**Existential and Phenomenological Conceptions of the Relationship Between Philosophy and Theology**

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# Kierkegaard's Existential Conception of the Relationship Between Philosophy and Christianity

https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2019-0010
Received May 19, 2019; accepted May 28, 2019

**Abstract:** This paper explores the implications of Kierkegaard's concern with the existential meaning of Christianity on his treatment of the relationship between philosophy and theology. It will be argued that Kierkegaard offers an existential corrective to the predominantly scholarly-scientific engagement with this debate, to point to the much more serious matter of the individual's existence and the impossible difficulty and challenge that the religious sphere poses to the human being, both epistemologically and ethically. This will be shown by taking into account Kierkegaard's definitions of the terms philosophy, theology, and Christianity, as well as the distinction he draws between objective and subjective philosophy: Whereas Kierkegaard separates from Christianity what can be termed objective philosophy (in particular Hegelian-speculative philosophy), subjective philosophy (specifically Socratic philosophy) is revealed to have a much more complex relationship to the religious sphere. Socratic philosophy's relationship to Christianity is ultimately kept in a dynamic tension of similarity and dissimilarity, or analogy and contrast, which reflects the difficulty of Christian existence. As such, this reconceptualised debate, for Kierkegaard, does not belong within a scholarly academic context, but rather annihilates such inquiry.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaard, existence, Socratic philosophy, sin, annihilation, dissimilarity, reflection

Kierkegaard's engagement with the question of how philosophy and theology relate is a fascinating aspect of his authorship, which brings into relief his concern with the existential meaning of Christianity; his preoccupation with clear and well-defined categories, and his polemical response to the intellectual trends of his time. In the 1830s the question of philosophy and theology's proper relationship was becoming increasingly pressing, as the University of Copenhagen's Theology Faculty found itself in a deepening crisis: Still under the influence of the previous century's Wolffian rationalism, the theology practiced was being perceived as increasingly disconnected from the church and spiritual life.[1] In contrast, Danish philosophy was moving away from rationalism, and Danish philosophers were attempting to formulate holistic Christian philosophies of life.[2] Uninspired theology students, including Kierkegaard, started migrating to the Philosophy Faculty, where it was felt that a truly living Christian spirit was cultivated. In this period, a number of Danish thinkers and academics, most importantly the poet and critic Johan Ludvig Heiberg and the theologian Hans Lassen Martensen, came to believe that theology had to be renewed through philosophy, and in particular through an incorporation of Hegel's speculative philosophy, whose principle of mediation

1 Grane, "Breakdown of the Humanist-Christian Cultural Synthesis," 107. For a detailed overview of the history and development of Copenhagen University's theological faculty see also Grane, "Det Teologiske Fakultet 1830-1925," 325-380.
2 For example Danish philosophers such as F.C. Sibbern and Poul Martin Møller.

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offered a way to unify theology and philosophy once and for all. Following Hegel, Heiberg argued that "theology in general may be considered philosophy", which was "absolutely true of *Christian theology* since only in the Christian religion is God completely revealed, completely clear and transparent."[3] Martensen, who had tutored Kierkegaard in theology in 1834, while much more critical of Hegel's synthesis of philosophy and theology,[4] still saw great value in Hegelian thought for Christian theology because it legitimised spirit and made it possible to place faith on a level with objective cognition. Furthermore Hegel's speculative mediation served Martensen's own profound desire for a harmonic and holistic worldview as well as what he describes as a compulsive pursuit of uniting of faith and cognition, philosophy and theology.[5] In his 1837 dissertation, Martensen thus emphasises the profound inner connection of philosophy and theology: Both ultimately seek objective knowledge of the absolute truth, or God, and both employ the same speculative method to gain this knowledge.[6] Unlike both Hegel and Heiberg, Martensen believed the solution was to start theonomically, positing that absolute knowledge begins with faith and God's revelation, viewing speculative theology, rather than philosophy, as the culmination point of all thought.

However, Kierkegaard would reject this speculative marriage of philosophy and theology, viewing it as a distorted and confused relationship, in which theology had sold itself out to speculative philosophy.[7] As early as 1835, Kierkegaard declares, in what Jon Stewart has characterised as a battle slogan,[8] that: "Philosophy and Christianity can never be united," which he compares to "the scholastic principle that 'something can be true in philosophy that is false in theology'."[9]

This paper seeks to examine Kierkegaard's forceful separation of philosophy and Christianity. It will be argued that Kierkegaard moves the debate about philosophy and theology's relationship out of its scholarly context to show how the discussion of this relationship reflects the much more serious matter of the individual's existence, ultimately pointing to the impossible difficulty and challenge that Christian existence poses to the human being both epistemologically and ethically. This will be shown by exploring the way in which Kierkegaard defines the terms philosophy, theology, and Christianity, and by taking into account the distinction he draws between objective and subjective philosophy. Whereas Kierkegaard separates from Christianity what can be termed objective philosophy, in particular Hegelian speculative-philosophy, a subjective existentially-oriented philosophy, specifically Socratic philosophy, is revealed to have a much more complex relationship to the theological and religious spheres. However, while Socratic philosophy's relationship to Christianity to some degree involves profound analogical and constructive dynamic interplay, these two spheres are ultimately kept in a dynamic tension of similarity and dissimilarity, which reflects the difficulty of existence. For Kierkegaard, this debate therefore does not belong within an academic context, but rather annihilates such inquiry. Instead Kierkegaard's reconceptualisation of this debate seeks to show the upbuilding aspect in philosophical reflection's self-annihilation in relation to Christianity.

## 1 Defining the terms

In order to see how Kierkegaard seeks to redefine this debate, it becomes necessary to establish how the terms philosophy, theology, and Christianity are defined. First of all, it is important to point out that Kierkegaard in the 1835 journal entry is considering the relationship between philosophy and *Christianity* and not theology. Instead, Kierkegaard distinguishes between a) objective forms of philosophy and theology,

**3** Heiberg, *On the Significance of Philosophy*, 90-91.

**4** Jens Holger Schjørring notes that *both* Kierkegaard and Martensen responded critically to precisely this central issue. See Schjørring, "Martensen," 197.

**5** See for example Martensen, *Af mit levnet I*, 54-55.

**6** Martensen, *Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, 1-7.

**7** See for example, Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 32; *Journals and Notebooks 6*, 183.

**8** Stewart, *Cultural Crisis of the Danish Golden Age*, 162. Stewart argues that Kierkegaard's separation of philosophy and Christianity in this early entry underpins and foreshadows central themes in Kierkegaard's mature pseudonymous texts. See also Stewart, "'Philosophy and Christianity Can Never Be United'."

**9** Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 1*, 25.

i.e., sciences or academic disciplines[10] in pursuit of objective knowledge; b) subjective forms of philosophy and theology, and finally c) Christianity as an existence-communication. In contrast to the academic nature of this debate and its pursuit of objective knowledge through the unification of philosophy and theology, Kierkegaard's early engagement with this question emphasises his concern with the question of how to existentially appropriate Christian faith, which in turn cannot be encompassed or explained by objective inquiry, but must become a matter of subjective-existential import for the individual person. Reflecting on his future calling and vocation in an early journal entry from 1835, Kierkegaard asks what use pursuing objective philosophical and theological knowledge would have "if it had *no* deeper meaning for *myself* and *my life*?"[11] Instead Kierkegaard writes that what he has been missing is leading a full human existence and not simply a life of the mind:

> That's what I lacked for leading a *completely human life* and not just a life of *knowledge*, to avoid basing my mind's development on—yes, on something that people call objective—something which at any rate isn't my own, and to base it instead on something which is bound up with the deepest roots of my existence, through which I have as it were, grown into the divine, clinging fast to it even if the whole word were to fall apart.[12]

As a result, Kierkegaard calls for a distinction between the objective-cerebral and subjective-existential philosopher. In a note to this passage, Kierkegaard reflects on his own time's wrongful prioritisation of cognition over existence, which has led to his contemporaries forgetting that "the genuine philosopher is in the highest degree subjective."[13] Kierkegaard thus distinguishes between the popular view of philosophy at the time: time—the objective philosopher who treats philosophy as a scientific-rational discipline in pursuit of objective knowledge, and what he considers the "genuine" philosopher—the subjective philosopher who treats philosophy as a subjective mode of reflection that relates to actual existence. Kierkegaard makes a similar distinction in his treatment of theology, although in comparison with philosophy [*Philosophie*], the term "theology" [*Theologie*] and its variants appear surprisingly few times in Kierkegaard's oeuvre.[14] As a student, Kierkegaard lists theology as one of his main interests, a central direction for his abilities, and as a subject which captivates him.[15] Yet in this same entry, Kierkegaard also remarks that studying for his theological degree is "an occupation that does not interest me in the least and which therefore is not going particularly quickly,"[16] and he makes his disillusionment with scholarly theology explicit, when stating that for him:

> the scholarly world of theology is like Strandveien on a Sunday afternoon in the Deer Park season—they rush past another, yell and shout, laugh and make fools of one another, drive their horses to death, tip over and are run over, and when they finally reach Bakken covered in dust and out of breath—yes, then they look at one another—and go home.[17]

Despite the violent competition between its practitioners, which is treated like a matter of life and death, at the end of the race the competitors simply "go home," and the racing and competing, for all its drama and commotion, ultimately leads nowhere—it may feign to be a matter of existence, of life and death even, but in reality it has nothing at all to do with life. Kierkegaard's disdain for scholarly theology becomes more explicit and aggressive in later writings and journal entries. In an especially irreverent entry, Kierkegaard remarks that: "There's a great saying that Coun[cillor] H. C. Ørsted told me: If a lark wants to fart like an elephant, it will end up bursting. And in the same way, scholarly theology will also burst because instead

**10** Science or scientific should here be understood in the sense of *Wissenschaft* (or *videnskab* in Danish).

**11** Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 1*, 19.

**12** Ibid., 20-21.

**13** Ibid., 20.

**14** It is both telling and remarkable that the 6-tome *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources Volume 15: Kierkegaard's Concepts*, edited by Steven Emmanuel, William McDonald and Jon Stewart, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2013-2015, does not include an entry on "Theology".

**15** Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 1*, 16-17.

**16** Ibid., 17.

**17** Ibid., 18.

of being what it is—a modest triviality—it wants to be the supreme form of wisdom."[18] In particular this comment can be read as an attempt to expose the hubris of objective scientific theology. The problem arises because this theology oversteps its proper domain, and believes it is more than it is. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* Climacus makes this point by comparing the discipline of philology with scholarly theology. Climacus finds philological scholarship "wholly legitimate" and expresses his deep respect for the philological scholar who conducts his careful research, yet remains within the remits of his science, "for when he has completed his work, nothing follows from it except the admirable feat that through his skill and competence an ancient text has been made available in the most reliable form".[19] Climacus contrasts this legitimate scholarly approach to the approach of critical theological scholarship, which he argues continually oversteps its legitimate disciplinary demarcations.[20] Scholarly theology's "entire effort suffers from a certain conscious or unconscious duplexity."[21] Kierkegaard and Climacus are thus not denying the validity of scholarly theology as long as it remains within its boundaries. However, scholarly theology makes an invalid leap from its rightful area of research to speaking as an authority of matters of existence, such as on what basis one should have faith or build one's eternal happiness. Climacus describes this as a misrelation between objective, or disinterested, research and a "personal, infinite interestedness in one's own eternal happiness."[22] Climacus notes that while the objective treatment of faith is the "wishful hypothesis" and "noble desire" of academic theology, it is impossible "because even its most consummate fulfilment would still remain an approximation."[23] That is, objective knowledge can only ever be an approximation of true existence and actuality. Instead of looking to scholarly theology for answers about Christianity and faith, Kierkegaard therefore urges people to "take the N.T.: Close your door, speak with God, pray—and if you then do what the N.T. quite simply and plainly says, if you actualize it by expressing it existentially—that's Xnty."[24]

It is for this reason that Kierkegaard reconceives this debate as being about the relationship between philosophy and *Christianity*, not philosophy and *theology*. For philosophy and theology in the objective, scientific sense are really two sides of the same coin: They are both expressions of a scientific-objective approach in pursuit of systematic, objective knowledge. However, Christianity is not a science or a doctrine [*Lære*] but an *existence-communication*. Christianity is therefore not something that can be discussed in the same way that one might discuss a particular school of philosophy or something that can be presented as an objective science, where it simply matters that the presenter "(objectively) says the right thing," Christianity can only be presented subjectively in existence—it matters *who* presents Christianity. Kierkegaard notes that "If Xnty...does not reduplicate itself in the person who presents it, then what he is presenting is not Xnty. For Xnty is an existence communication and can only be presented—by existing."[25] By replacing theology with Christianity, Kierkegaard thus indicates that this debate is no longer merely academic, but one that points to the existential-religious sphere.

## 2 Objective philosophy and Christianity

We can now return to Kierkegaard's declaration that philosophy and Christianity can never be united. The philosophy Kierkegaard here operates with should precisely be understood in the objective sense. He for example characterizes this philosophy as "the standpoint of reason [*Fornuft-Standpunctet*],"[26] and

**18** Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 6*, 52.
**19** Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 26.
**20** For an incisive look at Kierkegaard's call for clear demarcations of various academic and scientific disciplines, see Rosfort, "'at forstaaeliggjøre og tyde Naturens Runer'," 140-144.
**21** Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 25.
**22** Ibid., 24.
**23** Ibid., 29-30.
**24** Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 6,* 51.
**25** Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 5*, 39. See also Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 6*, 323 and 358-9.
**26** Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 1*, 29.

"an accounting-within-itself [*Sig-Rede-Gjøren*]."[27] In other words, philosophy that is aimed at rational explanation and understanding based on the faculty of human reason. However, because philosophy works on the assumption that knowledge can be acquired through the human cognitive faculties, it does not take into account the effects of sin, which mean the human being requires both a moral and a cognitive redemption. Kierkegaard therefore concludes: "Ultimately it is *here* the yawning chasm lies: Christianity stipulates the defectiveness of human cognition due to sin, which is then rectified in Christianity. The philosopher tries qua man to account for matters of God and the world."[28] Kierkegaard notes that where philosophy is this "accounting-within-itself", Christianity is something different, "since Christianity demands, before being examined, a living oneself-into-it".[29] As an existential category Christianity therefore cannot be encapsulated by such philosophical-rational explanation nor can it be compared to it. However, if philosophy were to reach the conclusion that it is unable to explain Christianity, or the relation between God and humans, it would "at the peak of its perfection be accomplice to its own total downfall."[30]

For Kierkegaard, the prime example of this objective philosophy would soon become Hegelian-speculative philosophy. In a journal entry from 1846, Kierkegaard calls attention to the incompatibility between speculative thought and existence, and the confusion speculation causes: "philosophers (Hegel and the rest of them)...basically exist in categories entirely different from those in which they speculate... Out of this come the untruthfulness and confusion prevalent in science and scholarship."[31] In other words, speculation does not take existence into account; speculative philosophers have forgotten that they are existing human beings and have confused thinking and being. Some years later, in *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus echoes this, noting how the abstract nature of speculative philosophy causes confusion and distance from lived existence:

> Modern philosophy, being abstract, is floating in metaphysical indeterminateness. Instead of explaining this about itself and then directing people to the ethical, the religious, the existential, philosophy has given the appearance that people are able to speculate themselves out of their own skin, as they so very prosaically say, into pure appearance [*speculere sig ud af deres gode Skind og ind i det rene Skin*].[32]

In Danish, "*at gå ud af sit gode Skind*" (literally "to burst out of one's skin") means to be beside oneself or at one's wit's end, but "*Skin*" means a delusion. Through this pun Kierkegaard plays on how speculation leads people not only out of their physicality into pure abstraction and away from religious existence, but also, ironically, towards delusion rather than true knowledge.

This contrast is one that Kierkegaard explores in great detail in *Postscript*, where Climacus addresses the many ways in which speculative philosophy is so inherently opposed to existence and thus also to Christianity. Climacus contrasts the subjective individual with the speculative thinker, noting how speculation causes an alienation from existence: "The subjective individual is impassionedly, infinitely interested in his eternal happiness and is now supposed to be helped by speculative thought...to speculate, he must take the very opposite path, must abandon and lose himself in objectivity, disappear from himself."[33] It would therefore make no sense to approach Christianity through speculation, because it cannot be observed objectively, but instead "wants to lead the subject to the ultimate point of his subjectivity."[34] Thus any attempts to mediate speculative philosophy and Christianity are profoundly misguided because Christianity is not something to appropriate intellectually, but something to be lived, for: "Christianity pertains to existence, to existing, but existence and existing are the very opposite of speculation...our age has reversed the relation and changed Christianity into a philosophical theory that is to be comprehended and being a Christian into

**27** Ibid., 25.
**28** Ibid., 26.
**29** Ibid., 25-26.
**30** Ibid., 25.
**31** Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 2*, 279.
**32** Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 81.
**33** Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 56.
**34** Ibid., 57.

something negligible."[35] Not only are speculative philosophy and Christianity thus opposed, but speculative philosophy has also distorted and rejected the existential aspect of Christianity. Speculative philosophy has instead turned Christianity into something "negligible" by reducing it to a mere theoretical-philosophical doctrine to be comprehended rather than the paradox and mystery that it is. The problem, Climacus notes, is that speculation "annuls all difficulty"[36] through its chimeric concept of mediation or *Aufheben,* which claims to resolve and synthesise all differences, for example between philosophy and theology. Climacus explicitly attacks speculative mediation in relation to the question of philosophy and Christianity in *Philosophical Fragments*, when Climacus suggests that "if in discussing the relation between Christianity and philosophy...we begin with "that great thinker and sage Pontius Pilate, executor Novi Testamenti"," Climacus argues that Pilate is owed a "great deal of gratitude from Christianity and philosophy, even if he did not invent mediation."[37] As Joel Rasmussen has pointed out, Pilate's service to Christianity and philosophy specifically consists in his "acting on the maxim "better well-hanged than ill wed"."[38] That is, according to Climacus, Pilate's execution order of Christ did more for philosophy and Christianity than the ill-informed speculative marriage of philosophy and Christianity, which has reduced Christianity to an objective theoretical mode of knowledge, stripping away Christianity's paradoxicality and existential challenge to the individual. However, not all philosophy pretends to have absolute knowledge or makes light of existence. As noted previously, Kierkegaard contrasts the objective philosopher to the subjective, or genuine, philosopher, and for Kierkegaard the subjective philosopher *par excellence* is Socrates.

## 3 Socratic philosophy and Christianity

Kierkegaard strongly laments and objects to the speculative philosophers' claim to have "gone beyond" Socrates.[39] Instead, Kierkegaard marks his departure from this kind of philosophy by explicitly naming Socrates his teacher,[40] and as the only analogy he has for himself and his task. In contrast to Kierkegaard's recurring ridicule and criticism of the figure of the scholar or professor, Kierkegaard rates Socrates as "the only *human being* I admiringly acknowledge as a thinker."[41] As the following sections will show, Socratic philosophy forms a corrective to both speculative philosophy and scholarly forms of inquiry. Because Socratic philosophy in a similar way to Christianity emphasises existence, the relationship between Socratic philosophy and Christianity is much more complex than the more straight-forward separation of objective philosophy and Christianity. Yet, ultimately, Socratic philosophy's relationship to Christianity is best understood in the light of Kierkegaard's paradoxical first thesis from *The Concept of Irony*: "The similarity between Christ and Socrates consists essentially in their dissimilarity,"[42] which Kierkegaard also later phrases as there being "an analogy only because there is a contrast."[43]

The similarities, or analogies, are not hard to find. Climacus proclaims in the *Postscript* that "Socrates' infinite merit is precisely that of being an *existing* thinker, not a speculative thinker who forgets what it means to exist,"[44] and that: "The great merit of the Socratic was precisely to emphasize that the knower is an existing person and that to exist is the essential."[45] Unlike speculative philosophy, Socratic thought grasps that existence, rather than theoretical knowing, is what is essential about being a person. Socratic philosophy is favourably compared to speculative philosophy because it is not a disinterested pursuit

**35** Ibid., 379-380.
**36** Ibid., 222.
**37** Kierkegaard, *Fragments,* 109-110.
**38** Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, 96.
**39** See for example, Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 111; *Postscript,* 207; *Sickness unto Death,* 92; *Journals and Notebooks 8*, 470.
**40** Kierkegaard, *Point of View,* 55.
**41** Kierkegaard, *The Moment,* 341. For a further comment on Kierkegaard's identification of this Socratic task see Damgaard, "Through Hermeneutics of Suspicion to a Rediscovery of Faith," 210.
**42** Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony,* 6.
**43** Ibid., 30.
**44** Kierkegaard, *Postscript,* 205.
**45** Ibid., 207.

of objective knowledge, but represents a way of life. Due to its emphasis on life, Socratic philosophy relates very differently to Christianity than speculative philosophy does. In various writings, Kierkegaard repeatedly underlines the similarities of Socratic philosophy and Christianity through descriptions that are not only parallel in content, but also in form. In one journal entry, Kierkegaard describes how both Socratic philosophy and early Christianity were expressions of life, not doctrines or sciences, in identically structured and worded sentences:

> In Socrates philosophy was **still only**...it was *still only* a life. In Plato, on the other hand (thus, things are going forward, we are ascending) it becomes (we are ascending) doctrine. Then it becomes science. So it goes with philosophy, onward up to our own times, when we stand on the summit of science and look back upon Socrates as something lower, for in him philosophy was still only a life. With Xt, with the apostles, with the first Xns, Xnty was **still only**..., it was *still only* a life. Then things go forward, we are ascending, Xnty becomes a doctrine, then a science—and now we are standing on the summit of science and look back upon the first Xns, for in the Xnty was still only a life.[46]

Similarly in 1850, Kierkegaard offers parallel descriptions of Christ and Socrates as "the existential" in contrast to the scientific:

> That "science" is lower than the existential is seen quite simply in the God-Man. Imagine yourself as a contemporary: "science" is impossible here because the God-Man is himself the existential...Imagine yourself contemporary with Socrates. There is no science here; that is precisely what he wants to get rid of; he is "a gadfly," himself the existential... What Joh. Climacus says is true: to transform Xnty into "science" is the greatest possible error, and if it succeeds absolutely...then Xnty is absolutely abolished.[47]

This mirroring and repetition thus underlines the similarities between the two, as well as their contrast to the scientific objectivity of speculative philosophy and scholarly theology. In addition to these clear similarities to Christianity, Kierkegaard also perceives the Socratic as being "of the greatest importance for Christianity" because of its thesis that "virtue cannot be taught—that is, it is not a doctrine, it is an ability, a practice, an existing, an existential reformation."[48] Like Christianity, Socratic philosophy is thus not a doctrine, but a practice, or a way of life. Furthermore, Socratic ignorance is upheld as a philosophical tenet particularly useful for the Christian lifeview. In *Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus applauds Socratic philosophy's emphasis on its own ignorance and argues that it has an important role to play within Christianity because Socratic ignorance is analogous to the Christian concept of sin, or the Biblical dictum: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."[49] As such, it serves to guard and sustain the incommensurable gap between the divine and human, in contrast to objective philosophy's aim to know and explain everything:

> This is no doubt what our age, what Christendom needs: a little Socratic ignorance with respect to Christianity [...] Let us never forget that it was out of veneration for God that he was ignorant that as far as it was possible for a pagan he was on guard duty as a judge on the frontier between God and man, keeping watch so that the deep gulf of qualitative difference between them was maintained, between God and man, that God and man did not merge in some way, philosophically, poetically, etc. into one. That's why Socrates was the ignorant [Uvidende] one, and that was why the deity found him to be the wisest of men. – Christianity teaches that everything essentially Christian depends solely upon faith; therefore it wants to be precisely a Socratic, God-fearing ignorance, which by means of ignorance guards faith against speculation, keeping watch so that the gulf of qualitative difference between God and man may be maintained as it is in the paradox and faith, so that God and man do not, even more dreadfully than ever in paganism, do not merge in some way, philosophice, poetice, etc., into one—in the system. [50]

The infinite qualitative distinction between God and human beings in many respects constitutes a cornerstone in Kierkegaard's theological thought, and the fact that Anti-Climacus calls upon Socratic-philosophical ignorance as a way to guard and maintain this distinction is therefore quite remarkable.

**46** Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 9*, 236 (Kierkegaard's emphases).
**47** Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 7*, 71.
**48** Ibid., 188
**49** Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death,* 99.
**50** Ibid.

According to Anti-Climacus this infinite distinction is also defined as sin. On the one hand, Socratic ignorance guards the distinction precisely because it does not attempt to or believe it can explain it, unlike speculative philosophy, and thereby sustains the difference; on the other hand if Socratic ignorance is analogous to sin, it makes sense that it would maintain an awareness of the infinite difference, that is, sin.

Thus Kierkegaard establishes an analogous relationship between Socratic philosophy and Christianity, allowing for a productive interplay, which shifts the emphasis from scholarly knowledge to existence and encourages the right attitude towards God in light of sin. Thus the relationship between subjective Socratic philosophy and Christianity is starkly different from the relationship between objective philosophy and Christianity. However, while the analogies are thus compelling and in plain sight, we come now to the question of how this relationship of similarity and analogy can simultaneously consist in dissimilarity and contrast between the Socratic and Christian.

In *Postscript*, the analogy between Socratic thought and Christianity is explicitly established when Climacus notes that "Socratic ignorance is an analogue to the category of the absurd," and "Socratic inwardness in existing is an analogue to faith."[51] However, if we continue reading, Climacus qualifies both of these statements by emphasising that there is an infinite difference between the Socratic and the Christian categories: Socratic ignorance might be analogous to the absurd, but the absurd contains an "infinitely greater resilience."[52] Likewise, while Socratic inwardness may be an analogue to faith, "the inwardness of faith… is infinitely deeper".[53] Complicating the matter further, Climacus later revokes the possibility of analogy entirely, writing that "there is no analogy to the sphere of the paradoxically religious, and thus the application, when it is understood, is a revocation."[54] How then are we to understand the seeming contradiction here, as Climacus affirms the Socratic's analogical relationship to Christianity, only to argue that the analogy must be revoked? And moreover, how does this explain the paradoxical statement that the similarity between the Socratic and the Christian consists in dissimilarity?

Tracing the concept of analogy from Aristotle to Kant, Ettore Rocca has noted that Kierkegaard follows these thinkers in viewing the purpose of analogy to be to show dissimilarity; to create relation between things that cannot be related, for analogy "exists only between heterogenous things."[55] This also explains Kierkegaard's claim in *Concept of Irony* that analogy can only exist if there is contrast. For Kierkegaard every analogy must ultimately be revoked, for otherwise it will, like objective philosophy has done, trivialise and remove Christianity's paradox. Instead, as Climacus explains, analogy "can serve to make aware, but no more, the understanding of which is therefore a revocation".[56] Socratic philosophy through analogy thus serves Christianity by making us aware of the difficulty of Christian existence, the paradoxicality of Christianity, and of sin or the infinite qualitative difference, although Socratic philosophy cannot explain these things, and thus the analogy must be immediately revoked. As Rocca notes, for Kierkegaard "analogy defines our understanding of the incomprehensible by letting us understand in which sense we cannot understand".[57]

We see an example of this in the chapter "The Socratic Definition of Sin" in *Sickness unto Death*. Here, as discussed above, Anti-Climacus affirms the analogy of Socratic ignorance to sin. However, the Socratic cannot explain sin, but it still helps make us aware of the Christian notion of sin and its radicality. Anti-Climacus writes:

> By no means shall I dismiss the Socratic definition on the grounds that one cannot stop there, but with Christianity *in mente*, I shall use this Socratic definition to bring out the latter in its radicality—simply because the Socratic definition is so

**51** Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 205.
**52** Ibid.
**53** Ibid.
**54** Ibid., 567.
**55** Rocca, "Analogy and Negativism," 169. For a further discussion of what it means to understand what we cannot understand, see also Grøn, "Sokrates og *Smulerne*," and "Transcendence of Thought".
**56** Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 569.
**57** Rocca, "Analogy and Negativism," 171.

> genuinely Greek. And here as always with any other definition that in the most rigorous sense is not rigorously Christian… its emptiness becomes apparent.[58]

Anti-Climacus does not dismiss or ignore the Socratic definition—in fact he considers it "extremely urgent that we come back to this Socratic principle."[59] But the Socratic-philosophical definition of sin is used to bring out the more radical Christian definition, which goes beyond human understanding. Even though Socratic ignorance is analogous to sin, the Socratic definition of sin is "defective"; and even though this defect is "something the Socratic principle itself realises and remedies," it does so "only to a certain degree,"[60] for the Socratic principle lacks "a dialectical determinant"[61] suitable for the transition in which Christianity begins; the transition from understanding something to putting this into action, which when made in real life is "the beginning of a long-winded story".[62] However, as Anti-Climacus notes, whereas speculative philosophy un-Socratically wants to "delude us into believing that this is Christianity,"[63] Socratic ignorance guards the infinite difference between humans and God through its analogy to sin. However, this analogy is simultaneously revoked, as sin cannot be explained by any human being. As Anti-Climacus writes: "no man of himself and by himself can declare what sin is; all his talk about sin is basically a glossing over of sin, an excuse, a sinful watering down. That is why Christianity begins in another way: man has to learn that sin is by a revelation from God."[64]

The dissimilarity thus encompasses and represents precisely that which goes beyond the human sphere—that in which the infinite difference between God and human beings consists—and as David Possen has persuasively argued, in *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard is ultimately attempting to show that scholarship is unable to address the dissimilarity between the Socratic and the Christian.[65] Moreover, this dissimilarity goes beyond any mode of human reflection or inquiry, whether it be speculative, scientific, Socratic, philosophical, or theological. This returns us to Kierkegaard's position in his 1835 journal entry, where philosophy at its highest point must will its own downfall in its encounter with Christianity in accepting the reality of sin. The revocation of Socratic philosophy's analogous likeness is reminiscent of this downfall. Because of its emphasis on existence and acknowledgement of its own ignorance, Socratic philosophy exists in an analogous relationship with Christianity. However, this analogy must be immediately revoked, or philosophy annihilated, in order to guard the dissimilarity and keep intact the paradoxicality and mystery of Christianity. As an attempt at a scholarly inquiry into the relationship between philosophy and Christianity, this paper then reaches a somewhat self-annihilating conclusion: it is ultimately outside its scope to fully explain this relationship as it cannot account for the true dissimilarities or difference that the human encounters in God through Christian existence.

However, for Kierkegaard, this is precisely the insight that must be reached in order to gain the right theological attitude from which to appropriate Christianity existentially. In a journal entry from 1848, Kierkegaard notes that while reflection, which William McDonald has pointed out is the supreme category of philosophy in Kierkegaard's authorship,[66] has always been thought of as wanting to destroy Christianity, or even as Christianity's "natural enemy," with God's help a "God-fearing reflection can retie once more the knots at which superficial reflection has picked away for so long,"[67] and "reinstall the coiled springs of Christianity so that it can hold its own—against reflection."[68] In other words, a truly God-fearing reflection can make Christianity so difficult that reflection is unable to fathom it, thus implying that reflection serves Christianity through annihilating itself. Again, Kierkegaard makes the point that: "The task is not

**58** Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death,* 88.
**59** Ibid., 92.
**60** Ibid., 93.
**61** Ibid.
**62** Ibid., 94.
**63** Ibid., 93.
**64** Ibid., 95.
**65** See Possen, "Similarity and Dissimilarity between Jesus and Socrates," 35-36
**66** See McDonald, "Philosophy/Philosophers," 85.
**67** Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 6*, 69.
**68** Ibid., 70.

to comprehend Xnty, but to comprehend that one cannot comprehend it. This is faith's holy cause, and therefore reflection is sanctified by being used in this manner."[69] In other words, reflection resounds in both a philosophical and a theological register, by becoming God-fearing and sanctified in its willing self-annihilation. The idea that human beings must recognise that they are always in the wrong in relation to God—that they become nothing before God—is a recurring theme in Kierkegaard's writings.[70] In these journal entries, this theme is echoed to underline how human reflection is able to support this insight if "reflection humbles itself under the hand of God in fear and trembling, referring everything to God (because even in its totality it is, after all, nothing before God)."[71]

Thus Kierkegaard's concern with the existential reality of Christianity results in a complex and layered engagement with the question of how philosophy and Christianity relate. In contrast to the academic debate and the speculative unification of philosophy and theology championed by a number of his contemporaries, Kierkegaard highlights the infinite difference between any human mode of reflection or inquiry and Christianity. However, the relationship between subjective philosophy, exemplified in particular by Socratic philosophy, is characterised by a dynamic tension through the simultaneous upholding of similarity and dissimilarity, analogy and revocation, and reflection's self-annihilating task. Subjective philosophical reflection plays an upbuilding role by alerting us to the difficulty of appropriating Christianity existentially. The difference at the heart of the relationship between philosophy and Christianity thus brings to our attention the uncertainty, difficulty, and inevitable self-annihilation before God in seeking to understand that which we cannot understand. For as Kierkegaard states, "Christianity is to be kept moving existentially; becoming a Christian is to be made more and more difficult."[72] No form of human reflection can halt the existential movement of Christianity or ease the task of becoming a Christian, but it can make the individual person aware of this difficulty through its own willing downfall.

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**69** Ibid.

**70** See for example Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 339-354; *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 226, 309, and *Without Authority*, 155.

**71** Kierkegaard, *Journals and Notebooks 6*, 51.

**72** Ibid., 307.

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