This is a difficult point because, of course, the Christian faith is bound up with some quite specific historical claims. For example it is not possible to be a Christian if one does not believe that Jesus was born, was crucified and rose from the dead. And since these are historical claims it is difficult to see what is objectionable about trying to demonstrate that they did or did not take place. After all nobody would object to the notion that we could in principle look for evidence that the two men crucified with Christ actually were born and were executed. Why should it be any different with Christ? Why cannot we look for evidence that he existed just as we might look for evidence that Napoleon existed?

In response to this we should remind ourselves that, for the reasons we have discussed above, Climacus does not think that it is *ever* possible to demonstrate the existence of people or things. So although we could look for evidence to support the claim that the two men crucified with Christ were indeed born and executed, this would not amount to demonstrating that they existed. Furthermore, this is not because of the long historical perspective involved. It is because, as Climacus never tires of pointing out, if we are to look for evidence of their existence we must presuppose that they did exist. Moreover, since, as we have seen, Climacus does not allow that we can prove existence from sense-data the situation would not change if we were present at the time of the crucifixions. If we witnessed the crucifixions we could not thereby demonstrate to ourselves or to anybody else the existence of the men, or the stones they trod on, or the clothes they wore, or the crosses that they died on. And with this in mind it is no longer exceptional to claim that it is not possible to demonstrate the existence of Christ. If we regard Christ as an historical figure then we should not expect to be able to demonstrate his existence simply because this can never be done in relation to *any* historical figure.

But, of course, in another respect Christ *qua* Christ is absolutely different to the men who accompanied him to the cross. And here we are returned to Climacus' distinction between names and concepts. Christ is a concept and consequently, as I noted above, it won't do to look for evidence of the existence of Christ in the same way

that I might look for evidence of slugs in my garden or of river dolphins in rivers. But we can develop this case if we go beyond simply observing that Christ is a concept and elucidate the concept itself. As we saw in the previous chapter Climacus argues that Christ is a paradoxical concept. Christ is God and therefore is eternal. But Christ is also a man and therefore is finite. To be knowledgeable about Christ, then, one would have to understand ‘something’ that is simultaneously temporal and eternal. And this, as Climacus often says, is absurd. Consequently, there is an important sense in which it is not possible to have knowledge of Christ. Climacus explains this point in the following way:

‘It is easy to see, then (if, incidentally, the implications of discharging the understanding need to be pointed out), that faith is not a knowledge, for all knowledge is either knowledge of the eternal, which excludes the temporal and the historical as inconsequential, or it is purely historical knowledge, and no knowledge can have as its object this absurdity that the eternal is the historical.’⁵³

But if it is not possible to have knowledge of Christ in the sense that Climacus sets out, then we cannot expect to objectively know whether or not Christ exists. Or to put this in another way, it makes no sense to set about objectively proving whether Christ exists when Christ cannot be known in a way that is relevant to such an investigation.

This last point is easily misunderstood because, of course, Christians do claim to know Christ. Consequently it appears that Climacus’ argument flatly contradicts a basic Christian claim. But Climacus doesn’t deny that there is *any* sense in which Christ is known to people. What he denies is that a disinterested enquiry into Christ can lead to knowledge about whether or not he exists, or tell us about the nature of Christ. For when one disinterestedly surveys the concept of Christ all one can say is that he is, absurdly, both finite and infinite. However, there is, of course, a quite different sense in which one might come to know Christ, and that is in the context of having faith in him. Here ‘knowing’ Christ comes to something completely different. For, as Climacus points out in the passage I have just quoted, faith is not a form of knowledge. To know Christ in the context of faith, then, is not to become more knowledgeable about him – for example by developing improved theories about his nature, or his actions or his

⁵³ *Fragments*, *ibid.*, 62.

origins, say. Rather, to know Christ, in the context of faith, is to conduct a relationship with him. To know Christ in this sense involves acknowledging him as God, worshipping him, being obedient towards him, and so on.

And here we are reminded of the importance of Climacus' observation that Christ is a concept and not a name. For it is only by understanding the Christian concept of God that we can appreciate how it is that activities such as acknowledging God and worshipping him are connected to claims about his existence. For understanding the concept of God means understanding that activities such as acknowledging God and worshipping him are contexts in which it makes sense to say that God exists.

4) Critical Comparison of Climacus and James

From the foregoing discussion it is evident that Climacus and James make very different arguments. But in spite of these differences it is possible to identify three strands of common interest. Firstly, both Climacus and James argue that God is a concept. Secondly, both Climacus and James argue that it is not possible to demonstrate the existence of God simply by reflecting on the concept 'God.' Finally, and as I noted in my preliminary discussion, both Climacus and James argue that religious belief is grounded in personal conviction and not in philosophical proofs for the existence of God. In this section I shall critically compare the arguments of Climacus and James in each of these three areas.

4.1) God as a Concept

Both Climacus and James hold that God is a concept, but they mean very different things by this. James argues that the concept God and its attendant theological terms are, as it were, necessary evils born out of the need to communicate our religious sentiments. Such concepts allow us to discuss religious beliefs, evaluate them, form creeds and so on. However, they also fail to capture what 'glimmers and twinkles' in the 'living act of perception' in which we encounter God.⁵⁴ As James puts it, with regard to the experience of the divine, 'reflection comes too late.'⁵⁵ In contrast to James, nothing that Climacus says indicates that he thinks that the concept of God fails to capture the 'living act of perception' in the way that James does. That is not to say that Climacus

⁵⁴ *Varieties*, op. cit., 456.

⁵⁵ *Varieties*, ibid., 456-7.

thinks that in order to be a Christian one need only understand the concept of God. Such an understanding could be had by way of a disinterested survey of the concept. But on the contrary, Climacus insists that if one is to be a Christian one must have an interested relation to the concept God. If one is to be a Christian then one's understanding of God must be shown appropriately in one's life. The key difference between Kierkegaard and James, then, is that where James opposes religious concepts to religious sentiment, Climacus places an understanding of religious concepts at the heart of religious life. To put this differently, where James thinks that the real business of religious life is the pre-conceptual experience of religious sentiments, Climacus thinks that the business of a religious life is to articulate one's understanding of religious concepts by one's manner of living.

The difficulty with James's position is that it isn't clear how we could know that the sentiments we experience are religious sentiments. For if, as James holds, reflection comes 'too late' to capture the immediacy of experience, then it is not clear why we should call any particular experiences 'religious'. Moreover, this problem cannot be solved by the creation of a better conceptual vocabulary. For concepts *always* fail to grasp the 'glimmer and twinkle' of experience. Climacus does not face this difficulty precisely because he thinks that, so to speak, the boot is on the other foot. Climacus' position is not that concepts fail to grasp religious experience, but rather that if one is a Christian then one understands experience through religious concepts. In other words, for Climacus, sentiments and experiences can be said to be religious insofar as they are understood in relation to religious concepts. And, as I noted above, this means seeing the hand of God in what is abhorrent as well as what is fine. However, maintaining one's faith in the light of all that is abhorrent in the world is a quite different problem to the one faced by James. To struggle over one's faith is to struggle to apply religious concepts to one's experiences. But James holds that religious concepts *never* do quite apply to religious experiences, thereby making us wonder how those experiences can be known to be religious?

4.2) Concepts and Proofs

As we have seen, James does not examine in any detail arguments for the existence of God. And this seems to be because he considers such an examination unnecessary in view of the fact that religious conviction is born out of religious experience, not

philosophy. Climacus, on the other hand, unpacks the concept of God so as to show that it doesn't make sense to attempt a disinterested proof of existence. That is to say that Climacus draws our attention to the fact that God is a paradoxical concept and not a person or a 'thing', in order to disabuse us of the notion that we might try to prove the existence of God in the same way that we might try to prove the existence of people and things.

The advantage of Climacus' position is that it is built on a consideration of the logic of religious claims. That is to say that Climacus holds that it follows from a consideration of the claim 'Christ exists' that this cannot be shown by means of a disinterested enquiry. James's case, however, rests on the psychological observation that as a matter of fact people are not moved to faith by formal arguments for the existence of God. The problem with this argument is that it is contingent upon the range of James's observations. Somebody may come along who *does* claim to base his or her religious beliefs on a formal proof for the existence of God. Such a person would confound James's view that as a matter of fact people do not make this claim. But such a person would not confound Climacus' views. Climacus accepts that many people claim that faith is based on proof of God's existence. His response is to elucidate the concept of God in such a way that such claims are shown to be confused or mistaken.

4.3) Proofs and Personal Conviction

In my preliminary discussion I noted that Climacus and James appear to make similar cases because they both claim that religious belief is grounded in personal conviction, not formal proof. I also claimed that this apparent similarity is not profound. And, in view of the preceding two sections we are now in a better position to see why. James's claim that religious faith rests on personal conviction is bound up with his complaint that concepts never quite capture experience. Since concepts never quite capture religious experiences they can never persuade us into religious belief. For Climacus, however, things are very different. Climacus argues that it only makes sense to assert that God exists in the context of a personal faith in God. Or to put this in another way, by elucidating the concept of God Climacus shows that it is literally senseless to make the assertion that God exists – or that God does not exist – from the point of view of a disinterested enquiry.

That advantage of Climacus' position is that it ties together the logic of religious claims with the notion that faith rests in personal conviction. James, on the other hand, seems only to make the point that as a matter of fact it is personal conviction that does carry the day. But this *observation* about what is generally the case leaves the central philosophical question unanswered – why *shouldn't* faith be based on proofs for the existence of God?

I have argued, then, that Climacus makes a better argument than James regarding why it is that faith cannot be grounded on proofs for the existence of God. In what follows I shall argue that Climacus' case also constitutes a powerful criticism of James's view that faith can be based on feeling.

5) Religious Feelings as Grounds for Religious Belief

Climacus dismisses both logical and empirical proofs for the existence of God. James certainly dismisses logical proofs; but nonetheless admits that certain feelings can ground a religious conviction for the person who experiences them. Climacus would, I think, have rightly objected to James's view. In this section, then, I shall press home what I take to be Climacus' objection to James's appeal to religious feelings. But I shall first discuss a defence of James's views advocated by Ellen Kappy Suckiel.

5.1) Suckiel on James and Religious Feelings

As I have noted, James is committed to the claim that feeling is the 'deeper source' of religious belief. According to this view religious feelings are not simply an accompaniment to a religious belief, as they would be for somebody who always felt a certain way whenever he or she thought about God. And, furthermore, the kinds of religious feelings that James has in mind are not caused by a religious belief. On the contrary, James's argument is that people experience religious feelings that move them to believe in God. As Suckiel explains:

'But James is not interested in providing only a set of psychological observations about what religious feelings may be like as subjective states, or what their practical, moral, or aesthetic benefits may be. For he believes that states of mind such as "religious rapture,"

“ontological wonder,” or “cosmic emotion” may also be deeply significant cognitively - they may be a means by which the subject recognizes genuine religious truths.’⁵⁶

In addition, Suckiel points out that James does not think that cognitive value attaches only to those feelings that seem to disclose the presence of God. Feelings associated with religious needs ‘may have cognitive value as well’.⁵⁷ Moreover, the sense in which both types of feeling can be said to have cognitive value, and the reason that they move people to believe in God, is that they help substantiate the claim that God exists. Accordingly Suckiel notes that for James ‘[...] emotions, and even desires or needs, can provide evidence for claims about the existence of a divine reality [...]’⁵⁸

This undoubtedly is an unusual claim; and for what Suckiel calls ‘scientific rationalists’ it is not only atypical, but it is also particularly hard to swallow. Suckiel speculates that the reason for this is that scientific rationalists place too much faith in the principle of parsimony. In other words, what seems questionable about James’s proposal is that it is unnecessarily speculative. There are, according to this view, simpler explanations for the fact that we have religious feelings than that God exists. And if that is the case it seems that there is little point in giving James’s view an airing. Suckiel counters this objection in two ways. Firstly, she questions the logical force of the principle of parsimony, pointing out that the simplest explanation for something is not necessarily the correct explanation⁵⁹. If the simplicity of an explanation does not guarantee its veracity, then it is unreasonable to exclude James’s proposal on the grounds that it is complex. Secondly, Suckiel argues that the principle of parsimony is not applicable to the question of whether there is a God.

‘I suggest that the mistake of the many philosophers [...] is to think that the point of religion is to provide a list of existing entities, an inventory of the world’s contents, no different in kind, for example, from everyday empirical enumerations of the contents of a room. The difference between religious and secular accounts of the universe, on this view, is that religious accounts (at least theistic ones) include at least one additional

⁵⁶ Suckiel, E.K. (1996) *Heaven’s Champion: William James’s Philosophy of Religion*, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 61. Hereafter *Champion*.

⁵⁷ *Champion*, ibid., 61.

⁵⁸ *Champion*, ibid., 62.

⁵⁹ *Champion*, ibid., 65.

entity (God), and additional actions or judgements (God's) which secular accounts leave out, and which are regarded as unnecessary.'⁶⁰

But, as Suckiel points out, when we ask religious questions we are not 'asking for the leanest and most austere possible inventory of the contents of the world.'⁶¹ On the contrary, 'We are asking for the profoundest possible explanation, to help us understand and appreciate, as deeply as we can, why we are here; what, if anything, life and existence mean; and how we should behave with regard to them.'⁶² To think that Ockham's razor should be applied to religious questions, then, is to misunderstand the kind of questions that are being put.

Having blunted the threat of Ockham's razor, Suckiel sets out three defences of James's proposal. James advanced the first two of these defences. The third defence is an extension of his thinking.

James's first argument is that, as a matter of fact, our feelings do influence the conduct of scientific research and that, by extension, there is nothing inappropriate about allowing our feelings to guide us in religious matters. Suckiel summaries this view in the following way.

'In his first argument, James draws parallels between the most basic feelings and desires which animate both science and religion. He supports religion by suggesting that while its basis is emotional, so also is the basis of science. He argues, moreover, that since scientific judgements built upon that emotional basis have shown themselves to be reliable (in that they have been confirmed), one should not deny the possibility that religious feelings (like wonder or awe) will support judgements equally as successful as scientific ones.'⁶³

James's second argument is that not putting trust in our religious feelings would be both uncomfortable and unduly negative. 'Given the value and deeply natural

⁶⁰ *Champion*, *ibid.*, 67.

⁶¹ *Champion*, *ibid.*, 68.

⁶² *Champion*, *ibid.*, 68.

⁶³ *Champion*, *ibid.*, 70.

character of religious emotions, James claims, it would be disconcerting and self-destructive to hold that such feelings are intrinsically and ineluctably untrustworthy.⁶⁴

Finally, the third defence, proposed by Suckiel but not by James, hinges on showing that not only does trusting our religious feelings save us great deal of discomfort, but there are also independent reasons for thinking that our religious feelings are reliable indicators of the existence of God. Suckiel starts with the observation that as a matter of fact it is quite common for people to experience religious feelings. Furthermore we can and do make judgements about when it is appropriate to have such feelings. And this implies that there are ‘reasonably well agreed-upon criteria for what constitutes an appropriate context for religious and spiritual emotions.’⁶⁵ Suckiel argues that some people – for example people with autism or with ‘frontal lobe damage’ to the brain – cannot experience religious feelings or understand the contexts in which they might be appropriate.⁶⁶ But, in Suckiel’s view, these exceptions prove the norm. She argues that people who cannot experience religious feelings are normally regarded as ‘in some measure limited.’⁶⁷ Conversely, since it is ‘normal’ to be ‘unlimited’ in this regard, this at least implies that there may be some truth to the view that religious feelings should be taken at face value. Summarising her case, Suckiel writes:

‘Of course the fact that religious emotions may be regarded as normal and appropriate does not by itself entail the existence of divine realities. Contrary to James’s critics, however, it does help establish the probability of religious truths. Does not the fact that we can trust other healthy human functions provide presumptive evidential justification for trusting our healthy and appropriate religious feelings as well? Just as we trust that our eyes are fitted to the world (indeed, what it means to have visible property x is for an object to look like x to a person with normal eyesight under normal conditions), why may we not trust that our normal and natural religious intuitions, feelings, and experiences, are evidence for God’s existence? The point of the argument is this: it is irrational to hold, on the one hand that the ability to have religious or spiritual feelings is a healthy, normal capacity, and that the inability to do so is a deficiency; and on the

⁶⁴ *Champion*, *ibid.*, 71.

⁶⁵ *Champion*, *ibid.*, 74.

⁶⁶ *Champion*, *ibid.*, 74.

⁶⁷ *Champion*, *ibid.*, 74.

other hand to hold to a metaphysics and epistemology which categorically invalidates the kinds of claims which these feelings support.’⁶⁸

5.2) Evaluation of Suckiel’s arguments

Before considering what Climacus would make of the foregoing arguments, let us first make some more general comments on them. I don’t see anything objectionable about the view that the simplest explanation for something need not be best explanation. Simplicity doesn’t imply anything about explanatory power. However the three further arguments that Suckiel proposes in support of James are much less attractive. With regard to the first argument it is extremely hard to know what is meant by the claim that emotion ‘is the basis of science’. For what typifies scientific research is disinterested inductive or deductive enquiry, not appeals to sentiment. It may be true that scientists sometimes have ‘hunches’ or ‘feelings’ about which hypothesis will turn out to be correct. However such ‘hunches’ are clearly not the ‘basis of science’. If a scientist chooses to follow a ‘hunch’ then he or she does so by attempting to verify it by means of best scientific practice. Consequently it is the scientific practices of disinterested induction, deduction, verification, falsification and so on, which demonstrate the veracity of the hunch. The hunch does not ground those scientific practices.

James’s second argument is similarly unattractive. The fact that a religious feeling is valuable and deeply held simply does not imply that we can infer from it that God exists. It may well be upsetting to distrust such religious feelings. But, again, the fact that this is upsetting doesn’t imply that we can reliably infer the existence of God from the religious feeling.

The third argument, advanced by Suckiel and not by James, is perhaps the least attractive of the bunch. Suckiel tries to go beyond James’s rather suggestive arguments by showing not only that it is comfortable or normal to trust our religious emotions but also that there are good reasons to do so. In order to do this Suckiel makes two important claims. Firstly, that there are universal criteria by means of which we can judge whether an emotion is a specifically religious emotion. And, secondly, that there are a minority of people who are unable to have feelings that meet those criteria. From these two claims Suckiel infers that because most people have religious feelings this implies that there is some probability that God exists.

⁶⁸ *Champion*, *ibid.*, 75.

I should certainly want a much more detailed account than Suckiel provides if I am to be persuaded that there are *universal* criteria by means of which we can judge whether an emotion is a specifically religious emotion. In view of the vast multiplicity of religious claims Suckiel's assertion looks implausibly weak, and, at any rate, nobody is likely to accept it at face value. And, one would hope, few people are likely to accept at face value Suckiel's assertion that autistic people are 'limited' on the grounds that they have different cognitive abilities to non-autistic people. To call autistic people 'limited' is to make a value judgement about their cognitive abilities in relation to one's own. It is not to report a fact. Consequently Suckiel's reference to autistic people does not show what she intends to show. For all it demonstrates is that some people sometimes make the judgement that autistic people are 'limited'. But to make that judgement doesn't imply anything at all about the veracity of the religious sentiments of non-autistic people. It is clear, then, that neither of Suckiel's two key claims holds water. But, in any case, the inference that she draws from these two claims is equally problematic. For I simply don't see any reason to think that because lots of people have religious feelings it follows that there probably is a God.

5.3) Climacus on Religious Feelings

Climacus' objection to James and to Suckiel is much more profound than the criticisms I have just rehearsed. This is because I have, so to speak, addressed those arguments on their own terms. In other words, I have pointed out where the arguments do not demonstrate what they are supposed to demonstrate. But Climacus would view the *whole business* of grounding religious belief on religious feeling as completely mistaken.

There are, I think, at least three arguments that Climacus would rightly bring to bear on Suckiel's case. The first of these is bound up with the claim that it is not possible to demonstrate existence from sense-data. As we saw above, Climacus' claim is that we cannot demonstrate existence from sense data for two reasons. Firstly, simply receiving a sense impression of something does not come to the same thing as making a philosophical argument. That is to say that the business of looking at something, for example, does not describe a philosophical trajectory from a premise about what we see to a conclusion about the existence of what we see. And this argument can, I think, be applied to the claim that feelings can demonstrate existence. That is not to argue that

having a feeling is the same as looking at something. However, it is to argue that having a feeling does not demonstrate the existence of anything, for the same reason that simply looking at something does not demonstrate the existence of anything. In other words both looking at something and having a feeling are kinds of immediate experience. And because they are immediate experiences they do not constitute philosophical arguments. Of course, somebody may reply that we can reflect upon our immediate experiences and thereby make inferences from them. By reflecting on what we see, or on our feelings, then, we might construct a philosophical demonstration. But, as we saw above, Climacus does not think that this strategy can work. And this brings us to the second reason that Climacus doesn't think that it is possible to demonstrate existence from sense experience. For, as we saw above, if we reflect on our sense experiences in order to demonstrate the existence of something, then we must assume what we wish to demonstrate. In order to ask myself 'does the slug on the lettuce exist?' I must already know what a slug is. And the criteria that are relevant to claiming that the slug exists or does not exist are drawn from our extant understanding of what slugs are. In other words part of what it means to know *what* slugs are is to understand the contexts in which it makes sense to say *that* they are. Consequently, I must presuppose the existence of slugs in order to demonstrate their existence. But, of course, if I presuppose the existence of slugs then I do not demonstrate it. And similarly, in order to ask myself 'does this feeling demonstrate the existence of God' I must already understand the contexts in which it makes sense to claim that God does or does not exist. And this is to presuppose what we wanted to prove: namely that God exists.

This last point is closely related to the second criticism that Climacus would level against Suckiel's argument. Suckiel asserts that there are widely accepted criteria by which we can judge whether a feeling is a religious feeling or not. There are two ways in which we might understand this claim. Firstly, we might take it to mean that there are criteria by which we can tell whether a particular feeling is a feeling that somehow derives from, or is inspired by, God. But this, of course, is to presuppose that God exists. As a result, the occurrence of religious feelings cannot demonstrate the existence of God; for we presupposed the existence of God in order to identify the relevant feelings as specifically religious feelings. Secondly, then, we may take it that Suckiel only means that these criteria are to be understood in cultural or historical terms. In other words her point may be that, as a matter of fact, people have commonly

made similar judgements about what constitutes a religious feeling. But if we take Suckiel's claim in this way, then we must still wonder *what* it is that people are asserting when they assert that certain kinds of feelings are religious feelings. If by that they mean that they are feelings that are somehow caused by God, then we are returned to the difficulty that we saw above. For to claim that a certain feeling is a feeling caused by God is to presuppose that God exists. Of course, people may not be asserting that the occurrence of religious feelings implies the existence of God. But if we take this view then it follows that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated by pointing to examples of religious feelings.

Somebody may point out that Suckiel does not go as far as claiming that the fact that people have religious feelings actually demonstrates the existence of God, but merely gives us some grounds for believing in God. In other words Suckiel is only committed to the claim that the fact that people have religious feelings implies that there is some likelihood that God exists. But, of course, this is still to claim that religious feelings are evidence for the existence of God. And as a result the criticisms of Suckiel's position that I have just rehearsed will still apply. And, furthermore, this brings into view the third criticism of Suckiel's position. For the claim that there is probably a God is an hypothesis. And as an hypothesis it is a claim that will turn out to be objectively true or objectively false. But, of course, Climacus denies that – in the context of Christianity at least – it makes sense to say that it is objectively true *or* that it is objectively false that God exists. As we saw in Chapter 1, and in section 3.2 above, for Climacus faith is a profoundly subjective affair in the sense that all objective reflections on the existence of God are misleading and irrelevant.

6) Conclusion

I started this chapter by discussing why we might think that James and Climacus hold similar views about the possibility of proving the existence of God. Subsequently, I argued that although both Climacus and James reject the notion that it is possible to prove the existence of God, their views are nonetheless importantly dissimilar. I criticised James's arguments against proofs for the existence of God and defended Climacus' rejection of proofs for the existence of God. Furthermore I used Climacus' arguments in order to criticise James's and Suckiel's view that religious belief can be grounded in religious feelings.

Throughout my discussion I have left aside all mention of one important kind of subjective experience which is sometimes taken to prove the existence of God. By that I mean ‘mystical’ experiences. Both Climacus and James have quite a lot to say on this matter and, for that reason, I shall turn to it next.

Chapter 3

Kierkegaard and James on Religious Experience

Introduction

It has often been claimed that God has communicated with a person by means of a voice, or in a vision or in a reverie. For example, in *Genesis* it is said that ‘the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision’.¹ Similarly, Simone Weil reports that whilst she was reciting a poem by George Herbert, ‘Christ himself came down and took possession of me.’² Weil subsequently made a habit of reciting the *Our Father* in Greek; a practice that she associates with further, and more profound encounters with Christ. ‘Sometimes, also, during this recitation or at other moments, Christ is present with me in person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more moving, more clear than on that first occasion when he took possession of me.’³ Many people who live religious lives claim to have had religious visions. But it is also true that many religious people do not claim to have had experiences of this kind. And this leads us naturally to ask whether religious visions can, or indeed should, serve to justify religious beliefs. On the one hand it seems that many people feel perfectly able to carry on with their religious observances without having had a dramatic ‘brief encounter’ with God. On the other hand, however, it is also difficult to resist the notion that people who have had a vision from God have an important advantage. After all, they seem to have been granted a rare glimpse of the deity to whom they are devoted. Other people may claim that reports of religious visions are always unreliable, or that we cannot judge their veracity. Maurice O’C. Drury wonders whether it is possible to dissociate reports of mystical visions from the spectre of mental illness.

‘Can we distinguish between madness and religion? Can we say of one such state: ‘This is a mental illness and is the province of the psychiatrist’? And of another: ‘This is a spiritual experience sent by God for the advancement of the soul and is the province of a wise director’?’⁴

¹ Genesis 15. 1 Revised Standard Version.

² Weil, S. (2001) *Waiting for God*, New York: Perennial, 27.

³ Weil, *ibid.*, 29.

⁴ Drury, M. O’C (1973) *The Danger of Words*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 121.

In view of these formidable controversies, it seems difficult to know whether religious visions can or should justify religious belief. Both Kierkegaard and James address themselves to this dilemma. In this chapter I critically compare their arguments, with a view to showing that Kierkegaard's position trumps James's.

Neither Kierkegaard nor James take the view that all reports of religious visions are in principle unreliable. For Kierkegaard the notion that God reveals himself in visions is absolutely indispensable to the Christian faith. Accordingly, to write off or explain away the concept of revelation as merely a convenient vehicle for the deranged or deluded is to discard a religious concept without which Christianity is completely changed. As the pseudonym Petrus Minor puts it:

'No Christian, and thus no Christian ecclesiastical superior either, can be willing to allow the syllogism: a man has claimed to have had a revelation in which the Savior has communicated this and that to him – ergo, the man is mentally deranged. If the state church ever allows this conclusion, it has destroyed itself.'⁵

Petrus Minor clearly would not condone the argument that simply because Abram, Weil and others claim to have had a revelation it follows that they *must* be deluded. And James would likewise be minded to resist the peremptory rubbishing of their claims. James argues that if we are to gain an understanding of the specifically religious aspects of people's lives we must be prepared to take seriously reports of mystical visions, voices, reveries and the like. In *Varieties* James makes this point in the following way.

'One may say truly, I think, that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness; so for us, who in these lectures are treating personal experience as the exclusive subject of our study, such states of consciousness ought to form the vital chapter from which the others will get their light.'⁶

Where Petrus Minor argues that to do away with revelation is to do away with Christianity, James makes the broader claim that to do away with mystical experience is

⁵ Kierkegaard, S. (1994) *Fear and Trembling & The Book on Adler*, trans. W. Lowrie, London: David Campbell Publishers Ltd, 78. Hereafter *Adler*.

⁶ James, W. (1982). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 379.

to do away with personal religious experience per se. Since Kierkegaard does not wish to abolish Christianity, and James does not wish to abolish personal religious experience, both men conclude that we must be prepared to take reports of religious visions seriously.

But for Kierkegaard and for James taking reports of religious visions seriously comes to quite different things. Not only do they fail to draw similar conclusions, but also they propose fundamentally different kinds of argument. James offers a theoretical account of the origin and meaning of religious visions. From this he infers that such visions constitute evidence for the existence of God. But he qualifies his view by adding that religious visions are a special, personal kind of evidence that is authoritative only for people who experience them at first hand. Kierkegaard does not offer theoretical speculations on the origin and meaning of religious visions, but rather offers an elucidation of the specifically Christian concepts of revelation and authority. By means of this elucidation he shows that there is a sense in which the authority of religious visions is profoundly personal. But, crucially, this authority has *nothing* to do with the evidential value of religious visions. Kierkegaard takes the view that religious visions have a personal authority in the sense that to understand them is to be obedient with regard to them. Religious visions do not justify faith, then. On the contrary, one must already have a degree of spiritual development in order to exhibit the kind of obedience that is relevant with regard to religious visions.

My view is that both Kierkegaard's approach and his conclusions are superior to James's. I shall argue that Kierkegaard is right to elucidate relevant concepts rather than propose a speculative theory, as James does. And Kierkegaard is also right to argue against the view that religious visions constitute evidence for the existence of God. In order to make this case I shall critically compare three aspects of Kierkegaard's and James's thinking on religious visions. Firstly, I shall examine their accounts of what constitutes a religious vision. James theorizes that mystical visions are communications from an 'unseen order'⁷ that is normally beyond the compass of human sense perception. Kierkegaard, however, does not think that revelations are messages from an unseen order. He holds that the origin of a revelation is to be understood by reference to Christian concepts, and not by reference to a mostly invisible realm. Furthermore, from Kierkegaard's point of view, James's speculative approach actually obscures the

⁷ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 53.

phenomena that he wishes to understand. For the latter's speculative theory leaves aside the very religious concepts that give sense to the phenomena he wishes to explain.

Secondly, I shall examine James's and Kierkegaard's views on the evidential value of religious visions. James regards mystical experiences as evidence for the existence of the unseen order from which they emanate. Kierkegaard criticises the view that revelations can be evidence for the truth of Christianity. Kierkegaard argues that the claim that revelations constitute evidence for the truth of a religious belief is rooted in the misleading view that such beliefs are theories. If religious beliefs are viewed as theories it is natural to look for evidence that can support or falsify them. And religious visions seem like a good place to look for such evidence. For, if such visions are true, it seems that the religious theory must rest on a sound, if unusual empirical footing. But against this view Kierkegaard argues that a religious belief is not a theory. And because a religious belief is not a theory it does not make sense to look for evidence that could support or falsify it. Consequently, it is mistaken to think that religious visions constitute evidence for the truth of religion.

Thirdly, I shall compare what Kierkegaard and James have to say on the authority of religious visions. James thinks that mystical reveries are authoritative only for those people who experience them. That is to say that a mystical experience only vouchsafes the existence of an 'unseen order' to the person who has had that experience. This view assumes that mystical revelations are communications from an unseen order, and that religious visions are evidence for the truth of religion. Since Kierkegaard rejects both of these views it is unsurprising to find that he also rejects James's conclusions about the authority of religious visions. For Kierkegaard, the authority of religious visions does not rest *at all* on their evidential value, but rather stands on a completely different footing. Kierkegaard argues that religious visions are authoritative in the sense that in order to understand them one must know how to be obedient towards them. Accordingly, religious visions are in principle authoritative for anybody who has sufficient spiritual development to observe the relevant kind of obedience.

Before making these arguments, however, I shall start by briefly locating Kierkegaard's and James's remarks on revelation and mystical experience in their respective oeuvres. I shall then briefly examine some autobiographical remarks made by Kierkegaard and James regarding mystical experiences and revelations. Besides being

of some historical interest, this will usefully serve to introduce in broad terms the differences between the two philosophers on the subject of religious visions. Following these introductory remarks, I shall discuss in turn each of the three points outlined above. In each case my procedure will be to start by discussing James's view before elaborating Kierkegaard's view by way of a critical response.

One potential objection to my case is that James's remarks on 'mysticism' address a phenomenon quite different to Kierkegaard's remarks on 'revelations'; and that, therefore, it is inappropriate to use the latter to criticise the former. This is an important matter, and for that reason it is best left alone until I have set out my arguments in full. Accordingly, I conclude by examining this objection. My argument is that James's use of the term 'mystical' is so broad that we cannot exclude Kierkegaard's reflections on specifically Christian 'revelations' from his analysis. But once we admit this, it is perfectly legitimate to use Kierkegaard's arguments to criticise James's.

1) Kierkegaard's remarks on Mysticism and Revelation

In this section I briefly review Kierkegaard's remarks on religious visions, with a view to showing which of these remarks should lay claim to our attention and which can be left aside. Kierkegaard sometimes refers to religious visions as 'mystical'; but much more frequently he uses the term 'revelation.' I shall start by examining his observations on mystical visions. My argument here is that there is not a great deal to be gleaned from these remarks. With that in mind I shall go on to propose that, for my present purposes at least, Kierkegaard's remarks on revelations are much more instructive.

Kierkegaard makes surprisingly few comments on mysticism. Even his voluminous journals contain only a small number of entries on the subject. One entry shows that Kierkegaard was to some extent aware of the history of Christian mysticism in the Middle Ages.⁸ In another remark Kierkegaard very briefly contrasts Hegel's philosophical notion of 'nothing' with the 'divine nothing' that the 'mystical always ends up with', and which Socrates 'continually reached.'⁹ More promising, perhaps, is Kierkegaard's remark on the work of J. E. Erdmann. Kierkegaard cites Erdmann's

⁸ Kierkegaard, S. (1967) *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers Volume I, A-E*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Entry no. 739 Hereafter *Journals* followed by volume and entry number.

⁹ *Journals*, Vol. 3 No. 2797.

definition of mysticism approvingly, noting that it is correct to say that the mystic ‘does indeed forsake society [...] and yet wants to come into relationship with the universal.’¹⁰ What seems promising about this remark is that Kierkegaard’s notion that the mystic, *qua* mystic, is separated from society parallels his oft-repeated argument that the Christian *qua* Christian is in some important sense separated from his or her milieu. In this remark, then, Kierkegaard appears to connect mysticism with one of his principal doctrines. But I don’t think we can make too much of this. Kierkegaard simply doesn’t say enough in order for us to judge whether he thinks ‘mystics’ are separated from their societies in exactly the same sense that the Christian ‘single individual’ must be. Furthermore, we are discouraged from speculating along these lines by a journal entry penned by Kierkegaard about six years after his reflections on Erdmann. In this later entry Kierkegaard equates mysticism with ‘sensuality proper’, where ‘the factor of the will is lacking’.¹¹ The notion of ‘sensuality proper’ seems much more at home in Kierkegaard’s various portrayals of somewhat louche aesthetic lifestyles than it is with his account of properly Christian belief. Consequently this remark seems to take us away from the notion that ‘mysticism’ is fundamentally similar to Christianity in some regard, and even encourages us to think that ‘mysticism’ is fundamentally opposed to Christianity in some other regard. This impression is strengthened by Kierkegaard’s remark that ‘Mysticism does not have the patience to wait for God’s revelation.’¹² This might imply that Kierkegaard thought of ‘mystical’ experience as anathema to Christian revelation. And this is further implied by another remark penned a month earlier in which Kierkegaard complains that mystics think they have a direct relationship to God and will not acknowledge the truth of Christian revelation according to which ‘all men have only an indirect relationship’¹³ with God. But I don’t think we can conclude from Kierkegaard’s journal remarks that his views are inconsistent, or even that he changed his mind. In the context of his journals, Kierkegaard never develops his remarks on mysticism into arguments, and accordingly it would be at best unfair and at worst churlish to suggest that he was in any way fickle.

However, Kierkegaard’s remarks on mysticism are not limited to his journals. He discusses mysticism in his doctoral dissertation on *The Concept of Irony*; and

¹⁰ *Journals*, Vol. 2 No. 1972.

¹¹ *Journals*, Vol. 5 No. 5669.

¹² *Journals*, Vol. 3 No. 2795.

¹³ *Journals*, Vol. 3 No. 2794.

reflections on mysticism also feature in the exchange between the young aesthete and the judge that is staged in *Either/Or*. In his doctoral dissertation Kierkegaard refers to ‘Oriental Mysticism’; which he boldly likens to a desire for narcotics - ‘It is wishing for the foggy, drowsy wallowing that an opiate can procure’¹⁴ - whilst simultaneously casting aspersions on his own understanding of the subject.¹⁵ Kierkegaard’s remarks here are perhaps most charitably understood as ‘playful’; although it would be perfectly appropriate to point out that the same remarks are ill informed and high handed in roughly equal measure. But, as Christopher Nelson has pointed out, Kierkegaard does not seem to have been interested in setting out an incisive account of ‘Oriental mysticism.’ Rather, he simply mentions Oriental mysticism as a foil for his principal argument, namely that Socratic irony is a fundamentally Greek concept.¹⁶

In a similar vein, Judge William, author of the papers collected in the second part of *Either/Or*, uses the notion of mysticism as a foil for his argument against the aesthetic lifestyle. Interestingly, William seems to think that mystics occupy a halfway house between the purely aesthetic lifestyle of his interlocutor and the ethical lifestyle that he recommends. The mystic is ethically developed insofar as he or she chooses to live a life devoted to God. That is to say that by choosing a life of devotion, the mystic adopts a sense of responsibility concomitant with his or her commitment. Nonetheless, the mystic’s manner of devotion does not completely satisfy the judge. For the mystic’s devotion to God does not develop his or her sense of responsibility. That is to say that rather than engendering ethical maturity, the mystic’s way of life leaves him or her waiting for the next moment of divine illumination. The Judge writes:

‘It is frightful to read a mystic’s laments over the flat moments. Then when the flat moment is over comes the luminous moment, and thus his life is continually alternating; it certainly has movement, but not development.’¹⁷

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, S. (1989a) *The Concept of Irony*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 66. Hereafter *Irony*.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard prefaces his remarks with the disclaimer ‘Insofar as I can grasp Oriental mysticism’. *Irony*, *ibid.*, 65.

¹⁶ Nelson C.A.P (2006) “Kierkegaard, mysticism, and jest: The story of little Ludvig,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 39: 435-464, 439.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, S. (1987) *Either / Or Part 2*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 242. Hereafter *Either/Or P2*

The mystic, then, is ‘strung out’ between periodical galvanizing encounters with God. And this lifestyle is objectionable, according to the Judge, insofar as it features three ethical failings. Firstly the mystic is irresponsibly unconcerned with the material circumstances in which he or she lives. Secondly, the mystic does not witness to the love of God at every moment of his or her life. And thirdly, mystics opt for a life of solitude that they do not have a right to choose. The Judge’s ethical critique of mysticism is Kierkegaard’s most developed argument on acute religious experience that we have looked at so far. Furthermore the Judge draws a clear conclusion: ‘this road [of religious mysticism] is not only a dangerous but a wrong road’¹⁸

Nonetheless, there is good reason to be cautious with regard to this account. For just as in his doctoral dissertation Kierkegaard casts aspersions on his own understanding of mysticism, so too the Judge draws attention to his own lack of expertise in this area. The Judge notes that, ‘Since I do not have a theological education, I do not regard myself as competent to deal with religious mysticism in greater detail.’¹⁹ So while it is clear that the Judge wishes to indict religious mysticism on ethical grounds, it is also clear that he doubts his judgement here. In reply to this we might bring an action of our own, indicting the Judge on the grounds that he strongly condemns something that he also professes not to understand. But, more importantly, it isn’t feasible to overcome the doubts that the Judge expresses on the basis of his few remarks. For although his remarks on mysticism are more developed than those we find in the *Journals* and in *The Concept of Irony*, they still constitute a very slight treatment of a complex subject. The Judge may or may not be right to impugn his understanding of religious mysticism, then, but he certainly doesn’t impart much understanding to his reader.

For an extended discussion of religious visions we must turn to Petrus Minor, pseudonymous author of the *Book on Adler*. Minor makes no reference to mysticism, but nonetheless is profoundly interested in religious visions, which he refers to as ‘revelations.’ In particular Petrus Minor concerns himself with the revelatory encounter reported by Magister Adolph Peter Adler. Adler, a Danish pastor, claimed that on one evening in December 1842 Christ came to him accompanied by a ‘hideous sound’ and

¹⁸ *Either/Or P2*, *ibid.*, 247.

¹⁹ *Either/Or P2*, *ibid.*, 247.

told him to take down a dictation.²⁰ This claim led Adler into conflict with the Lutheran Danish state church, and in 1845, he was retired on the grounds of heresy and insanity.²¹

The *Book on Adler* contains what are by far both Kierkegaard's most sophisticated and most extended thoughts on religious visions. Furthermore, Kierkegaard was well placed to discuss Adler's case, being not only well versed in the latter's writings but also personally acquainted with him.²² Before claiming that it is the most useful source of Kierkegaard's thinking on religious visions, however, we must first deal with the fact that it was published posthumously. As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, the fact that an author chooses to withhold certain works from the public may in certain respects cast doubt on the value of those works. For we cannot in good conscience attribute to an author ideas that he or she deliberately chose to hold back from the public. This is not to say that we should never look at such suppressed ideas or that they never have any value. They may have intrinsic value as ideas and they may also tell us about the history of a writer's thinking. But I do not intend to discuss the development of Kierkegaard's thought. And, furthermore, for my purposes it will not do simply to claim that the ideas expressed in the *Book on Adler* have intrinsic value. For it is not my intention to allow the *Book on Adler* to stand alone. Rather, my intention is to treat this work in the context of the rest of Kierkegaard's published works. I shall treat Minor as simply another of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, even though Kierkegaard himself did not allow this.

The problem posed by Kierkegaard's suppression of the *Book on Adler* can, I think, be satisfactorily resolved by looking more closely at what he withheld and why he chose to do so. Kierkegaard did in fact publish a small portion of his original manuscript. In 1849 Kierkegaard published the last section of *The Book on Adler* in the work *Two Essays*, attributed to the pseudonym H.H.²³ It is clear, then, that Kierkegaard did not completely withhold *The Book on Adler*, and was happy to allow a section of it to form a part of his public pseudonymous production. Kierkegaard perhaps allowed only this section of *The Book on Adler* to appear because it does not refer to Adler by

²⁰ See the selections from Adler's writings in the Hong's edition of *The Book on Adler*. Kierkegaard, S. (1998) *The Book on Adler*, ed. and trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 339.

²¹ Hannay, A. (2001) *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 367-368.

²² Adler visited Kierkegaard in 1843 and visited him again on at least one further occasion. Kierkegaard was impressed by Adler's intelligence but also thought him 'a trifle ecstatic.' Hannay, *ibid.*, 367-368

²³ See the Historical Introduction to the Hong's edition of *The Book on Adler*. *Op. cit.*, xiv.

name. For Kierkegaard's two principal reservations about publishing *The Book on Adler* hinged on the fact that Adler is identified in that work. Kierkegaard was troubled by the effect his book might have on Adler. And, secondly, Kierkegaard was concerned that the book would be viewed as a personal spat between himself and Adler, rather than read as a serious reflection on Christian revelations.²⁴ On the face of it these are two perfectly good reasons for withholding the work. However, they are not reasons that need bother the modern-day reader of Kierkegaard. Adler has of course passed away, so we need not be concerned about hurting his feelings. And, far removed as we are from the gossip of nineteenth century Copenhagen, there is nothing to make us presume that the work is merely a personal attack on Adler. Finally it is also worth pointing out that Kierkegaard had no qualms about the quality of the arguments that he set out in *The Book on Adler*. On the contrary, Kierkegaard said of the book that it 'has great merit.'²⁵ Not only is *The Book on Adler* Kierkegaard's most extended treatment of religious visions, then, it is also legitimate to treat this posthumously published work in the context of other works that he published during his lifetime.

1.1) James's Remarks on Mysticism

The difficulties posed by James's writings on religious visions are quite different to those posed by Kierkegaard's. As we have seen, Kierkegaard uses two terms, 'mysticism' and 'revelation' and the difficulty is to see whether to draw on one or both of these discussions. James's work does not present a similar dilemma, simply because he mostly sticks to the term 'mysticism' and doesn't introduce what we might call competing terms. However, this introduces a new difficulty, namely that James uses the term 'mysticism' very broadly. For example, in his essay *What Psychological Research Has Accomplished*, James introduces his subject by noting that psychological research examines the 'dust-cloud of exceptional observations'²⁶ which scientific research has not been able to classify. Refining this point, James notes that, 'No part of the unclassified residuum has usually been treated with a more contemptuous scientific disregard than the mass of phenomena generally called *mystical*.'²⁷ The 'mass of phenomena' that

²⁴See the Historical Introduction to the Hong's edition of *The Book on Adler*. Op. cit., xiii. See also Hannay, op. cit., 367-368.

²⁵See the Historical Introduction to the Hong's edition of *The Book on Adler*. Op. cit., xiii.

²⁶ James, W. (1956) *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York: Dover Publications, inc. 299 Hereafter *Will*.

²⁷ *Will*, ibid., 300.

James goes on to discuss is very diverse, covering, amongst other things, clairvoyance, hypnotism, hallucination and ‘physical mediumship’. It would, I think, be unfair to criticize James for using the term ‘mystical’ so broadly. After all he does point out that he is using the term in a popular fashion, not as a technical term. And in *Varieties* James himself complains that applying the term ‘mystic’ loosely has ‘has little value.’²⁸ Nonetheless, it remains the case that James frequently applies the term ‘mystical’ to a wide range of phenomena. And this presents us with the difficulty of knowing how to come to terms with James’s account of mysticism. For, in view of the diversity of the phenomena under discussion, it isn’t beyond question whether James intends to advance a unified philosophical account of mysticism at all.

Here it is important to recall that James *did* think that the various mystical and psychical phenomena that interested him should be understood by reference to a single explanatory framework.²⁹ And in the light of this, the difficulty posed by the variety of James’s interests in ‘mystical’ phenomena is best addressed by pointing to the core collection of theoretical propositions that crop up in his writings about them. There is, I think, such an identifiable core of propositions that runs through many of James’s numerous treatments of ‘mysticism’ and of the psychical phenomena that he took to fall under the same umbrella. And if this is the case, then not only can we say that James advances a theory of mysticism, but we can also identify in a preliminary fashion what that theory is. However, I certainly do not claim that James unswervingly advanced the same ideas on mysticism throughout his career. Rather, my view is that in these writings James, as it were, reworks the same territory. In order to bring that territory into view I shall set out a short survey of James’s writings.

The idea that James continually returns to in his writings about mystical experiences is that they are the result of a widening of our consciousness. James expresses this notion in various ways, but it is, nonetheless, a consistently identifiable element of his thinking on mysticism. For example, in his early account of *What Psychical Research has Accomplished*, James claims that the most important work of the Society for Psychical Research has been that done by ‘Mr. Myers on what he now calls the ‘subliminal self,’ or what one might designate as ultra-marginal

²⁸ *Varieties*, op. cit., 380.

²⁹ For example in *What Psychical Research Has Accomplished* James praises Myers for proposing such a single explanatory framework for such diverse phenomena as ‘hallucination, hypnotism, automatism, double personality, and mediumship’. *Will*, op. cit., 316.

consciousness.’³⁰ ³¹ According to Myer’s theory ‘mystical’ experiences take place when our ‘ultra-marginal consciousness’ ceases to be marginal and comes to the centre of our attention. And James felt able to embrace this account of mystical experience in his own work on hallucinations. ‘The result [of my research] is to make me feel that we all have potentially a “subliminal” self, which may make at any time irruption into our ordinary lives.’³²

James returns to the notion of ‘ultra-marginal consciousness’ in his Ingersoll lecture on *Human Immortality* of 1898. Here James contrasts what he calls the ‘production theory’ of the brain with ‘permissive’ and ‘transmissive’ theories of the brain. The production theory holds that the brain produces thoughts. Against this, James argues that the brain is ‘permissive’ and ‘transmissive’ in the sense that it acts as a filter through which our consciousness is strained. In other words our brains do not produce consciousness, but our brains do determine how it is that we participate in consciousness. James argues that this ‘permissive’ and ‘transmissive’ conception of the brain affords us an explanation of assorted ‘psychical’ phenomena, including ‘religious conversions’.³³ Such phenomena occur when the brain permits ‘more’ consciousness through than is usually the case. James notes that, ‘According to the state in which the brain finds itself, the barrier of its obstructiveness [to consciousness] may also be supposed to rise or fall.’³⁴ When the barrier is low, ‘a comparative flood of spiritual energy pours over.’³⁵ And it is this flood of usually excluded or marginal consciousness that lies at the root of psychical phenomena.

The notion that mystical experiences have their root in the acute widening of our consciousness is also present in James’s 1902 tour de force *Varieties*. *Varieties* contains James’s lengthiest treatment of religious visions. There he not only devotes two complete chapters to the subject but also discusses it in many other places, most notably in Chapter III, *The Reality of the Unseen*. In this chapter, and as we shall see in greater detail below, James posits a kind of ‘sixth sense’ by means of which we can gain cognition of an ‘unseen’ reality that is normally beyond the compass of our senses.

³⁰ *Will*, *ibid.*, 315.

³¹ I have noted that this is an ‘early account’ because it is made up various essays and addresses published in 1890, 1892, and 1896. These sources were drawn together into a single essay by James and published in *The Will To Believe* in 1897. *Will*, *ibid.*, 299.

³² *Will*, *ibid.*, 321.

³³ *Will* *ibid.*, 25.

³⁴ *Will* *ibid.*, 17.

³⁵ *Will* *ibid.*, 17.

Furthermore, during his first chapter on mysticism James recounts an experience of his own, which he interprets as a widening of his consciousness.

‘One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation.’³⁶

In the conclusion to *Varieties*, James again returns to the notion that mystical experiences are the result of widened consciousness. There James claims that religious experiences – including mystical experiences – are best explained by reference to regions of ‘ultra-marginal consciousness’. And he further speculates that, ‘the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come’.³⁷

Further evidence that James did not abandon the view that mystical experiences are experiences of ‘ultra-marginal consciousness’ can be seen in the fact that he advances this thesis in writings that post date *Varieties*. In *The Last Report* of 1909, for example, James expresses in more figurative terms the notion set out in his Ingersoll lecture that our brains normally filter out a portion of our consciousness.

‘The maple and pine may whisper to each other with their leaves, and Connecticut and Newport hear each other’s foghorns. But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean’s bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir. Our “normal” consciousness is circumscribed for adaptation to our

³⁶ *Varieties*, op. cit., 388.

³⁷ *Varieties*, ibid., 515.

external earthly environment, but the fence is weak in spots, and fitful influences from beyond leak in, showing the otherwise unverifiable common connection.’³⁸

In *A Pluralistic Universe*, also published in 1909, James again advances the notion that we typically experience only a restricted region of consciousness, and that religious experiences occur when our consciousness is expanded.

‘I think it may be asserted that there *are* religious experiences of a specific nature, not deducible by analogy or psychological reasoning from our other sorts of experience. I think they point with reasonable probability to the continuity of our consciousness with a wider spiritual environment from which the ordinary prudential man (who is the only man that scientific psychology, so called, takes cognisance of) is shut off.’³⁹

And, finally, in his 1910 essay *A Suggestion about Mysticism*, James again reiterates the view that mystical experiences are born out of the expansion of our consciousness. ‘The suggestion, stated very briefly, is that states of mystical intuition may be only very sudden and great extensions of the ordinary ‘field of consciousness.’’⁴⁰

In the foregoing I have not attempted to give a detailed or critical account of James’s views. I shall turn to this below. However, it is abundantly clear from the brief survey that I have set out that James’s thoughts on mystical experiences never stray far from the notion that they are the result of an expansion of consciousness. Furthermore James’s statement of this position in *Varieties* is particularly forceful. For in *Varieties* James also describes in some detail what mystical experiences are like. And, crucially for my purposes, James also discusses the authority of mystical experiences vis-à-vis that of philosophical arguments.

On the whole, then, my comparisons will be between Kierkegaard’s reflections on Christian revelations in *the Book on Adler* and James’s reflections on mysticism in *Varieties*.

³⁸ Murphy, G. and Ballou, R.O. (eds) (1961) *James on Psychical Research*, London: Chatto and Windus, 324.

³⁹ James, W. (1996a) *A Pluralistic Universe*, London: University of Nebraska Press, 299-300.

⁴⁰ James W. (1910) “A suggestion About Mysticism,” in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 7, no. 4: 85. Hereafter *Suggestion*.

2) Mysticism and Revelation in the lives of Kierkegaard and James

Before turning to their arguments ‘head on’, we can gain a useful preliminary sense of the dissimilarities between Kierkegaard and James by referring briefly to some relevant autobiographical remarks. I shall recount what Kierkegaard and James have to say about their mystical experiences – and lack of mystical experiences – before indicating how these remarks point us towards some of the important philosophical differences between the two men.

In *Varieties* James makes the following claim regarding his own familiarity with mystical experiences. ‘My own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand.’⁴¹ This is an odd remark, for James seems to assume that mystical experiences must be ‘enjoyable’ in some way.⁴² But it is also a revealing remark, in that James does not say that his constitution leaves him *completely* excluded from mystical experiences. No doubt part of the reason that James said this was because, as we have already noted, he defines mystical experiences very broadly. He includes *déjà vu*, drunkenness and drug-induced reverie in his roster of legitimate mystical occurrences. Even if James had not experienced *déjà vu*, or had never been three sheets to the wind, he perhaps had no reason to think that he was constitutionally barred from either of these experiences. But even if he had been, he certainly was not constitutionally barred from the experience of drug-induced reverie. For, as is well known, under the influence of Benjamin Paul Blood’s *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* James certainly did experiment with drugs.⁴³ James used nitrous oxide (laughing gas), and was clearly impressed by the results of his experiment. In *Varieties* he notes that, ‘Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler.’⁴⁴ Perhaps fearing that his reader would think his judgement on this matter to have been seriously impaired by the drug in question, James insists that a (seemingly small) community of fellow inhalers shares his view. ‘I know more than one person who is persuaded that in the nitrous oxide trance we have a genuine metaphysical

⁴¹ *Varieties*, op. cit., 379.

⁴² A sentiment with which Magister Adler no doubt would have disagreed following his frankly terrifying meeting with Christ complete with ‘hideous sound’ for accompaniment. See the selections from Adler’s writings in the Hong’s edition of *The Book on Adler*. Op. cit., 339.

⁴³ *Will*, op. cit., 294.

⁴⁴ *Varieties*, op. cit., 387.

revelation.’⁴⁵ Perhaps looking to swell the numbers of like-minded people, James even evangelises on behalf of the ‘anaesthetic revelation’: ‘I strongly urge others to repeat the experiment, which with pure gas is short and harmless enough.’⁴⁶ Despite his protestation that he could only speak of mystical experiences at second hand, then, there certainly was at least one mystical experience about which James could discourse at first hand. It is true that James did not think that a nitrous oxide ‘high’ was the apogee of mystical experience. Nonetheless James did think that laughing gas could ‘stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree’⁴⁷, and encouraged his readers to follow his example, so that they too might be able to discuss at first hand the ‘tremendously exciting sense of an intense metaphysical illumination’⁴⁸ attendant upon its inhalation.

James’s somewhat curious stance of downplaying his credentials as a mystic whilst reporting his mystical experience is one that he repeated in 1910, some eight years after the publication of *Varieties*. In *A Suggestion About Mysticism* James repeats the claim that he has no special personal insight into mystical experience. ‘I also am an outsider, and very likely what I say will prove the fact loudly enough to readers who possibly may stand within the pale.’⁴⁹ But, just as was the case in *Varieties*, James goes on to recount several ‘mystical’ experiences of his own. Unlike the laughing gas episode recounted in *Varieties*, however, these experiences are not experimental. That is to say that these experiences were not deliberately induced, but rather came upon James in the course of his daily affairs. James claims to have had four such mystical experiences between 1905 and 1910. He divides these four experiences into two kinds. The first kind, which he experienced on three occasions, has to do with a short-lived and rapid expansion of perception. James describes these experiences in the following way:

‘What happened each time was that I seemed all at once to be reminded of a past experience; and this reminiscence, ere I could conceive or name it distinctly, developed into something further that belonged with it, this in turn into something further still, and so on, until the process faded out, leaving me amazed at the sudden vision of increasing

⁴⁵ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 387.

⁴⁶ *Will*, *op. cit.*, 294.

⁴⁷ *Varieties*, *op. cit.*, 387.

⁴⁸ *Will*, *op. cit.*, 294.

⁴⁹ *Suggestion*, *op. cit.*, 85.

ranges of distant fact of which I could give no articulate account. The mode of consciousness was perceptual, not conceptual – the field expanding so fast there seemed no time for conception or identification to get in its work.’⁵⁰

The second kind of experience that James relates in *A Suggestion About Mysticism* is rather different and has to do with a series of dreams that he had on two successive nights. On the first night James awoke from a ‘quiet dream of some sorts’ and, ‘whilst gathering my waking wits, seemed suddenly to get mixed up with reminiscences of a dream of an entirely different sort, which seemed to telescope, as it were, into the first one, a dream very elaborate, of lions, and tragic.’⁵¹ On the following night James again awoke from a dream, and, thinking back on it he ‘became suddenly confused by the contents of two other dreams that shuffled themselves abruptly in between the parts of the first dream, and of which I couldn’t grasp the origin.’ The experience rendered James perplexed and scared, as he wondered whether he was somehow ‘getting into other people’s dreams’⁵² He only shook off his fear and confusion when he was able to relate the dreams that he was experiencing more securely to himself. This he did by supposing not that the dreams ‘belonged’ to other people, but that they had been dreamt by him on previous occasions. ‘Dream states carry dream memories – why may not the two succedaneous dreams (whichever two of the three *were* succedaneous) be memories of *twelve o’clock dreams of previous nights*, swept in, along with the just-fading dream, into the just-waking system of memory.’⁵³ This notion, though hard to grasp, apparently gave James ‘great relief’.⁵⁴

Although the experiences that James describes are clearly peculiar we may wonder whether they are examples of mystical experiences. Freewheeling trains of intense sensory perception and confused recollections of dreams certainly don’t *have* to be taken as examples of mystical experience. Furthermore James’s assertion that he is an ‘outsider’ to mysticism seemingly lends support to the view that we should not understand his experiences in this way. However, the issue is not clear cut, for James does also seem to allow that his experiences were – to some extent at least – mystical in

⁵⁰ *Suggestion*, *ibid.*, 87.

⁵¹ *Suggestion*, *ibid.*, 88.

⁵² *Suggestion*, *ibid.*, 89.

⁵³ *Suggestion*, *ibid.*, 90.

⁵⁴ *Suggestion*, *ibid.*, 90.

nature. There are three reasons for thinking that James does think that the experiences he recounts are examples of mystical experience. Firstly, James claims that the hypothesis that propounds in *A Suggestion About Mysticism* ‘was originally suggested to me by certain experiences of my own’.⁵⁵ This claim would not make sense unless James held that there was something about his experiences that enlightened him about mystical states. Secondly, and perhaps with this first point in mind, James explicitly claims some common ground between his temporarily heightened sense perception and ‘classical’ mystical experiences. Summarising his experiences of heightened sense perception James notes that, ‘This conviction of fact-revealed, together with the perceptual form of the experience and the inability to make articulate report, are all characters of mystical states.’⁵⁶ James does also draw attention to the dissimilarity between his experiences and those of ‘classical mysticism.’ In this regard he notes that, ‘The point of difference is that in my case certain special directions only, in the field of reality, seemed to get suddenly uncovered, whereas in classical mystical experiences it appears rather as if the whole of reality were uncovered at once.’⁵⁷ Nonetheless we need not conclude that because James detected some difference between his experiences and fully (or classically) mystical experiences he did not think we could say that his experiences were at all mystical. This brings us to the third point, which is that James makes it clear that he thinks that it is possible for certain aspects of an experience to be mystical whilst others are not. This is a point that he makes with great force in relation to his confusing and frightening dream experience.

‘The distressing confusion of mind in this experience was the exact opposite of mystical illumination, and equally unmystical was the definiteness of what was perceived. But the exaltation of the sense of relation was mystical (the perplexity all revolved about the fact that the three dreams *both did and did not belong in the most intimate way together*); and the sense that *reality was being uncovered* was mystical in the highest degree.’⁵⁸

⁵⁵ *Suggestion*, *ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁶ *Suggestion*, *ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁷ *Suggestion*, *ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁸ *Suggestion*, *ibid.*, 91.

For James, then, there need not be any cut and dried distinction between mystical and non-mystical experiences. And this perhaps goes some way to explaining his otherwise seemingly disingenuous position in both *Varieties* and *A Suggestion About Mysticism*. James's claim to be an outsider to mysticism can be squared with his accounts of personal mystical experience by reference to his view that experiences can be mystical by degree. James may be an outsider to fully-fledged religious mysticism, but he nonetheless holds that aspects of some his experiences were mystical. And he appeals to those aspects to inform his philosophical account of mysticism.

James's autobiographical comments on mystical experience stand in marked contrast to those made by Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard denied having had a revelation from God. Furthermore he sought to dissuade people from explaining his work by reference to insights gained through mystical experience: '[I] only ask the reader not to think of revelations and the like, since with me everything is dialectical.'⁵⁹ Nonetheless, Kierkegaard claimed that he had 'needed God's assistance day after day, year after year'⁶⁰ in order to execute his work as an author. Furthermore, Kierkegaard claimed to have received that assistance in the form of divine 'governance' that directed his writing and his life more generally. Kierkegaard draws attention to the fact that his understanding of governance is rooted in his Christian education. And by his Christian education he understands not only what was imparted to him in his early years – that 'powerful religious impression of childhood'⁶¹ – but also the business of living a thoughtful and committed Christian life, or, as he puts it, 'living in decisive religious categories'.⁶²

We can say, then, that Kierkegaard and James had markedly different experiences of the divine. James experienced a short-lived 'metaphysical revelation' induced by laughing gas, and he also had at least four 'mystical' experiences that he did not bring upon himself. Kierkegaard, by contrast, had no revelation, but did feel the press of Christian governance. I do not claim that this is an exhaustive treatment of the religious experiences of the two philosophers. And nor do I claim that this difference between the biographies of Kierkegaard and James explains the differences between

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, S. (1998) *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 84. Hereafter *Point of View*.

⁶⁰ *Point of View*, *ibid.*, 72.

⁶¹ *Point of View*, *ibid.*, 82.

⁶² *Point of View*, *ibid.*, 86.

their accounts of mystical experiences. Rather, I want to draw attention to the different ways in which Kierkegaard and James account for their religious experiences and suggest how these differences point to areas of philosophical disagreement.

As we have seen, James took an experimental approach to the study of mystical experience. By inhaling laughing gas, and encouraging others to do so, he hoped to confirm or falsify the hypothesis that the world is fundamentally divine. And he understood his uninvited mystical experiences as tentative evidence for the truth of a speculative theory of the ‘field of consciousness.’ Kierkegaard, on the other hand, did not *experiment* with religious experience. Rather, his understanding of revelations is rooted in his understanding of, and fluency with, specifically Christian concepts.

With this difference between Kierkegaard and James in view we can begin to appreciate what a Kierkegaardian critique of James’s position might look like. James’s experiments with laughing gas call to mind Petrus Minor’s rather angry remark that, ‘Nowadays one takes for a revelation any sort of strong impression, and the same evening puts it in the newspaper.’⁶³ Here Petrus Minor is attacking the view that if one has any kind of ‘strong impression’ it is reasonable to call it a religious revelation and to post an account of it so that it might be studied and assessed. Arguably this is precisely the procedure that James carries out with regard to his laughing gas experiment. The ‘strong impression’ made by the gas is called a metaphysical insight and the whole affair is written up in a scholarly essay for peer evaluation.⁶⁴ But Kierkegaard would no doubt find this procedure as objectionable as Petrus Minor does. And this is for two reasons. Firstly, James’s experiment is not rooted in a religious tradition, and is not conveyed using specifically religious concepts. As a result it is misleading to attribute a specifically religious significance to the ‘strong impression’ made by the gas. Secondly, James’s experiment is designed to demonstrate or refute a religious hypothesis. But, for Kierkegaard, as we have seen in the previous two chapters, a religious belief is not a belief in a hypothesis. A religious belief is unconditional, and therefore is not related to evidence whether pro or contra. Moreover, James’s accounts of the unprovoked mystical experiences that befell him, would, no doubt, also fail to impress Kierkegaard. For the significance that James attaches to these experiences has to do with whether they demonstrate the truth of his claim that we sometimes experience a wider field of

⁶³ *Adler*, op. cit., 121-2.

⁶⁴ In a note at the conclusion of his essay *On Some Hegalisms* James includes a partial transcription of the things he said whilst ‘high’ on laughing gas. *Will*, op. cit., 296.

consciousness. And, again, this means that the significance of such mystical events is specifiable without reference to any specifically religious concepts. From Kierkegaard's point of view, then, James's reflections on mystical experiences are contributions to a psychological hypothesis, not elucidations of profound religious phenomena. In the following three sections I shall draw out in detail the critical implications of this difference between the two men, starting with a consideration of James's notion that mystical experiences are communications from an 'unseen order.'

3) James on Mysticism and the 'Unseen Order'

James describes the fundamental features of religious life in the following way: 'Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief in an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.'⁶⁵ One obvious objection to this formulation is that if the order is unseen we wouldn't have any reason to believe in it, and wouldn't know how to bring ourselves into accord with it. But there is every indication that James would not think his position defeated by this remark. James argues that we can gain a relevant sense of the 'unseen order' by means of mystical experiences. It is for this reason that 'religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness.' For mystical experiences disclose the 'unseen order' from which religious life derives its sense. In order to get to grips with James's understanding of mystical experiences, then, we need to examine how it is that such experiences disclose the unseen order.

By an unseen order James means an order that is not usually and not readily apprehended by means of sense perception. To believe in this order, then, is to believe in something of which one cannot readily apprehend by our senses. James argues that we do, as a matter of fact, believe in all kinds of ideas that we cannot apprehend in this way. James has in mind various kinds of ideas, and in particular '[a]ll sorts of higher abstractions'.⁶⁶ Such ideas, although they cannot be sensed can, nonetheless, galvanise the lives of those who believe them. James writes:

⁶⁵ *Varieties*, op. cit., 53.

⁶⁶ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 56.

‘The sentiment of reality can indeed attach itself so strongly to our object of belief that our whole life is polarized through and through, so to speak, by its sense of the existence of the thing believed in, and yet that thing, for the purpose of definite description can hardly be said to be present to our mind at all.’⁶⁷

From a survey of some of the kinds of insensible ideas that can polarize the lives of those who believe them, James draws the inference that we may have an ability, or a capacity, perhaps, to discern what is missed by our senses. James makes his point in the following way:

‘But the whole array of our instances leads to a conclusion something like this: It is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call ‘*something there,*’ more deep and more general than any of the special and particular ‘senses’ by which the current psychology supposes existent reality to be originally revealed.’⁶⁸

James is speculating, then, that we have a kind of ‘sixth sense’ for which the psychology of the day fails to account. However, we need not wait for psychology to catch up in order to start testing the veracity of James’s speculation. We can notice that people sometimes have experiences that seem to indicate the existence of a ‘sixth sense.’ Chief among these experiences is hallucination. When a person hallucinates he or she gains an impression of something, but not by means of ordinary sense perception: “the person affected will feel a ‘presence’ in the room, definitely localized, facing in one particular way, real in the most emphatic sense of the word, often coming suddenly, and as suddenly gone; and yet neither seen, heard, touched, nor cognized in any of the usual ‘sensible’ ways.”⁶⁹ Accounts of hallucinations such as this provide empirical evidence for the existence of the ‘sixth sense.’

In his chapters on mysticism James continues with his task of gathering evidence for the existence of a ‘sixth sense’. To this end he examines a range of phenomena, starting with rather common experiences and culminating in ‘classical’ mystical experiences. At the bottom of this ‘mystical ladder’ is the experience of a

⁶⁷ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 55.

⁶⁸ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 58.

⁶⁹ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 59.

‘deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or a formula which occasionally sweeps over one.’⁷⁰ Déjà vu is a ‘more pronounced step forward on the mystical ladder [...]’.⁷¹ And one advances still further with experiences of ‘yet other dreamy states.’⁷² Drunkenness and other forms of intoxication approximate mystical states still more closely. The summit of the ladder is reached with ‘religious mysticism pure and simple’, a phenomenon that James claims is ‘not uncommon.’⁷³

Having arrived at mystical experiences James considers whether and in what sense they can be considered to be true. And he proposes two kinds of answers to these questions. Firstly, he proposes a pragmatic answer. That is to say that in order to know whether and in what sense mystical experiences are true we must enquire into their practical value, or what James calls their ‘fruits for life’. And in this regard James notes that ‘Their fruits appear to have been various’. Moreover their fruits have not always been useful. ‘Stupefaction, for one thing, seems not to have been altogether absent as a result.’⁷⁴ Nonetheless it is also the case that mystical experiences can have more positive outcomes, including ‘the formation of a new centre of spiritual energy’⁷⁵ and rendering ‘the soul more energetic in the lines which their inspiration favors.’⁷⁶

However, James also admits that reinvigorating effects of mystical experiences are only genuinely advantageous if they do not rest on a delusion of some kind.

‘But this [the positive ‘fruits for life’ attendant upon mystical experiences] could be reckoned an advantage only in case the inspiration were a true one. If the inspiration were erroneous, the energy would be all the more mistaken and misbegotten. So we stand once more before that problem of truth which confronted us at the end of the lectures on saintliness.’⁷⁷

James’s answer to this difficulty is not pragmatic but speculative. That is to say that he situates mystical experiences in relation to theoretical account of truth. And he does this in two distinct ways. One is to show that mystical experiences are in fact in accord with

⁷⁰ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 382.

⁷¹ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 383.

⁷² *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 384.

⁷³ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 393.

⁷⁴ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 413.

⁷⁵ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 414.

⁷⁶ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 415.

⁷⁷ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 415.

certain philosophical positions. That is to say that mystical experiences can be accommodated by certain philosophical accounts of what the world is like. James makes this point in the following way.

‘In spite of their repudiation of articulate self-description, mystical states in general assert a pretty distinct theoretical drift. It is possible to give the outcome of the majority of them in terms that point in definite philosophical directions. One of these directions is optimism, and the other is monism.’⁷⁸

James’s second way of relating mystical experiences to a theoretical account of truth is to propose a speculative explanation of the cause and meaning of mystical experiences.

“Let me then propose, as an hypothesis, that whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the ‘more’ with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life. Starting thus with a recognized psychological fact as our basis, we seem to preserve a contact with ‘science’ which the ordinary theologian lacks. At the same time the theologian’s contention that the religious man is moved by an external power is vindicated, for it is one of the peculiarities of invasions from the subconscious region to take on objective appearances, and to suggest to the Subject an external control.”⁷⁹

James explains away as inessential differences between reports of mystical experiences. Those differences relate only to the manner in which mystical experiences are conceptualised, and to the creeds to which they give rise. These features, which James refers to as over-beliefs, are subsequent to immediate mystical experience itself. When we look beyond over-beliefs to the immediate mystical experiences upon which they depend we find not a diverse collection of events but a single kind of event. Moreover, taken in this way, mystical experiences attest to the truth of James’s theory of ‘the subconscious continuation of our conscious life.’⁸⁰ James writes:

⁷⁸ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 415-6.

⁷⁹ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 412-3.

⁸⁰ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 412.

‘Disregarding the over-beliefs, and confining ourselves to what is common and generic, we have *the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come*, a positive content of religious experience which, it seems to me, *is literally and objectively true as far as it goes*.’⁸¹

Elaborating on this theory, James speculates that, ‘The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely ‘understandable’ world.’⁸² And this ‘other dimension of existence’ can be thought of in religious terms. ‘Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose.’⁸³ Furthermore, although this ‘mystical’ or ‘supernatural’ region at the margins of our consciousness is unexplained this does not imply that we cannot assert that it is real. James reasons that transactions between our daily consciousness and our ‘mystical’ marginal consciousness serve to shape our personality. And since it makes sense to say that there have been ‘real’ changes in the personality of a person it also makes sense to say that the causes of those changes are ‘real’. Although we cannot ‘know’ the mystical region of our consciousness, then, we can know that it is real by virtue of the effects that it has upon us. As James explains, ‘But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal.’⁸⁴

3.1) Kierkegaard and the Unseen Order

We have seen that James argues that mystical experiences originate from an ‘unseen order’. Compared with this rather complex speculation Kierkegaard’s assertion that revelations come from God perhaps seems disarmingly simple. Nonetheless Kierkegaard often argues that God cannot be apprehended directly, that he is paradoxical in such a way that he ‘thrusts away’ disinterested reasoning and speculation. Accordingly, there is an important sense in which Kierkegaard thinks that God is hidden or mysterious. And for this reason we might wonder whether Kierkegaard and James are actually somewhat in agreement. For the notion that

⁸¹ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 515.

⁸² *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 515-6.

⁸³ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 515-6.

⁸⁴ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 516.

mystical experiences have their origins in an ‘unseen order’ doesn’t seem all that far removed from the notion that mystical experiences have their origin in an ‘unseen’ or mysterious God.

However, this apparent similarity is, I suggest, specious. And clarifying the differences between Kierkegaard and James here will also bring further into view what a Kierkegaardian critique of James looks like. For Kierkegaard, God is hidden in a quite different sense to which James’s ‘unseen order’ or ‘mother-sea’ of consciousness is hidden. James thinks that the ‘unseen order’ is sometimes revealed to us, either by our ‘sixth sense’ or through religious visions. But for Kierkegaard God is *essentially* hidden. That is to say that it is not an empirical fact that God is – for the most part – hidden from our lives. Rather, it belongs to the concept of God that there is an important sense in which he is always hidden. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus makes this point with some force. In the *Postscript* Climacus simply ridicules the idea that we sometimes gain, as it were, a better look at God, as if it is sometimes possible to pierce the veil of his mystery and thereby gain a glimpse of God unveiled and as he *really* is.

‘But with regard to the absolute paradox [God], this glimpsing and squinting with the eyes, this listening silence of the congregation of revivalists that is broken only as one after the other stands up and in a tense posture tries to catch a glimpse of what His Reverence glimpses, while the women remove their hats in order to catch every prophetic word – all this excitement about what His Reverence glimpses is very ludicrous. And most ludicrous of all is the notion that this glimpsing is supposed to be something higher than the passion of faith.’⁸⁵

For Climacus, the notion that one can catch a glimpse of God is ‘neither more nor less than pious flirting.’⁸⁶ Furthermore, claims to have penetrated God’s mystery are unattractively egotistical. ‘But the more a person stresses the incomprehensible, if he ends up with glimpsing, the more corruptive is his flirtation, because it all becomes a compliment to himself.’⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *Postscript*, op. cit., 563,

⁸⁶ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 564.

⁸⁷ *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 564.

If God is ‘unseen’, then, Kierkegaard certainly doesn’t think that it is sometimes possible to catch a glimpse of him as James does. However, while this observation drives a wedge between the views of Kierkegaard and James it also makes Kierkegaard’s views all the more puzzling. For Kierkegaard does hold that religious visions come from God, and, on the face of it, this would seem to be one important way in which God does reveal himself to us. Surely, when God chooses to impart a religious vision to some person, he *does* set aside his veil of mystery and allows that person to catch a glimpse of him. In order to appreciate why it is that this criticism fails we need to look in more detail at what Kierkegaard means when he claims that God cannot be ‘glimpsed.’ And in particular we need to appreciate that God is not mysterious to us because we lack important knowledge about him. Revelations from God, then, are not additional pieces of information that allow us to fill in the gaps in our knowledge - as would be the case, for example, if somebody gave us the key to a code.

Climacus routinely points out that Christ is paradoxical, and that, as a result, it is not possible to develop disinterested objective theories about him. This does not imply, however, that we are deprived of an important source of knowledge about God. As I argued in the opening chapter, the fact that we cannot have objective knowledge of God in no way implies that we have to compensate for this by guessing or gambling on what God is like and whether he exists. Rather, it implies that objective knowledge is not relevant to our understanding of God. What is relevant to our understanding of God are the ways in which we live and understand our lives in relation to him. To affirm a belief in God or to deny the existence of God, are both personal, interested – Climacus would say ‘subjective – courses of action which resonate throughout the whole conduct of one’s life.

It is with Climacus’ remarks on the redundancy of objective knowledge in relation to God that we can gain a better understanding of the sense in which he thinks that God is mysterious or hidden. When Climacus says that it is not possible to ‘glimpse’ God he seems to have in mind at least two things. Firstly, when Climacus says that God cannot be ‘glimpsed’ he seems to mean that it is not possible to have objective knowledge of God. But, as his reference to emotional revivalists makes clear, Climacus isn’t only concerned to ward off the unhelpful attention of scholars. He is also concerned to point out that – contrary to what the revivalists seem to think – it makes no sense to try to get ‘beyond’ one’s faith in God. In other words, for Climacus, faith in

God is not a necessary evil brought about by the uncomfortable fact that one cannot objectively know God. To know God is to have faith in him.

But here we are returned to the question of what is shown by a revelation. Surely a revelation does tell us something about God that we didn't know before? It is true that revelations can for example reveal to us the will of God. Both Moses and Mary had visions in which God explained his will. But, importantly, these are only explanations of God's will in the context of faith. Somebody who is not a Christian simply isn't going to accept that the Ten Commandments, for example, are an expression of the will of God. Indeed, part of what is meant by the claim that one doesn't believe in God is that one doesn't recognize the authority of visions such as the one that Moses had. Conversely, one of the things that is meant by the claim that one is a Christian is that one does recognise the authority of such visions. And what these observations make clear is that revelations from God do not grant us some special objective knowledge of God; and nor do they provide us with a means by which we can get 'beyond' faith. Revelations are taken as revelations within the context of faith.

Somebody may point out that revelations do in fact occur to people who do not have faith; and indeed, one reason why people convert to faith is because they have had a religious vision of some kind. But far from constituting an objection, this observation actually illustrates the point at stake. For people who are converted in this way, having a religious vision is the occasion upon which they reorient their lives. That is to say that they do not have a new piece of information, or a new theory, but a new way of life. And, accordingly, they do not gain a 'glimpse' of God that supersedes faith and thereby makes it redundant. Rather, what the new convert acquires is faith.

From Climacus' point of view, then, James's mistake is to think that revelations give us knowledge about some hitherto unknown region of our consciousness. Revelations only give us knowledge of God in the context of faith.

4) Mysticism, Revelation and Evidence

We have seen that James offers a speculative account of the explanation and meaning of mystical experiences. And it is in the context of this speculative account that mystical experiences count as evidence for the truth of that theory. But if, as James claims, mystical experiences are evidence for the truth of his theory, they are certainly an unusual kind of evidence. For mystical experiences tend to be profoundly personal, and

cannot be repeated in a controlled setting. The burden of James's case, then, is to show that it is legitimate to think of mystical experiences as evidence at all. And in order to do this James makes two kinds of arguments. The first is that mystical experiences are, in some important sense, analogous to sense experiences. We commonly do accept that sense experiences can be evidence relevant to determining the truth of our theories. By extension, then, we should accept that in principle mystical experiences might also serve as evidence for the truth of theories in the same way. James argues this in the following way:

'Our own more 'rational' beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which mystics quote for theirs. Our senses, namely, have assured us of certain states of fact; but mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us.'⁸⁸

James's second strategy for defending the claim that mystical experiences constitute evidence for the truth of a theory is to motivate the notion that, as a matter of fact, our criteria for what counts as good evidence are much more complex than is commonly recognised. Once we recognise this fact it is much more difficult to dismiss mystical experiences as evidence because they fail to meet a narrow set of 'rational' criteria, such as the need to be impersonal and the need to be repeatable. James sketches his views as follows:

'The opinion opposed to mysticism in philosophy is sometimes spoken of as *rationalism*. Rationalism insists that all our beliefs ought ultimately to find for themselves articulate grounds. [...] Vague impressions of something indefinable have no place in the rationalistic system, which on its positive side is surely a splendid intellectual tendency, for not only are all our philosophies fruits of it, but physical science (amongst other good things) is its result.

Nevertheless, if we look on man's whole mental life as it exists, on the life of men that lies in them apart from their learning and science, and that they inwardly and

⁸⁸ *Varieties*, op. cit., 423-4.

privately follow, we have to confess that the part of it of which rationalism can give an account is relatively superficial.’⁸⁹

The reason that the rationalist account of reasoning is superficial, then, is simply that it fails to account fully for what actually goes on in our thinking. We arrive at our beliefs in the light of our complex conscious and sub-conscious biographies. And, furthermore, the rationalist’s criteria for what counts as a sound belief are actually trumped by these biographical influences. ‘Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you absolutely *knows* that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it.’⁹⁰

In view of these considerations James concludes that we may in principle treat mystical experiences as evidence for the truth of his theory that our consciousness is sometimes broadened. And, furthermore, he asserts that there is sufficient evidence of this kind to make his theory plausible. ‘In spite of rationalism’s disdain for the particular, the personal, and the unwholesome, the drift of all the evidence we have seems to me to sweep us very strongly towards the belief in some form of superhuman life with which we may, unknown to ourselves, be co-conscious.’⁹¹

4.1) Kierkegaard on Revelation and Evidence

Unlike James, Kierkegaard doesn’t think that revelations are evidence that God exists. This follows from Kierkegaard’s arguments against proofs for the existence of God, which I rehearsed in the previous chapter. Kierkegaard argues there cannot be *any* kind of evidence that demonstrates the existence of God. I shall not rehearse those arguments again here. However, the pseudonym Anti Climacus summarises the upshot of Kierkegaard’s case in the following way:

‘That is, he [Christ] himself makes it clear that in relation to him there can be no question of any demonstrations, that there is no *direct* transition to becoming Christian,

⁸⁹ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 73.

⁹⁰ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 73.

⁹¹ *A Pluralistic Universe*, *op. cit.*, 309.

that demonstrations can at best serve to make a person aware, so that he can now come up to the point: whether he will believe or he will be offended.⁹² (96)

5) Mysticism, Revelation and Authority

At the conclusion of his two chapters on mysticism James sets out an account of the kind of authority that he believes we should attach to mystical experiences. His account has three principal points, the first of which is that it is legitimate for mystical experiences to be authoritative for those who have them. James cites two reasons for this conclusion. He notes that such mystical experiences ‘are usually authoritative over those who have them’, adding that it ‘is vain for rationalism to grumble about this.’⁹³ However, James also contends that people who have had mystical experiences are entitled to take them to be authoritative simply because we commonly do take experience in general to be authoritative. ‘Our senses, namely, have assured us of certain states of fact; but mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us.’⁹⁴ Furthermore, not only are mystical experiences on a par with our ordinary sense experiences, but as a source of knowledge they are more profitable than formal arguments.

But, of course, not everybody has mystical experiences. And accordingly James considers whether mystical experiences should be authoritative for people who do not have them. And this brings us to James’s second principal point. He argues that mystical experiences can have no authority over people who have not had them. ‘[M]ystics have no right to claim that we ought to accept the deliverance of their peculiar experiences, if we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto.’⁹⁵ There are two reasons why James thinks that reports of mystical experiences are not authoritative. Firstly, citing such reports would only amount to an appeal to numbers that has ‘no logical force.’⁹⁶ And secondly, James argues that mystical experiences cannot have universal authority because they do not have any intellectual content. ‘The

⁹² Kierkegaard, S. (1991) *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press., 96.

⁹³ *Varieties*, op. cit., 423.

⁹⁴ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 423-4.

⁹⁵ *Varieties* *ibid.*, 424.

⁹⁶ *Varieties* *ibid.*, 424.

fact is that the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content of its own.’⁹⁷

James’s final point in relation to the authority of mystical experiences point is that they *are* authoritative in the sense that they may just as well serve to inform our beliefs as formal arguments and more standard kinds of empirical evidence. ‘Yet, I repeat once more, the existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe.’⁹⁸

5.1) Kierkegaard on the Authority of Revelation

Previously I argued that Kierkegaard’s claim that God is ‘hidden’, ‘mysterious’ or ‘unseen’ is a conceptual point not an empirical claim. And I inferred from this that although revelations come from God they are not evidence that God exists. For Petrus Minor these two points have an important bearing on the kind of authority that attaches to revelations. If revelations are not evidence for the existence of God it follows that the kind of authority that they have cannot be the kind of authority that attaches to evidence. Evidence presented in a court of law, for example, underwrites the truth of certain propositions. A video may demonstrate to us the truth of the claim that it was young Freddy who pilfered a hamster from a pet shop. But if revelations are not evidence then they cannot underwrite the truth of propositions in the same way that evidence presented to a court of law can. That is to say that revelations are not authoritative in the sense that they demonstrate the truth of the proposition that God exists. But, as Minor makes clear, this is not to say that revelations have *no* authority. Consequently one of his key tasks in *The Book on Adler* is to differentiate the kind of authority that properly belongs to revelations from the kind of authority that properly belongs to various kinds of evidence. And this means gaining a clear view of the conceptual relations between revelation and authority.

In order to get to grips with Minor’s case it will be useful to stay for a moment with the example of evidence that is given in a court of law. Consider in particular the case of the so-called ‘expert witness’. The role of expert witnesses is to bring their knowledge to bear upon certain aspects of a case. Typically this means interpreting what certain facts or statements show. The authority of the expert witness stems from the fact

⁹⁷ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 425.

⁹⁸ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 427.

that he or she is in a better position than any layperson to make such an interpretation. While the unaided jury could only *speculate* whether the presence of certain drugs in a person's bloodstream may have caused that person to be drowsy, a medical doctor would be able to spell out the implications in some detail. Consequently, it makes sense for the jury to defer to the opinion of the doctor on that matter. What is important to note is that it is the expert knowledge and skills that the doctor brings to the courtroom that gives him or her authority. *Any* doctor with relevant skills and knowledge could act as the expert witness. And, in principle, any layperson could take the place of the expert witness provided he or she first successfully acquired the relevant skills and knowledge. But not all authority stems from expertise. Take, for example, the case of parental authority. Here authority is not conferred by virtue of knowledge, but by virtue of parenthood. Clearly children and young adults do not always recognise this authority, by refusing to eat their greens, or by sneaking off to parties, stealing hamsters from pet shops, and so on. Expert witnesses are perhaps less likely to meet with this kind of rebellion. Nonetheless, the fact that children do *rebel* against their parents shows that there is a concept of authority at stake. If parents had no authority over their children it would make no sense to say that the children had rebelled. Furthermore, parental authority cannot be gained by undergoing training in the way that the authority of an expert witness can be gained by so doing. It is true that one can gain parental authority – for example by fostering a child – or lose it – for example by becoming estranged. But gaining and losing parental authority in these ways does not come down to losing or gaining knowledge.

What the example of parental authority shows, then, is that not all concepts of authority rest on knowledge. Or to put this differently, not all figures of authority have that authority by virtue of their knowledge. And Minor draws our attention to how easy it is to lose track of this fact, and to assume that all authority is rooted in superior knowledge.

‘If a son were to say, “I obey my father not because he is my father but because he is a genius, or because his commands are always profound and brilliant, “ this filial obedience is affected. The son emphasizes something altogether wrong, emphasizes the brilliance, the profundity in a *command*, whereas a command is simply indifferent to this qualification. The son is willing to obey on the basis of the father's profundity and

brilliance, and on that basis he simply cannot *obey* him, because his critical attitude with regard to whether the command is profound and brilliant undermined the obedience.’⁹⁹

The mistake that the son makes is to confuse parental authority with the kind of authority that comes with expertise.

The point that Minor makes here with respect to the relation between parent and child can also be made with respect to the relation between the religious person and prophets. The mistake that the son makes is to think that he should obey his father because his father is clever, erudite or knowledgeable. But this is not how the concept of parental authority works. One is – or should be – obedient to one’s parents simply because they are one’s parents. What is important is who they are, not what they know. And, similarly, what is important about religious prophets is who they are, not their intellect, erudition or knowledge. As Minor explains:

‘I am not to listen to Paul because he is brilliant or matchlessly brilliant, but I am to submit to Paul because he has divine authority; and in any case it must become Paul’s responsibility to see to it that that he produces this impression, whether anyone submits to his authority or not. Paul must not appeal to his brilliance, since in that case he is a fool; he must not become involved in a purely aesthetic or philosophic discussion of the content of the doctrine, since in that case he is absentminded. No, he must appeal to his divine authority and precisely through it, while he willingly sacrifices life and everything, *prevent* all impertinent aesthetic and philosophical superficial observations against the form and content of the doctrine.’¹⁰⁰

In this passage Climacus points out that the concept of divine authority has implications not only for those who would listen to the word of God, but also for those who would preach it. If it is a mistake to look for expert knowledge in religious preaching it is also a mistake for a religious prophet to peddle knowledge in his or her preaching. For if one peddles special knowledge then one’s authority is that of an expert. But, as we have seen, religious authority is more akin to parental authority than to expert authority. As Minor explains:

⁹⁹ This quote is taken from the Hong’s edition of *The Book on Adler*. Op. cit., 185.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 177.

‘A Christian pastor, if he is to speak properly, must simply say, “We have Christ’s word that there is an eternal life, and with that the matter is decided. Here it is a matter neither of racking one’s brains nor of speculating, but of its being Christ who, not in the capacity of profundity but with his divine authority, has said it”’¹⁰¹

Minor speculates that the tendency to confuse divine authority with expert authority is rooted in our failure to come to terms with important differences between the concept of God and the concept of a person.

‘A king exists physically in such a way that one can physically assure oneself of it, and if it is necessary perhaps the king can very physically assure one that he exists. But God does not exist in that way. Doubt has made use of this to place God on the same level with geniuses, poets and thinkers, whose utterances are imply evaluated only aesthetically or philosophically; and if it is said well, then the man is a genius – and if it is said exceptionally well, then it is God who has said it!!!’¹⁰²

Somebody who thinks in this way reasons that the wisdom or philosophical acumen that can be found in the sayings of God ‘compensates’ for the fact that God is not an empirical entity.

From Minor’s point of view James’s error is to fall into the trap of thinking that the authority of revelations is derived from the special knowledge that they bring. According to James mystics are entitled to trust in their visions precisely because in those visions they are given an immediate ‘glimpse’ of God. They are granted, as it were, an insider’s knowledge of God. But people who have not had such experiences do not know what it is to stand in the presence of God. Mere reports of this knowledge are not compelling. One has to have the experience in order to really *know*. But for Minor the authority of revelations does not have to do with knowledge at all, but with obedience.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 184

¹⁰² Ibid. 178

6) A Concluding Defence

In the foregoing I have pitted Kierkegaard's understanding of revelation against James's understanding of mysticism. But before it is possible to conclude anything from this exchange, it is necessary to address an important objection. Somebody may ask, quite rightly, whether in comparing Kierkegaard's remarks on Christian revelation with James's more general remarks on mysticism we are really comparing like for like? If revelation is conceptually distinct from mysticism are we not simply talking about two things? If that is the case then the exchange between Kierkegaard and James that I have set out above is really only what the Dane would doubtless call shadow boxing. Both sides can claim an easy victory; but it is a pointless victory, since the opponent is really elsewhere.

In reply to this objection let us first note that the terms 'mysticism' and 'revelation' need not be mutually exclusive. It would certainly make sense to say that a revelation from Christ, say, is a mystical experience. And, secondly, James did not think that the Christian tradition is excluded from his account of mystical experiences. Saint Ignatius, Saint John of the Cross, Saint Teresa and Dionysius the Areopagite all make an appearance in James's pages on mysticism. Furthermore, both Kierkegaard and James address the same philosophical question, namely what kind of authority should be attached to acute religious experiences. We can conclude, then, that although the accounts offered by Kierkegaard and James are, so to speak, chalk and cheese, this does not mean that there is no sense in comparing them or bringing their arguments to bear on one another.

7) A Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter I have compared Kierkegaard's and James's accounts of religious experience. I surveyed the remarks made on this subject by Kierkegaard and James; and compared the religious experiences of the two philosophers. I then compared three aspects of their accounts. Firstly, I compared what Kierkegaard and James have to say about the origins of religious experiences. Secondly, I assess James's claim that religious experiences are evidence for the existence of God in the light of Kierkegaard's claim that religious experiences cannot be evidence of the existence of God. Finally I compared James and Kierkegaard on the issue of what authority we can attach to

religious experiences. My argument has been that in each of these three areas of comparison Kierkegaard's case is superior to James's.

Chapter 4

Life-views and Sick Souls

Introduction

In the preceding chapters I have made several arguments to the effect that Kierkegaard does not think that having a religious belief comes to accepting the objective truth of certain propositions. In the first chapter I argued that although Kierkegaard thinks that faith is risky, he does not think that the kind of risk involved has to do with not knowing whether it is objectively true that there is a God. In other words, for Kierkegaard, faith is not a gamble on the objective truth of the proposition that there is a God. In the second chapter I argued that Kierkegaard denies the coherence and relevance of formal proofs for the existence of God. Such proofs, of course, are designed to demonstrate the objective truth of the proposition that there is a God. But, for Kierkegaard, it is a great misunderstanding to think that such a demonstration can ground a life of faith. It is clear, then, what Kierkegaard does *not* think constitutes a good account of religious belief. In this chapter I shall consider Kierkegaard's more positive account of what constitutes a religious belief. In particular I shall discuss his proposal that a religious belief is a 'life-view.' And I shall also discuss whether James makes any similar proposals.

Gilmartin deserves credit for tabling the suggestion that there may be some mileage in comparing Kierkegaard's notion of a life-view with certain arguments in James.¹ However, I shall only touch briefly on Gilmartin's case. The reason for this is that Gilmartin's argument is intimately bound up with his proposal that similarities between the biographies of James and Kierkegaard explain similarities between their philosophical views. I have already discussed this proposal in the introduction, where I argued that it is untenable. Nonetheless, it is possible to ask whether there are other, non-biographical reasons for thinking that Kierkegaard and James are making similar cases. Furthermore, there is considerable value in comparing Kierkegaard's arguments

¹ Gilmartin, T. (1974) *Soul-Sickness: A Comparison of William James and Soren Kierkegaard*, Ph.D thesis, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California.

with James's. It gives us an opportunity to clarify their positions, and, as I shall argue, to clarify the differences between their arguments in particular.

One way of gaining an initial purchase on what Kierkegaard means by a life-view is to recall his observation that we live 'forwards' but understand 'backwards'. The bald observation that we live forwards and understand backwards is by no means easy to understand. If by 'living forwards' is meant facing the future then the remark seems simply false. We do of course understand quite a bit about the future, for example that the cricket season will finish at the end of summer. And, conversely, there's quite a bit that we don't know about the past, for example the precise number of waves that broke on West Bay beach last year. But Kierkegaard's observation is not about understanding things like the cricket season and oceanography. Rather, I take it that his point is to highlight an important distinction between the actual contingencies and exigencies of our lives and the disinterested study of life. Kierkegaard insists that we are often guilty of losing track of this distinction between the interested pursuit of life and the disinterested study of life. In his journals, for example, he complains, 'How easily a person is led to think of man (an abstraction) instead of himself, this tremendous concretion.'² And the Dane ruminates further on this theme in a journal entry for 1843:

'Philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other clause – that it must be lived forwards. The more one thinks through this clause, the more one concludes that life in temporality never becomes properly understandable, simply because never at any time does one get a perfect repose to take a stance: backwards.'³

Here Kierkegaard seems to think that life is contingent and demanding; and that only by thinking about life retrospectively in a disinterested fashion can we make it orderly and thereby comprehensible. But Kierkegaard also seems to worry that the contingencies and exigencies of life are such that no disinterested retrospective view of it is possible. Our 'backwards' understanding is rooted in the ever-changing present, such that no

² Kierkegaard, S. (1975) *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers Volume 3, L-R*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong, and E.H Hong, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Entry no. 2324.

³ *Journals*, Vol. 1 no. 1030.

conclusions can ever finally be drawn: ‘life in temporality never becomes properly understandable.’⁴

As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, James was familiar with Kierkegaard’s distinction between living forwards and understanding backwards. For that reason it is perhaps unsurprising that in *Varieties* James similarly makes a strong distinction between the ‘backwards’ disinterested contemplation of life and the concrete, personal conduct of life: ‘Knowledge about life is one thing; effective occupation of a place in life, with its dynamic currents passing through your being, is another.’⁵ In common with Kierkegaard, then, James holds that our lives are contingent and exigent in a way that somehow resists disinterested ratiocination. Furthermore, both Kierkegaard and James offer piecemeal explanations as to why this distinction between understanding ‘backwards’ and living ‘forwards’ has sometimes been ignored or has not been recognized.⁶ But, interestingly, neither Kierkegaard nor James concludes that there is *no* sense in which we can say that that ‘life in temporality’ is ‘properly understandable’. In fact while neither Kierkegaard nor James recant on the distinction between living forwards and understanding backwards, both philosophers try to remove the ‘sting’ that apparently follows from it. To this end Kierkegaard argues that we can understand ourselves in temporality by developing what he calls a ‘life-view’.

David Swenson helpfully glosses Kierkegaard’s complex notion of a life-view in the following way: ‘A view of life is a principle of living, a spirit and an attitude

⁴ *Journals*, Vol. 1 No. 1030.

⁵ James, W. (1982a) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 489.

⁶ For example, James suggests that a wholly abstract account of religious belief may appear attractive because it circumvents all the actual concrete difficulties of living a life of religious devotion: ‘Warranted systems have ever been the idols of aspiring souls. [...] what more ideal refuge could there be than such a system would offer to spirits vexed by the muddiness and accidentality of the world of sensible things?’ (*Varieties*, *ibid.* 433-434) Climacus may well have approved of this remark. For he also thinks that the attractiveness of abstract thinking might be explained by its perceived psychological benefits: ‘In order to shed light on logic, it might be desirable to become oriented psychologically in the state of mind of someone who thinks the logical – what kind of dying to oneself is required for that purpose, and to what extent the imagination plays a part of it.’ (*Postscript*, *op. cit.*, 117.) Kierkegaard also speculated that aesthetics might provide an explanation for the attractiveness of abstract thinking. ‘It is certainly remarkable that the abstract expression in a rhetorical presentation is sometimes more effective than concrete description. [...] in the same way that the abstract also has something engaging about it, a breeze, as it were, from the universal which passes over the listener’s head and stirs him precisely because he is not being talked about in particular.’ (*Journals*, Vol. 1, No. 629) Kierkegaard also speculates that confusions between concrete and abstract thinking can be explained by reference to the nature of language: ‘Speech is in fact an abstraction and always presents the abstract rather than the concrete.

Approaching something scientifically, esthetically, etc., how easily a person is led into the conceit that he really knows something for which he has the word. It is the concrete intuition which is so easily lost here.’ (*Journals* Vol. 3, No. 2324)

capable of maintaining its unity and identity with itself in all life's complexities and varying vicissitudes; and yet also capable of being declined, to use the terminology of the grammatical sciences, in all the infinite variety of cases that the language of life affords.'⁷ What a life-view provides to the person who has it, then, is a consistent interpretation of life, such that the kind of meaning and significance that one attaches to one's life is not hostage to the vicissitudes of everyday, contingent 'forward facing' existence. A life-view is not 'backwards' facing, in the sense that it is not a disinterested theoretical account of the past events in one's life. Consequently, and as Swenson points out, a life-view 'is not acquired as a direct and immediate result of a course of study, the reading of books, or a communication of results.'⁸ But this does not imply that a life-view is 'forwards' facing. By that I mean that a life-view is not simply a register of all the new and contingent things that happen or fail to happen in one's life. And one does not attain a life-view simply by keeping an inventory of such things. Rather, the attainment of a life-view is 'wholly a product of the individual's own knowledge of himself as an individual.'⁹ Consequently, a life-view is attained not by theorizing about past events in one's life or by recording new events in one's life, but by what Kierkegaard sometimes calls 'self-examination'. Furthermore, for some people, the result of such self-examination will be to come to a religious point of view. That is to say that such a person will adopt a religious perspective as his or her 'principle for living.'

Quite what Kierkegaard means by a life-view, and the ramifications that this idea has for his philosophical project, are subjects that I shall discuss in the course of this chapter. However, as I noted above, I shall also discuss to what extent James promotes an idea similar to Kierkegaard's. With this in mind there are two areas in James's corpus that I shall examine. The first of these is *Pragmatism*. At the outset of *Pragmatism* James notes that the most important thing to know about one's fellows is their philosophy. But he does not mean philosophy in any formal or academic sense; and his point is not that it is important to know whether one's fellows are Hegelians, or devotees of Berkeley, or anything of that kind. Rather, as James puts it, 'the philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is our more or less dumb

⁷ Swenson, D.F. (2000) "The Dignity of Human Life", in E.D. Klemke (ed.) *The Meaning of Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 21.

⁸ Swenson, *ibid.*, 21.

⁹ Swenson, *ibid.*, 21.

sense of what life honestly and deeply means.’¹⁰ The question that I wish to raise, then, is whether James’s conception of ‘dumb sense’ is comparable with Kierkegaard’s notion of a life-view. The second area of James’s corpus that I shall look at is his remarks in *Varieties* concerning the ‘sick soul’. In his discussion of the sick soul, James argues that the cure for certain kinds of melancholy is for the afflicted person to adopt a religious outlook or perspective on life. Kierkegaard similarly frames some of his discussion life-views by reference to melancholy. I shall discuss how far James’s account of the sick soul is anticipated by Kierkegaard’s reflections.

I start by developing an account of Kierkegaard’s conception of life-views, locating it in the context of his doctrine of subjective truth. I then discuss each of James’s arguments in turn in relation to Kierkegaard’s position. I shall argue that Kierkegaard’s conception of life-views and James’s conceptions of ‘dumb sense’ and sick souls are, in fact, quite different.

1) Kierkegaard on life-views

Kierkegaard’s conception of a life-view is intimately bound up with his view that the truth of Christianity is a ‘subjective truth.’ For this reason I shall start by briefly rehearsing some of the details and implications of that view. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, Kierkegaard thinks that it’s a capital error to argue that the truth of Christianity is something that can and should be established by means of objective enquiry. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus points out that if we enquire into the objective truth of Christianity this can be done in two ways. Firstly, we can treat Christianity as an historical claim that Jesus lived on earth. To enquire into the truth of Christianity, then, is to enquire whether it is objectively true that Jesus lived on earth. Alternatively, we can treat Christianity as a philosophical thesis. If we accept this position then to enquire into the truth of Christianity is to enquire into the objective truth of a philosophical position. As we saw in the first two chapters of this thesis, Climacus does not think that either of these approaches can work. Climacus argues that it is not possible to demonstrate the objective existence of *any* historical figure, including Jesus. And, furthermore, philosophical analysis can only establish that the concept of Christ is paradoxical. But to show that the concept of Christ is paradoxical is in no way to demonstrate the objective truth or falsity of that concept. The paradoxical

¹⁰ James, W. (1995) *Pragmatism*. Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1. Hereafter *Pragmatism*.

concept of Christ is neither objectively true nor objectively false, but simply paradoxical. However, as well as objecting to the idea that historical and philosophical enquiry can establish the objective truth or falsity of Christianity, Climacus also puts forward a different and arguably more fundamental objection to these approaches. Climacus' point is that these approaches not only fail to prove the objective truth or falsity of Christianity but are, in any case, *irrelevant*. For Christianity is not an historical claim, nor a philosophical claim, but a religious claim. And as a religious claim, Christianity is not a thesis to be objectively demonstrated or refuted but an injunction to turn one's life around. As Climacus complains, 'Surely a philosophical theory that is to be comprehended and speculatively understood is one thing, and a doctrine that is to be actualised in existence is something else.'¹¹ To actualise the Christian doctrine in existence is to have a Christian life-view. And, as we shall see below, to have a life-view is to have a certain kind of fundamental perspective on one's life. But before discussing this claim it will be useful to look a little more at some of the implications of Climacus' conception of subjective truth.

Advocates of historical and philosophical research into the truth of Christianity might respond to Climacus' point by saying that surely we should establish whether Christianity is objectively true *before* deciding whether to turn our lives around in accordance with it. But against this Climacus objects that an objective enquiry into the truth of Christianity cannot have any bearing on whether we choose to turn our life around. For to accept that Christianity is objectively true is to accept that it is true regardless of how we relate to it on a personal level. But, of course, to turn one's life around *is* to take Christianity personally. It is, as Climacus says, to actualise it in one's existence. In other words there is a qualitative difference between accepting the objective truth of Christianity and turning one's life around in the light of Christianity, such that the former cannot be the ground for the latter. Suppose somebody failed to notice this and chose to turn his or her life around strictly on the understanding that Christianity had been shown to be objectively true. Such a person would not in fact turn his or her life around in the relevant way. For his or her relation to Christianity is still *fundamentally* one of objective enquiry. As Climacus explains, 'With regard to the subject's relation to known truth it is assumed that if only the objective truth has been

¹¹ Kierkegaard, S. (1992b) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 379.

obtained, appropriation is an easy matter; it is automatically included as part of the bargain, and *am Ende* the individual is a matter of indifference.’¹² But, of course, actualising Christianity in one’s existence is not at all ‘part of the bargain’ when one demonstrates the objective truth of Christianity. For the authority of such a proof stems from the fact that it does not rest on any personal convictions; consequently accepting such a proof in no way places one in a personal relation to Christianity.

Of course if objective enquiry is irrelevant to deciding the truth of Christianity, then responsibility for that decision must rest with our own personal judgement. In other words we cannot, as it were, sit back and wait for some piece of objective evidence or a compelling impersonal argument to settle the issue once and for all and for all of humanity. We shall each of us have to make a personal decision about whether or not to turn our life around according to the Christian injunction. And this in turn raises the issue of what kinds of considerations are relevant to such a decision. Clearly, and as I argued in chapter 1, Kierkegaard doesn’t think that we can only *guess* whether or not Christianity is true. But, for the reasons I have just discussed, it is also the case that we cannot advance philosophical or empirical theses in support of Christianity or against it.

In one sense we wouldn’t expect there to be a general answer to the question of what kinds of considerations are relevant to deciding between Christian belief and unbelief. For, as we have just noted, the issue is strictly personal. But that is not to say that *any* personal views on Christianity are relevant. For example I may greatly enjoy church jamborees, but to become a Christian on *that* basis would clearly be to make a mockery of faith. The kinds of personal reflections relevant to deciding for or against faith, then, must have to do with Climacus’ claim that Christianity is to be actualised in existence. In other words, the kinds of questions that I must ask myself will have to do with whether I can see the point of living a Christian existence, whether I can see what living in that way comes to, and whether I am really able to actualise that kind of existence. To ask such questions is not, of course, to undertake an objective enquiry; for they are questions that I pose to myself from a first-person interested perspective. But this in no way implies that they are not serious questions, or that I am free to answer them in any way that I choose. They are, after all, still questions and not invitations to fanciful thinking.

¹² *Postscript*, *ibid.*, 22.

So far, then, we have seen that for Kierkegaard Christianity is not a philosophical thesis but an ‘existence communication’. Consequently, if I am to be a Christian my task is not to make an objective study of Christianity but to realise Christianity in existence. But the distinction that Kierkegaard draws between objective study and subjective actualisation does not only apply to Christianity. For, as Climacus often insists, it is *always* the case that to have an objective understanding of something is not to actualise it in existence. Of course, although this distinction always holds it is not always relevant. For example chemistry is clearly and properly an area of objective study. And studying chemistry is not to ‘actualise chemistry in existence’ in the way that Christians actualise Christianity in existence. But although it is true that to study chemistry is not to actualise it in existence, this observation is surely misplaced. For it simply makes no sense to claim that chemistry *should* be actualised in existence. This point is easily misunderstood because we sometimes do make changes to our lives in the light of advances in chemistry. For example we utilise new, non-natural materials such as nylon. However, to utilise the results of areas of objective study is not to actualise those areas of study in existence. Indeed it simply makes no sense to claim that I can or should actualise chemistry in existence. For, as we have already noted, chemistry is an area of objective research. But to actualise a doctrine in existence is to orient oneself subjectively in relation to that doctrine.

However, this is not to claim that the distinction between objective study and subjective actualisation applies only to Christianity. On the contrary, Climacus argues that the distinction is crucial if we are to understand what is involved in answering a whole range of what we might call ‘existential’ questions. That is to say, questions about what we should do, how we should understand ourselves, and what ethical commitments we should have. These are questions that fundamentally have to do with how we are to exist. That is to say that to answer such questions by making an objective study of them is to miss the mark. For no amount of objective study will come to the same thing as actually orienting or committing one’s life in a certain way. And it is in relation to these ‘existential’ questions – including the question of whether to become a Christian - that the notion of a life-view is important. The relevant kind of answer to these problems is not to develop a philosophical thesis on them, but, rather, to develop and actualise in one’s existence a standpoint with regard to them. And to do this is to attain a life-view.

We can gain some initial understanding of what Kierkegaard means by a life-view by looking at his comments on fellow author Hans Christian Andersen. For reasons that I shall discuss below, Kierkegaard takes the view that Andersen has no life-view. Kierkegaard characterises this failure in the following way: ‘- he [Andersen] is characterized rather as a possibility of a personality, wrapped up in such a web of arbitrary moods and moving through an elegiac duo-decimal-scale of almost echoless, dying tones just as easily roused as subdued, who, in order to become a personality, needs a strong life-development.’¹³ In this passage Kierkegaard is clearly making a more complex and more interesting claim than that Andersen is a bit ‘moody’. Kierkegaard’s point is that Andersen’s lack of a life-view means that he has no fundamental standpoint with regard to his life. And one implication of this is that he has no basic context in which to view his own changes of mood. As a result he understands his life first one way, then another, then another, and so on, as the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune induce different emotional responses in him. He is ‘just as easily roused as subdued’. Consequently, Andersen commands no clear view of his life and is only ‘a possibility of a personality’.

Kierkegaard’s remark about Andersen certainly brings out something of what Kierkegaard thinks follows from a failure to have a life-view. But we still might wonder exactly what it is that Andersen lacks. What could provide the kind of fundamental perspective that he lacks? Three answers that we might consider are life experience, nostalgia and philosophy. By the former I mean to suggest that Andersen’s problem could be simply that he hasn’t seen much of life. If he had a richer biography he would, perhaps, be able to place his own life into perspective. My second suggestion is that Andersen might gain a fundamental perspective on his life by always relating himself to one particular event in the past. And by the last suggestion I mean that Andersen’s problem could be that he lacks a philosophical account of the self. A theory of the self could perhaps provide the relevant perspective by means of which to make consistent sense of his own life. But in fact Kierkegaard considers and rejects all of these solutions.

That Kierkegaard distinguishes strongly between a rich biography and a life-view is clear from the following passage from his review of Thomasine Gyllembourg’s

¹³ Kierkegaard, S (1990a) *Early Polemical Writings*, trans. J. Watkin, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 70. Hereafter *Papers*.

book *Two Ages*. ‘The life-view creatively sustaining these stories [*Two Ages*] remains the same, while an ingenious inventiveness, a reserve of material gained from a rich experience and a fertile luxuriance of mood, all serve to produce change within creative repetition.’¹⁴ Here Kierkegaard’s point is not only that a life-view is not a rich biography, but that it is only by virtue of having a life-view that the author is able to order, interpret and communicate that rich experience. In other words it is only by virtue of having a life-view that Gyllembourg is able to have a consistent perspective on the rich mixture of moods and events that have featured in her life. It follows that, in Kierkegaard’s eyes, Andersen cannot solve his problem by leading a richer or more varied life. Arguably leading a more varied life may even worsen his problem, for it will furnish him with more moods and experiences without enabling him to view his life from the point of view of a consistent standpoint.

But if a life-view is not a rich biography then neither is it simply nostalgia. Kierkegaard explains his thinking on this matter in *Repetition*.

‘He [a person with a life-view] does not run about like a boy chasing butterflies or stand on tiptoe to look for the glories of the world, for he knows them. Neither does he sit like an old woman turning the spinning wheel of recollection but calmly goes his way, happy in repetition. Indeed, what would life be if there were no repetition? Who could want to be a tablet on which time writes something new every instant or to be a memorial volume of the past? Who could want to be susceptible to every fleeting thing, the novel, which always enervatingly diverts the soul anew?’¹⁵

A life-view facilitates ‘repetition’ in the sense that it provides a constant perspective from which to understand oneself and one’s life. In other words if one has a life-view one is able to ‘repeat’ the same self-understanding in spite of the constantly changing circumstances of one’s life. However, achieving this kind of repetition is not the same as being nostalgic and thereby becoming a ‘memorial volume of the past.’ And the reason for this, I take it, is that to become a memorial volume of the past is really only a way of avoiding or denying the constantly changing circumstances of one’s life. For

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, S. (2001) *A Literary Review*, trans. A. Hannay, London: Penguin, 11.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, S. (1983) *Fear and Trembling & Repetition*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E. H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 132-3. Hereafter *Fear and Trembling*.

somebody who is in the grip of nostalgia, what *matters* is only what has happened in the past, and the rest of one's life is of no consequence. But if that is the case then repetition is not possible. For repetition is only possible if one takes seriously the changing circumstances of one's life. It is only possible to 'repeat' the same self-understanding in spite of the constantly changing circumstances of one's life if those circumstances are indeed changing. Nostalgia, then, avoids the need to repeat one's self-understanding in new and ever-changing circumstances. However, as Constantine points out, the cost of this is to lead a seriously impoverished life.

Finally, Kierkegaard considers whether a life-view is a philosophical position. In the following remark from his review of Andersen, Kierkegaard does seem to come close to suggesting that a life-view is some kind of theory. 'There must come a moment, I say, when, as Daub observes, life is understood backwards through the idea.'¹⁶ What this observation rightly suggests is that if one has a life-view one has an idea of who one is through which one interprets one's life. But what is misleading about the notion that one understands oneself 'backwards through the idea' is that it suggests that one's self-understanding is primarily theoretical. In other words Kierkegaard seems to be suggesting that a life-view is a theory – some sort of philosophical account of the self, for example – which one uses to make sense of life. Having a life-view, then, would be something like an all-consuming exercise in applied philosophy. But this is not at all what Kierkegaard has in mind, as he makes clear in the following declaration: '[...] I have never maintained that an idea as such (least of all a fixed idea) is to be regarded as a life-view [...].'¹⁷

The reason that Kierkegaard discourages us from thinking that a life-view is a theory is that theories are hypotheses. And there are two related reasons why a life-view cannot be a hypothesis. Firstly, hypotheses are open to revision and replacement. Consequently if our life-view were a hypothesis we would be prepared to revise or discard it whenever we found it difficult to apply. But, of course, if that were the case our life-view would hardly be a means by which we could understand our lives. Rather, the ever-changing events in our lives would drive us to keep amending our self-understanding, which is exactly the unfortunate situation that the development of a life-view is supposed to head off. The second reason that a life view cannot be a hypothesis

¹⁶ *Papers*, op. cit., 78.

¹⁷ *Papers*, *ibid.*, 79.

is that life-views are profoundly personal. A hypothesis is subject to disinterested enquiry, but self-understanding is by definition developed by interested personal enquiry or 'self-examination'. For this reason Kierkegaard notes that 'a life-view is more than a quintessence or a sum of propositions maintained in its abstract neutrality...'¹⁸

We know then, that a life-view is not a rich biography or nostalgia or a theory. But compared with these statements about what *doesn't* constitute a life-view Kierkegaard's positive definitions of a life-view can seem disappointingly brief and figurative. In his review of Andersen, for example, he tells us that a life-view is 'the transubstantiation of experience' and that it is a 'standpoint'.¹⁹ And the best that we can do with these remarks is to underscore what we have already understood; namely that for Kierkegaard a life-view is a fundamental perspective through which one understands oneself and one's life. But, arguably, Kierkegaard has quite a bit more to tell us about life-views if we look to his pseudonymous works.

In his pseudonymous works Kierkegaard presents us with what he sometimes calls poetic constructions. In these poetic constructions Kierkegaard gives us a portrait of characters that hold various life-views. This is not, of course, to claim that Kierkegaard presents us with portraits of people who are living various different lifestyles. I take it that the term 'lifestyle' is generally used to denote practices or interests that dominate one's routine. For example, the 'healthy' lifestyle revolves around the gym, and the - arguably more congenial - 'party' lifestyle revolves around boozy socialising, and so on. But Kierkegaard's imaginary constructions are clearly not examples of different lifestyles in *this* sense.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that in his imaginary constructions, Kierkegaard is not simply presenting us with an eccentrically fictionalised thesis. As we have seen above, for Kierkegaard the real task that each of us must undertake in relation to 'existential' questions is not study them objectively. For example, in relation to Christianity our task is to get to grips with whether we really understand what it is to believe in Christ, what living a Christian life comes to, and whether we are able and willing to live such a life. But, as Climacus repeatedly points out, undertaking this kind of reflection is a personal, interested *task*. In other words one must undertake 'self-

¹⁸ *Papers*, *ibid.*, 76.

¹⁹ *Papers*, *ibid.*, 76–77.

examination' in order to see how one stands subjectively in relation to Christianity. Proposing an objective theory of the truth of Christianity, then, is irrelevant and misleading in the sense that it leads the reader to reflect objectively on the truth of Christianity rather than to reflect subjectively on how one stands in relation to Christianity. As Climacus points out, 'Existing in what one understands cannot be directly communicated to an existing spirit, not even by God, still less by a human being.'²⁰ Consequently Kierkegaard must communicate 'indirectly'.

This does not imply that there are *no* philosophical discussions in Kierkegaard's imaginary constructions. As we have already noted, Climacus himself engages in some complex theoretical debates, for example on proofs for the existence of God. But we needn't conclude that Kierkegaard has 'slipped up' by including theoretical discourses in his imaginary constructions. For Kierkegaard's conception of indirect communication hinges on the claim that Christianity is not a philosophical thesis to be assessed, but an 'existence communication' to be actualised in one's life. It follows from this that if Kierkegaard is to avoid being accused of contradicting himself he must not present Christianity as a philosophical thesis. But this in no way bars him from entering *any* philosophical debate. And, indeed, much of Kierkegaard's work would be a great deal more puzzling if he had omitted all philosophical discussion. For example, if Climacus had not set out his criticisms of the notion that it is possible and desirable to prove the existence of God, then I think many readers would be greatly puzzled by much of what he has to say. For surely, given that many philosophers have thought it important to prove or disprove the existence of God, we should wonder why Climacus doesn't present us with some kind of proof along these lines. And, furthermore, it does *matter* whether what Climacus says on this issue is plausible or not. Climacus' rejection of the claim that it is plausible and desirable to prove the existence of God is intimately bound up with his view that Christianity is not a philosophical thesis, or an historical thesis, but an 'existence communication.' What Climacus' says about proofs, then, has an important bearing on his whole project. Consequently we *should* seriously scrutinize the objective truth of Climacus' philosophical claims on proofs.

Somebody may object that by entering into a philosophical discussion of proofs for the existence of God, Climacus will inevitably lead his reader into an objective appraisal of his thesis and away from subjective self-examination. Against this we can

²⁰ *Postscript*, op. cit., 275.

start by observing that although Climacus makes philosophical arguments about proofs for the existence of God, this does not amount to presenting Christianity as a philosophical thesis. And for this reason we cannot say that Climacus encourages his reader to think that what must be settled is whether Christianity is objectively true or false. We can, I think, concede that somebody may, as it were, become obsessed with Climacus' reflections on proofs. Such a person could then become engrossed in making an objective assessment of Climacus' arguments, rather than worrying about his or her own subjective relation to Christianity. But in fact I don't think that this is to concede anything that Climacus need worry about. For one thing it is unreasonable to expect Climacus to determine in advance how readers will position themselves in relation to what he has written. No author can prevent his or her works being read in a context that he or she did not intend. Furthermore, there are plenty of remarks in Climacus' work in which he makes it abundantly clear that he does not think that assessing the objective truth of philosophical arguments about the existence of God comes to the same thing as determining one's subjective relation to Christianity. Consequently, any reader who merely obsesses over Climacus' remarks on proofs must acknowledge that he or she is not, as it were, looking at the full picture. And what I have said here in relation to Climacus' remarks on proofs can, I think, hold good for all of the philosophical arguments that are advanced in Kierkegaard's indirect communication. That is to say that we can and should take them seriously as arguments; and to do so is not to contradict or lose sight of Kierkegaard's insight that Christianity is not a philosophical thesis.

Kierkegaard's doctrine of indirect communication has important implications for Kierkegaard's views on philosophical authorship. I shall return to this below in my discussion of James's conception of the sick soul. At this point, however, I shall finish my account of life-views by briefly indicating what a Christian life-view is like, and how it is different from other life-views.

As is well known, Kierkegaard presents three principal life-views in his pseudonymous authorship: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. The pseudonym Frater Taciturnus, makes the following distinction between the aesthetic and ethical spheres: 'The aesthetic sphere is the sphere of immediacy, the ethical the sphere of requirement (and this requirement is so infinite that the individual always goes

bankrupt)²¹. The notion that the aesthetic sphere is the ‘sphere of immediacy’ is at first glance hard to fathom. For the term ‘immediacy’ seems to imply ‘thoughtless’ or ‘unreflective’. But although Kierkegaard’s various pseudonymous depictions of the aesthetic sphere are often full of sensuous pursuits they also depict aesthetes engaged in complex reflection. So to be an aesthete, then, is not to be a *thoughtless* sensualist. And, in fact, we might even say that what characterizes the aesthetic sphere is reflection; but, importantly, it is disinterested reflection. As Conant points out, ‘With respect to the aesthetic, the accent falls on the what – that is, it falls directly on the object of one’s concern.’²² In other words, the aesthete is absorbed in whatever it is that holds his or her interest – a person, a glass of fine wine, a stroll, a poem, or whatever. In this sense the aesthete is primarily an observer. And it is with this in mind that we can begin to appreciate the distinction that Taciturnus cleaves between the aesthetic and ethical spheres. To be bound by ethical requirement is to be concerned about one’s subjective relation to life’s events. That is to say that ethically one does not merely observe things, but takes up an interested stance in relation to them. The ethicist has commitments, then, where the aesthete has observations.

The religious sphere is also characterised by subjective commitment. This is hardly surprising given that Kierkegaard constantly insists that Christianity is not a doctrine to be dispassionately assessed but an ‘existence communication’ which is to be actualised. However, the religious sphere of existence is by no means the ethical sphere in all but name; a point that Climacus makes rather dramatically by pointing out that from a religious point of view ethics is a ‘temptation.’²³ To be an ethicist is to act responsibly. And to act responsibly is to act in accordance with sound and careful judgements about what is good and right, and not to act on the basis of personal whims or fancies. As the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio puts it, ‘Thus in the ethical view of life, it is the task of the single individual to strip himself of the qualification of interiority and to express this in something external.’²⁴ Of course people can and do arrive at different judgements about what, ethically speaking, are right and wrong. But

²¹ Kierkegaard, S. (1988) *Stages on Life’s Way*, ed. and trans. H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 476.

²² Conant J. (1995) “Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors”, in T. Tassin and M. von der Ruhr (eds) *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 260.

²³ *Postscript*, op. cit., 259.

²⁴ *Fear and Trembling*, op. cit., 69

the important point here is that the ethicist's judgements are not arbitrary. Furthermore, since they are not arbitrary judgements it is possible for the ethicist to give an account of his views. In other words his or her judgements are at least publicly comprehensible, even if we wouldn't expect everybody to agree with them. And it is this that leads Climacus to claim that religiously speaking the ethical is a temptation. For there is an important sense in which a Christian cannot explain himself or herself in the way that the ethicist can. This is not at all to claim that in order to be a Christian one must deny one's faith or simply keep quiet about it. Rather, it is to claim that one's Christian faith cannot be given a public explanation in the way that one's ethical judgements can. As de Silentio notes, 'The paradox of faith is that there is an interiority that is incommensurable with exteriority, an interiority that is not identical, please note, with the first, but is a new interiority.'²⁵ Clearly Silentio is not arguing that to have faith is merely to follow some whim or private fancy. His point, I take it, is that there is an important sense in which one cannot enter into a public debate about one's faith without radically misrepresenting it. And the reason for this, I take it, is the same reason that underpins Kierkegaard's doctrine of indirect communication. In other words it has to do with the fact that Christianity is both paradoxical and an existence communication. As we have seen in the foregoing discussion, it is not possible to give an objective account of faith precisely because Christianity is not a philosophical doctrine but a paradoxical existence communication to be actualised in one's life. To attempt to give a 'direct' account of one's faith – as the ethicist gives a public account of his or her judgements – is, then, misleading. That is why Climacus says that religiously speaking ethics is a temptation. To enter into a debate about one's faith in the way that an ethicist enters into a debate about moral judgements is to misunderstand what is required by faith. This is not of course to claim that Christianity is amoral or even immoral, but merely to point to a fundamental distinction between the ways in which ethicists and Christians understand themselves and the world.

2) James on the 'dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means.'

As I noted in the introduction there are two places in James's corpus where we might look to see whether he is advancing something like Kierkegaard's notion of a life-view: *Pragmatism* and *Varieties*. In the following sections I shall review the relevant

²⁵ *Fear and Trembling*, *ibid.*, 69.

arguments that James makes in each of these places, and draw comparisons with the account of Kierkegaard's life-views that I have just set out. James's remarks in *Pragmatism* have, I think, less mileage in this regard than those in *Varieties*. For that reason, I shall start with the former but devote more space to the latter.

In *Pragmatism* James argues that even those of us who are not professional philosophers or students of philosophy nonetheless have a philosophy. Furthermore, the philosophy that each of us has determines our fundamental attitudes to life. James writes, 'I know that you, ladies and gentlemen, have a philosophy, each and all of you, and that the most interesting and important thing about you is the way in which it determines the perspective in your several worlds.'²⁶ As we might expect, given the broadness of this claim, the kind of philosophy that James has in mind is not formal philosophy. Rather, it is 'our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos.'²⁷ Accordingly, 'the philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means.'²⁸

But although James is careful to distinguish between the technical philosophy practiced by professionals and the 'dumb sense' of life's meaning that we all have, he does not think that the two are unconnected. For it is James's claim that our non-technical 'more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means' has a profound influence on which formal philosophical positions we formulate and support. In other words, James's point is that formal philosophical arguments are not composed and debated in isolation from the 'dumb sense' that each of us has. As James writes:

'Yet his [the philosopher's] temperament really gives him a stronger bias than any of his more strictly objective premises. It loads the evidence for him one way or the other, making for a more sentimental or a more hard-hearted view of the universe, just as this fact or principle would. He *trusts* his temperament. Wanting a universe that suits it, he believes in any representation of the universe that does suit it.'²⁹

²⁶ *Pragmatism*, op. cit., 1.

²⁷ *Pragmatism*, ibid., 1.

²⁸ *Pragmatism*, ibid., 1.

²⁹ *Pragmatism*, ibid., 3.

It is because, in James's view, philosophical arguments are motivated by our 'dumb sense' that he famously claims that, 'The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments.'³⁰ When philosophers debate the merits of various positions they do so in the context of their own 'temperamental' non-philosophical outlook. What they find broadly objectionable or broadly correct about formal philosophical argumentation they do so on the basis of their informal understanding of the 'total push and pressure of the cosmos.' When two philosophers disagree, then, they do so because they have different senses of what 'life honestly and deeply means.'³¹ For an argument that fails to accord with one's sense of what life 'deeply means' is difficult to accept, even if it has great technical merit. 'He [the philosopher] feels men of opposite temper to be out of key with the world's character, and in his heart considers them incompetent and 'not in it,' in the philosophic business, even tho they may far excel him in dialectical ability.'³²

James argues that failure to acknowledge the influence of our 'dumb sense' of what life means on formal philosophical debate renders the latter disingenuous. 'There arises thus a certain insincerity in our philosophic discussions: the potentest of all our premises is never mentioned.'³³ And not only do philosophers fail to mention their non-formal commitments, but they also *disguise* the fact that those commitments motivate their arguments.

'Of whatever temperament a professional philosopher is, he tries when philosophising to sink the fact of his temperament. Temperament is no conventionally recognised reason, so he urges impersonal reasons only for his conclusions.'³⁴

However, both denying and disguising the influence of 'dumb sense' or temperament on formal philosophical debate is equally undesirable. For it remains the case that informal philosophy *does* profoundly influence which philosophical doctrines we are prepared to accept. Consequently it is better to acknowledge this fact and to accept that

³⁰ *Pragmatism*, *ibid.*, 2.

³¹ *Pragmatism*, *ibid.*, 1.

³² *Pragmatism*, *ibid.*, 3.

³³ *Pragmatism*, *ibid.*, 3.

³⁴ *Pragmatism*, *ibid.*, 2.

whatever one proposes as a philosopher it will only meet with general approval if it somehow strikes a chord with the informal philosophies of common folk.

‘We philosophers have to reckon with such feelings on your [the general public’s] part. In the last resort, I repeat, it will be by them that all our philosophies shall ultimately be judged. The finally victorious way of looking at things will be the most completely *impressive* way to the normal run of minds.’³⁵

3) Comparison of Kierkegaard and James

With this account of James’s position in mind we can ask whether his notion of ‘dumb sense’ has anything in common with Kierkegaard’s notion of a life-view. There are, I think, two kinds of similarity that we can point to. Firstly, Kierkegaard’s notion of a life-view, like James’s notion of ‘dumb sense’ does have to do with one’s sense of what ‘life honestly and deeply means.’ As I noted above, Kierkegaard argues that a life-view is a perspective from which one makes judgements about the value and meaning of all of life’s experiences. Consequently a life-view is neither a fleeting impression of the value and meaning of life, nor a perspective on just some of one’s experiences. Rather, a life-view is an enduring perspective on all of one’s experiences. And for this reason there doesn’t seem anything objectionable about saying that a life-view is a standpoint on what ‘life honestly and deeply means.’ Furthermore, James’s notion of ‘dumb sense’ and Kierkegaard’s notion of a life-view are similar insofar as neither is a theory. For James, one’s ‘dumb sense’ has a profound influence on what kinds of theoretical arguments one finds acceptable; but one’s dumb sense is not itself a theory. Similarly, and as I noted above, Kierkegaard does not think that a life-view is a theory.

However, I don’t think we can put too much weight on either of the parallels that I have just sketched between James’s position and Kierkegaard’s. Although it is true that neither James’s ‘dumb sense’ nor a life-view is a theory, this does not imply that they have anything profound in common. Dashiell Hammet’s novel *The Thin Man* is not a theory, and neither is my local telephone directory; but clearly it would be a mistake to think that because neither is a theory they must be deeply alike. Moreover, although on the face of it there doesn’t seem anything objectionable about claiming that a life-view has to do with what ‘life honestly and deeply means’ this is only on the

³⁵ *Pragmatism*, *ibid.*, 15.

grounds that we do not enquire too deeply into what James actually means by this phrase. James engages this idea suggestively, rather than fleshing it out in any detail. For this reason any bridge that we construct between Kierkegaard and James on the basis of this expression must also be suggestive rather than precise.

There are at least three further reasons for doubting whether James and Kierkegaard have something similar in mind in their respective notions of ‘dumb sense’ and life-views. The first reason is that James seems to allow that one’s ‘dumb sense’ can change repeatedly over time. Discussing the connection between ‘dumb sense’ and philosophy James notes the following: ‘And so forth – your ordinary philosophic layman never being a radical, never straightening out his system, but living vaguely in one plausible compartment of it or another to suit the temptations of successive hours.’³⁶ James’s point here is that people who are not professional philosophers never work out coherent systems, but instead field a collection of varied philosophical views. For our purposes it is important to note that, for James, the reason that such people do not work out systems is that their ‘dumb sense’ is not constant but changes ‘by successive hours.’ But, as I discussed above, for Kierkegaard, one’s life-view does not change according to the ‘temptations of successive hours.’ Rather, it is one’s life-view that yokes one’s experiences of ‘successive hours’ into a single, coherent whole.

The second reason to think that Kierkegaard and James are not offering similar arguments hinges on the observation that for Kierkegaard a life-view is not simply a perspective that one always already has. Rather, it is a standpoint that must be attained. This is made clear by Kierkegaard’s claim that Christianity is a life-view that must be actualised in existence. Actualising Christianity in existence is a subjective *task*. Furthermore this task is never finished so long as one wishes to be a Christian. But for James having ‘dumb sense’ is not something that one has to achieve. One simply has it.

Finally, Kierkegaard would not, I think, accept James’s proposal that one’s ‘dumb sense’ can and should have a profound influence over the kinds of philosophical argument that one is prepared to accept. As I argued above, although Kierkegaard situates many of his arguments within the context of his indirect communication, this does not imply that those arguments should not be judged on philosophical grounds. In other words Kierkegaard is not suggesting that his arguments concerning proofs, or concerning Hegel’s logic, for example, are only attractive or compelling to those people

³⁶ *Pragmatism*, *ibid.*, 5.

who have a particular life-view. However, Kierkegaard does think that the notion of a life-view does have *some* important consequences for philosophical discourse, and I shall return to this in section 5, below.

4) James on Sick and Healthy Souls

I noted above that Gilmartin has tabled the notion that Kierkegaard's notion of a life-view has significant parallels with certain of James's philosophical views. Gilmartin's view hinges on the observation that both Kierkegaard and James discuss melancholy in similar ways. Gilmartin explains his point in the following way:

‘The two men [Kierkegaard and James] made searching diagnoses of the self in disarray [...] drew up a description of health, and searched for the means to attain it. The means they hit upon, freedom, choice, ethical effort and faith, are identical and even their formulations regarding the means bear resemblances’³⁷

For Gilmartin, the cure for melancholy that both Kierkegaard and James propose is the attainment of a life-view. This is, I think, an extremely interesting proposal. In this section I set out an account of James's remarks on melancholy. In the following section I discuss Gilmartin's proposal that James's position is similar to Kierkegaard's.

In *Varieties* James makes the interesting suggestion that the cure for certain kinds of melancholy is for the afflicted person to adopt a religious outlook or perspective on life. In this section I give an overview of James's argument, before drawing some comparisons with Kierkegaard in the following section. The kind of melancholy that James has in mind is that which characterises what he call the sick soul. For this reason I shall by discussing what James means by a sick soul, before passing on to the religious cure that he proposes for it.

James's distinction between healthy souls and sick souls corresponds to his distinction between those who are ‘once born’ and those who are ‘twice born’. Healthy souls are happy and at ease with the world. A sick soul, by contrast, is profoundly unhappy and ill at ease with life. In order to overcome their unhappiness and unease, sick souls must undergo some kind of radical spiritual conversion. That is to say that in addition to their physical birth they must be ‘born again’ spiritually. In this respect they

³⁷ Gilmartin, op. cit., 5.

are different to healthy souls, who have the good fortune to be naturally happy and at ease, and who therefore have no need of spiritual rebirth. In order to be happy, then, sick souls must be twice born – once physically and once spiritually – whereas healthy souls need only be born once. The reason that sick souls are unhappy is that they have what James calls a ‘divided self’. Spiritual or ‘second’ birth brings happiness by uniting the divided self.

James describes the divided self of the sick soul in the following way. ‘The psychological basis of the twice-born character seems to be a certain discordancy or heterogeneity in the native temperament of the subject, an incompletely unified moral and intellectual constitution.’³⁸ That is to say that the sick soul is a collection of competing interests, drives, judgements and so on. Consequently, such a person lacks fundamental continuity in his or her life. ‘There are persons whose existence is little more than a series of zig zags, as now one tendency and now another gets the upper hand.’³⁹ James argues that we are all in this - rather rocky - boat during our formative years. However, we typically reach a more happy state in which the competition between our interests, drives, judgements and so on dies out, or is at least less fierce.

‘Now in all of us, however constituted, but to a degree the greater in proportion as we are intense and sensitive and subject to diversified temptations, and to the greatest possible degree if we are decidedly psychopathic, does the normal evolution of character chiefly consist in the straightening out and unifying of the inner self. The higher and the lower feelings, the useful and the erring impulses, begin by being a comparative chaos within us – they must end by forming a stable system of functions in right subordination. Unhappiness is apt to characterize the period of order-making and struggle.’⁴⁰

Those with happy souls need hardly labour to attain its ‘straightened out’ and unified state. But for sick souls the process of ‘straightening out and unifying of the inner self’ is much more arduous, and, consequently, their unhappiness is much more enduring.

James asserts that if a sick soul has a religious upbringing then his or her unhappiness may take the form of specifically religious melancholy, a diagnosis that he

³⁸ *Varieties*, op. cit., 167.

³⁹ *Varieties*, ibid., 169.

⁴⁰ *Varieties* ibid., 170.

applies to the youthful depression of Saint Augustine. However, not all sick souls are religiously inclined depressives. And, similarly, whilst some sick souls may be cured by religious conversion, some find other kinds of solutions. However, as we would expect, in the context of *Varieties* James is mostly concerned to set out his account of how it is that religious conversion unifies the sick soul.

James observes that it is normal for people to be more or less preoccupied by certain ideas at different times of their lives. ‘As life goes on, there is a constant change of place in our systems of ideas, from more central to more peripheral, and from more peripheral to more central parts of consciousness.’⁴¹ Religious conversion is the process by which religious ideas, so to speak, come to occupy centre stage in a person’s consciousness. As James puts it: ‘To say that a man is ‘converted’ means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.’⁴² James does not think that the process by which this occurs is one that can be adequately explained by psychologists. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, there are a great many important differences between particular cases of religious conversion. And, secondly, it is difficult to account for the role of the unconscious in bringing religious ideas to the centre of a person’s consciousness. For these two reasons James thinks that only a general account of the process of conversion can be given.

Following Starbuck, James distinguishes between conversion that is brought about in a voluntary fashion and conversion that is the outcome of unconscious processes.⁴³ In cases of volitional conversion the sick soul consciously strives to bring religious ideas permanently to the centre of his or her concern, relegating non-religious ideas to the periphery. ‘In the volitional type the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits.’⁴⁴ In this way the sick soul purposely sets out to achieve a religious point of view. And in this regard voluntary conversion is quite different to that brought about by the unconscious. For in the latter case a religious point of view is not something that is purposely sought. On the contrary, in cases of involuntary conversion the preoccupation with religious ideas is not something that one strives for, but, rather, it is something that

⁴¹ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 194.

⁴² *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 196.

⁴³ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 206.

⁴⁴ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 206.

happens to a person. 'To state it in terms of our own symbolism: When the new centre of personal energy has been subconsciously incubated so long as to be just ready to open into flower, 'hands off' is the only word for us, it must burst forth unaided!'⁴⁵

James recognises that on the face of it the notion that conversion can be the outcome of subconscious processes does not sit well with Christian theology. For if conversion is indeed a function of subconscious processes this would seem to exclude the Christian view that conversion is brought about by God's intervention in a person's life.⁴⁶ But James's doesn't accept that the Christian account of conversion and the psychological account that he is proposing need be mutually exclusive. 'But if you, being orthodox Christians, ask me as a psychologist whether the reference of a phenomenon to a subliminal self does not exclude the notion of the direct presence of the Deity altogether, I have to say frankly that as a psychologist I do not see why it necessarily should.'⁴⁷

James reconciles the Christian and psychological accounts of conversion by arguing that the subconscious processes by which religious ideas come to dominate a person's attention may be the instruments of God. 'If there be higher powers able to impress us, they may get access to us only through the subliminal door.'⁴⁸ In other words it may be the case that one comes to a Christian point of view by virtue of one's unconscious, but one's unconscious is itself directed by God. Furthermore, it may only be by virtue of having an unconscious that we may have any meaningful interaction with God at all. For one's unconscious may be fitted to communicate with God in a way that consciousness is not. As James explains:

'But just as our primary wide-awake consciousness throws open our senses to the touch of things material, so it is logically conceivable that *if there be* higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so *might be* our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them. The hubbub of the waking life might close a door which in the dreamy Subliminal might remain ajar or open.'⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 210.

⁴⁶ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 211.

⁴⁷ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 242.

⁴⁸ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 243.

⁴⁹ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 242.

5) Comparison of James and Kierkegaard on Sick Souls and Life-views

Gilmartin's claim that there is something comparable about James's account of Sick souls and Kierkegaard's notion of life-views rests on two observations. Firstly, that both men tie the notion of melancholy to the notion of a 'divided self'. And, secondly, that Kierkegaard and James propose similar cures for the divided melancholic self: the attainment of a life-view.

With regard to the first of these points it is true, that, like James, Kierkegaard sometimes associates melancholy with a 'divided self' of some kind. This is one of the themes that the Pseudonym Anti Climacus develops in *The Sickness Unto Death*. And, rather differently, the Judge who pens part two of *Either Or* thinks that the melancholy suffered by aesthetes has to do with their refusal to become a 'self.' But I am not going to pursue these observations here. Rather, I think a more direct approach to assessing Gilmartin's claim is to ask whether James's account of the recovery of the sick soul actually does feature a concept of a life-view comparable to Kierkegaard's. And in order to do this I am going to briefly look at the relationship between life-views and philosophical authorship.

Interestingly, both Kierkegaard and James connect their respective discussions of life-views and sick souls with the issue of authorship. I noted above that Kierkegaard held the view that Andersen did not have a life-view. And Andersen's lack of a life-view has important consequences for his writing, a point that Kierkegaard makes in the following way:

'Moreover in Andersen's novels, on the one hand one misses the consolidating total survey (life-view), and on the other one encounters again and again situations, comments etc. that are indeed undeniably poetic but in Andersen remain undigested and poetically (not commercially) unused, unappropriated, unfiltered.'⁵⁰

Quite what Kierkegaard means by claiming that Andersen leaves his material 'undigested' is a point that I shall return to below. But, for the moment, I shall examine James's account of the relation between the sick soul and authorship.

⁵⁰ *Papers*, op. cit., 83.

James's discussion focuses not on Andersen but on Tolstoy. For James, Tolstoy is an example of a sick soul or divided self that was not cured by sudden conversion. Rather, in Tolstoy we have an example of 'the gradual way in which inner unification may occur.'⁵¹ As James notes, 'His [Tolstoy's] crisis was the getting of his soul in order, the discovery of its genuine habitat and vocation, the escape from falsehoods into what for him were ways of truth. It was a case of heterogeneous personality tardily and slowly finding its unity and level.'⁵² Moreover, Tolstoy's divided self and slow recovery has a profound effect on his reflections and his writing. Prior to his recovery Tolstoy engaged in 'unending questioning' and 'seemed to come to one insight after another.'⁵³ James does not claim that following his recovery Tolstoy somehow ceased to question or to have insights. But the important point here is that James thinks that the significance of Tolstoy's recovery is that it lead him to express new views.

We can begin to get to grips with Kierkegaard's rather different views on the relationship between life-views and authorship if we return to his observation that Andersen leaves his material 'undigested.' Kierkegaard expands on this complaint in the following way:

'If we now look and see how things are with Andersen in this respect, we find the relationship to be just as we expected. On the one hand single propositions stick out like hieroglyphs that at times are the object of a pious veneration. On the other he dwells on the individual phenomena coming from his own existence, which at times are further elevated to propositions and are then to be subsumed under the previous class, and at times are brought out more as something experienced, without one's therefore being rightly able, as long as these remain in their bachelor state, to draw any further conclusions from them.'⁵⁴

This is still rather difficult to understand. But the important point here, I think, is that Andersen doesn't have proper command of his material. And, furthermore, this is, I think, linked to Kierkegaard's complaint that Andersen does not have a life-view. Andersen's failure to have a life-view means that he has no fundamental view by which

⁵¹ *Varieties*, op. cit., 183.

⁵² *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 186.

⁵³ *Varieties*, *ibid.*, 184.

⁵⁴ *Papers*, op. cit., 77.

to understand himself and his life. Consequently, he understands himself first one way, then another, and this is reflected in the multiplicity of his interests and the disorganisation of his work. However, the important point here is that, for Kierkegaard, authors who are in possession of a life-view *do* organise their work in accordance with that view. And it is for this reason that Kierkegaard's remarks on life-views and philosophical authorship do not come down to the same thing as James's. For James only argues that Tolstoy's recovery led him to develop new ideas. But for Kierkegaard, to write from a life-view is not only to develop new ideas, but it is also to present them in accordance with that life-view.

8) Conclusion

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, Gilmartin has argued that there are certain similarities between Kierkegaard's notion of a religious life-view and James's notion that adopting a religious point of view can salve the sick soul's melancholy. For Gilmartin these similarities are both suggested and explained by profound similarities in the lives of Kierkegaard and James. I do not accept Gilmartin's argument from biography. However, in this chapter I have investigated whether on non-biographical grounds a case can be made for profound similarities between Kierkegaard's position and James's. To this end I have set out an account of Kierkegaard's notion of a life-view. I have also set out accounts of James's notion of 'dumb sense' and of the sick soul. I have argued that there is only a superficial similarity between James's notion of informal philosophy and Kierkegaard's notion of a life-view. James's discussion of the sick soul does come somewhat nearer to Kierkegaard's discussion of life-views. However, we must certainly stop short of claiming that there are any *profound* similarities between the two.

Conclusion

As I noted in the Introduction to this thesis, anybody looking to make a comparative study of Kierkegaard and James will face two difficulties. The first is that the two men did not know each other's works. And the second is that there is little extant literature on the subject. In this thesis I hope to have addressed both of these issues. In relation to the first, I argued that whatever James did know of Kierkegaard he probably learnt from Harald Høffding. This is, no doubt, a modest claim. But nonetheless it does contribute to our understanding of the relationship between Kierkegaard and James. I also argued that the fact that Kierkegaard and James did not know each other's works need not prevent us from comparing their arguments. And it was by comparing their arguments that I sought to address the second problem. I take it that part of the significance of my research is that it contributes to an area that has received little attention.

In the course of this thesis I have made three kinds of comparison between Kierkegaard and James. Firstly, where it has been claimed that Kierkegaard and James are making fundamentally similar arguments, I have investigated to see whether this really is the case. Secondly, I have identified arguments in Kierkegaard and James which, on the face of it, look similar. I have investigated whether such arguments really are similar. And, thirdly, where Kierkegaard and James are addressing similar issues I have evaluated who has the better case.

Finally, then, I shall summarize the results of my comparative research in the order in which I have presented it. In Chapter One I examined the claim that Kierkegaard proposes a pragmatist account of faith of the kind that James sets out in his essay *The Will To Believe*. I argued that this argument hinges on saddling Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus with the view that to believe in God is to risk believing something that is objectively false. I further argued that Climacus makes no such claim. In the following chapter I discussed James's and Kierkegaard's views on formal proofs for the existence of God. Both philosophers reject the notion that faith can be based on such proofs. However, their positions are not the same. Kierkegaard's view is based on an analysis of what it means to demonstrate existence. James's view is based on the observation that, as a matter of fact, formal proofs for the existence of God do not persuade people that God exists. I argued against James's case, and in support of

Kierkegaard's. In the third chapter I compared Kierkegaard's and James's accounts of religious experience. James views religious experiences as a special kind of evidence for the existence of God. For Kierkegaard it is a mistake to view religious experiences as evidence. Such experiences should be understood in relation to the concept of religious authority. I argued in favour of Kierkegaard's position. In the final chapter I examined Kierkegaard's conception of faith as a life-view. I argued that for Kierkegaard a life-view is a fundamental perspective on one's existence. I compared this conception with James's argument that we have a 'dumb sense' of what life 'honestly means', and with his discussion of the sick soul. I argued that Kierkegaard's conception is different to both of James's.

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