

Article

# Kierkegaard's Descriptive Philosophy of Religion: The Imagination Poised between Possibility and Actuality

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**Abstract:** Rethinking the powers of the imagination, Søren Kierkegaard both anticipates and challenges contemporary approaches to a descriptive philosophy of religion. In contrast to the reigning approaches to religion in his day, Kierkegaard reconceives philosophy as, first of all, descriptive of human, including specifically ethical and religious, existence. To this end, he develops conceptual tools, including a descriptive ontology of human existence, a “pluralist epistemology” exploring both cognitive and passional dimensions of religion, and a role for the poetic in philosophy, strikingly expressed in his observer figures who “imaginatively construct” “thought projects” to explore human existence. While this new descriptive account anticipates subsequent approaches to the philosophy of religion, it could be interpreted as another “objectivist” endeavor, yet Kierkegaard attempts more in this descriptive philosophy. He imaginatively deploys conceptual and rhetorical strategies maieutically to both describe *and* elicit self-reflection aimed at transformation, thus expanding the imagination’s uses for his readers. Comparing Kierkegaard to Pierre Hadot’s recovery of ancient Greek philosophy as “a way of life” will show how Kierkegaard also engages the particularity of “the Christian principle”, with implications for how philosophy can both describe and elicit the pathos of other religious traditions as well.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaard, Søren; imagination; philosophy of religion; poetics, religious; possibility and actuality; spiritual exercises; indirect communication; thought-experiments; Socrates; Hadot, Pierre



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## 1. Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard holds a pivotal place in philosophical approaches to human existence and especially in philosophical approaches to religion. He created a strikingly original approach to understanding religious existence, a descriptive approach in which the philosopher’s first goal is to provide a careful, often sympathetic, account of “subjective” religious existence in its own terms. For Kierkegaard, this descriptive account employs the imagination, for the philosopher must strive above all to imagine religious possibilities of existence, as far as one is able, in all of their complexity. What is striking about Kierkegaard’s rethinking of the imagination’s role in philosophy, however, is how his account unifies description with strategies of indirect communication seeking to evoke inward transformation. These multiple strategies, despite appearances, are not at odds. Rather, Kierkegaard can be seen as recovering ancient philosophical traditions, combining theoretical interests with goals of inward transformation while creating resources for engaging religious particularity.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. Kierkegaard on Imagination and Philosophical Description: A Sketch

Kierkegaard created a strikingly original descriptive approach to the entire realm of human subjectivity, including religious existence. If we focus only on the more rationalist as opposed to Romantic strands of thought current in his day, Kierkegaard was equally critical of natural theology, Enlightenment-inspired rationalism, and speculative philosophy, that is, whether grounding religious belief on rational proofs, finding religion failing the test

of reason, or redeeming religion by penetrating its “representations” in search of their underlying conceptual meaning. Kierkegaard’s conception of philosophy’s role in relation to religion as descriptive is in one sense more modest than the claims of sovereign reason to evaluate and judge religions, yet it is also much more expansive, for it seeks to provide a precise and fulsome account of what it is to be religious.

Kierkegaard’s critique of the reigning rationalist accounts of religion had several targets then. With regard to natural theology, he shared post-Kantian suspicions of arguments proving the existence of God ([1] pp. 39–44). Yet he also distanced himself from rationalist attempts to defend Christian theology, as in H.N. Clausen [2]. And, famously, Kierkegaard rejects Hegelian-inspired attempts to show how philosophy can save religion by interpreting it within the context of speculative reason. Rather, as Jon Stewart has recently put it, while both Hegel and Kierkegaard seek to defend Christianity from Enlightenment critique, for Kierkegaard, there is an “inward, subjective sphere of religious life that escapes the criticisms of science and Enlightenment reason”, quite different from Hegel’s goals of showing that Christianity “is in harmony with *logos* and reason” ([3] p. 204).

All of these philosophical positions—natural theological, rationalist, and speculative—share a range of basic philosophical convictions common to modern philosophy that Kierkegaard seeks to oppose and replace. Rick Anthony Furtak has succinctly summarized six of these assumptions that characterize modern philosophy from Descartes to Hegel: knowledge claims should attain certainty, its voice should be impersonal, it should proceed with methodological doubt or without presuppositions, its mood should be dispassionate or disinterested, its stance should be ahistorical and located “nowhere”, and it should be primarily theoretical<sup>1</sup>.

Kierkegaard’s task, especially in the writings penned under his pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, which directly address philosophical issues related to ethics and religion (*Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*), but also throughout his other pseudonymous and veronymous literature, seeks nothing less than to rethink two inter-related questions: First, what it is to be an existing human being for whom ethical and religious issues are paramount; that is, what it is to be a “subjective thinker”. Second, what it is for philosophy itself to reflect upon human existence broadly but also especially upon this “subjective thinking” that lies at the heart of human existence in its ethical and religious dimensions. Kierkegaard’s ambitious challenge to the entire scope of modern philosophy is, thus, to create a conception of philosophy in relation to human existence.

It is important to keep in mind how these two concerns, “What it is to be an existing human being as a ‘subjective thinker’” and “What it is for philosophy to reflect on this”, are *intertwined*. “Subjective thinker” in Kierkegaard’s vocabulary, first of all, describes not the philosopher but “the existing human being”. And then the question is “How can philosophy *describe* this phenomenon?” In other words, how might “anthropological reflection” shape “philosophical method”?

A helpful way to understand Kierkegaard’s approach to this wide-ranging task is to sketch out how the imagination, as the root of all possibility, figures prominently both in his account of human existence and in how he rethinks what a philosophical reflection on human existence should look like<sup>2</sup>. Kierkegaard’s understanding of the imagination is profoundly dialectical. On the one hand, he stands in the post-Kantian and also Romantic tradition of the rediscovery of the imagination, especially the imagination conceived of as a productive power. But his dialectical critique of the imagination emerges early against German Romanticism, and in his master’s dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, he critiques the early German Romantics (Solger, Tieck, and Friedrich von Schlegel) for volatilizing the self into the imagination. Throughout his later literature, he is keenly aware of the destructive powers of the imagination, seen especially in his depiction, in *Either/Or*, Part I, and *Stages on Life’s Way*, of the aesthetic sphere of existence. As the “infinite power” of the mind, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, the imagination can be the source not of all despair but of particular forms of despair, the “despair of infinitude”, threatening to be carried away in flights of the “fantastic” [*Phantasien*] ([15] p. 30).

Yet Kierkegaard does not forsake the imagination but instead finds it at the heart of human existence and of human knowledge. While discussing the dialectic of finitude/infinity in relation to despair in *The Sickness Unto Death*, the Christian pseudonym Anti-Climacus also calls the imagination nothing less than the capacity *instar omnium*, “the capacity of all capacities”, basic to all other human capabilities. “When all is said and done, whatever feeling, knowing, and willing a person has depends upon what imagination he has, upon how that person reflects himself—that is, upon imagination” ([15] p. 31). Imagination is also, following the elder Fichte, the source of the categories of knowledge, and it is the source of the “reflected self”.

The self is reflection, and the imagination is reflection, is the rendition of the self as the self’s possibility. The imagination is the possibility of any and all reflection, and the intensity of this medium is the possibility of the intensity of the self. ([15] p. 31)

So central is the imagination as the source of “possibility” to Kierkegaard’s concept of the religious and of specifically Christian existence that in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus famously states that when “the ingeniousness of the human imagination” can no longer create possibility, “then only this helps: that for God everything is possible” ([15] pp. 38–40, p. 39).

Kierkegaard’s interest in imagination is, therefore, both extensive and multifaceted. However, I want to focus, in this essay, on a narrower question: how does the imagination figure in Kierkegaard’s understanding of what it is to be a philosopher? We can sketch some of Kierkegaard’s philosophical uses of the imagination in four steps: the imagination as the basis of what has been termed Kierkegaard’s “descriptive ontology”, his “pluralist epistemology” affirming cognitive yet also passionate and emotional dimensions of ethics and religion, the poetic as a tool of investigation, and Kierkegaard’s use of “observer figures” and “thought-experiments” to illuminate human existence and religion.

### 2.1.1. Descriptive Ontology

Kierkegaard’s “descriptive ontology” begins with the imagination in its power to create “possibilities” for existing human beings<sup>3</sup>. As “the capacity *instar omnium* [for all capacities]” in *The Sickness Unto Death*, the imagination is “the medium for the process of infinitizing”, a capacity that presents possibilities to a self, but as temporal beings, the essential human task is to make these imagined, abstract possibilities into “actualities”. The existing person’s movement, or lack of movement, from possibility to actuality is central to this descriptive ontology; existence for Kierkegaard is always marked by the striving needed to concretize possibility into concrete actuality<sup>4</sup>.

This transition from imaginative possibilities to actualities is a key aspect of Kierkegaard’s philosophical thought, for it stands behind his fulsome accounts of various “stages on life’s way” (*Stadier paa Livets Vej*) (aesthetic, ethical, religious, Christian). These “stages” or “spheres”, which need not be interpreted in terms of a strictly linear progression, all portray different strategies for negotiating (or especially in the case of the aesthetic, avoiding) moving from imagined possibilities to actualities. Ethical ideals, for example, are possibilities that can be entertained only as possibilities, but it is the task of the individual person to make these possibilities actual and rendered in existence ([18] p. 133).

Human beings effect this move from imagined possibilities to concrete actualities by what Kierkegaard calls “reduplication”, or “doubling”, which is accomplished by passion or striving. As the pseudonym Johannes Climacus in *Postscript* puts it, speaking of his ideal “subjective thinker” (on whom more later):

There is an old proverb: *oratio, tentatio, meditatio faciunt theologum* [prayer, trial, meditation make a theologian]. Similarly, for a subjective thinker, imagination, feeling, and dialectics in impassioned existence-inwardness are required. But first and last, passion. ([19] I, p. 350)

Kierkegaard's descriptive ontology of existence is of such importance to his thought because it is the driving wedge for dismantling what philosophy overlooks about human existence. To be an existing human being is to live in time. The "medium of abstraction", it is important to state, is not the problem, for to be human is to be imaginative, i.e., to imagine, to think, possibilities that then can be brought into "the medium of actuality"<sup>5</sup>.

But it is only recently, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus maintains, that a third medium has been invented in modern philosophy, "the medium of pure thinking". Repeatedly, Climacus diagnoses the problem as "a peculiar kind of forgetfulness (a forgetfulness concerning ethical and religious existence and inwardness) . . . tied to [a person] knowing too much" ([20] pp. 43–44). It is this "fantastic" medium of "pure thinking" that is the target of Kierkegaard's pluralist epistemology.

### 2.1.2. Pluralist Epistemology

Kierkegaard's goal of rethinking philosophy as an adequate describer of human existence and religion, especially over against this "fantastic" and "forgetful" medium of "pure thinking" at the foundation of "objectivism", required fresh attention to epistemology with regard to ethics and religion.

While Kierkegaard is often interpreted as an irrationalist or at least a skeptic with regard to knowledge, others, such as M.G. Piety, argue that he is best seen as having a "pluralist epistemology". In contrast to epistemologies that reduce "knowledge" to a single essence that either forces knowledge claims into their model or else dismiss those cases, Kierkegaard attends carefully to the distinctions between, on the one hand, objective knowledge, which Piety defines as knowledge that "is not essentially related to the existence of the individual knower as is the case, for example, with knowledge in the natural sciences, or any sort of knowledge that is primarily descriptive", and, on the other hand, "subjective knowledge", the latter being "essentially related to the existence of the individual knower as is the case, for example, with ethical and religious knowledge, or with any sort of knowledge that has a prescriptive dimension" ([18] p. 3).

Kierkegaard, thus, expands and redefines the scope of epistemology with regard to ethics and religion, including, famously, the concept of truth. This "agreement between the ideality of ethical or religious prescriptions and the actuality of a person's existence" is what Climacus calls "essential truth" as "the truth that is related essentially to existence" or "subjective truth"<sup>6</sup>. Kierkegaard's keen attention to "subjective knowledge" locates both ethics and religion within the context of human existence rather than "pure thinking". It, thus, rejects Hegel's doctrine of the identity of thought and being ([18] p. 7). Beyond Hegel, however, Kierkegaard's target is broader. Kierkegaard's notion of "essential knowing" challenges all of the assumptions of Western philosophy that Furtak described. For now, philosophy must reckon with objective uncertainty; the personal; the inescapability of pre-suppositions; passion and interest; the impossibility of an ahistorical "view from nowhere"; and a focus primarily practical rather than theoretical.

With Piety's notion of a pluralist epistemology in view, we can add that Kierkegaard's epistemological reconstruction also clarifies the place of emotions in religious existence<sup>7</sup>. In the course of his sustained attack upon "the speculative process", Climacus, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, discusses the role of emotions in religious knowledge<sup>8</sup>. Analyzing the "contemporaneity" of particular elements of subjectivity, Climacus redeems the imagination and feeling. As we have already seen in discussing descriptive ontology, "For a subjective thinker, imagination, feeling, and dialectics in impassioned existence-inwardness are required. But first and last, passion" ([19] I, p. 350). In this passage, in which he redeems the best insights of Romanticism, Climacus mocks both the old-fashioned faculty psychology as well as speculative approaches to human psychology that denigrate the imagination and feeling as lower capacities:

Scientific scholarship orders the elements of subjectivity within a knowledge about them . . . [that] is an annulment of, a removal from existence. In existence this does not hold true. If thinking makes light of imagination, then imagination

in turn makes light of thinking, and the same with feeling. The task is not to elevate the one at the expense of the other, but the task is equality, contemporaneity, and the medium in which they are united is *existing*. ([19] I, pp. 347–348, original italics)

Against the older faculty psychology, Kierkegaard provides his own well-known psychological analyses, famously in his great treatises *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness Unto Death* on despair, wherein, against rationalist psychologies, he explores the dynamics of moods and emotions in existence in all of their variety.

Climacus also portrays the subjective thinker's "task" and "form, that is style". As we have seen, "for a subjective thinker, imagination, feeling, and dialectics in impassioned existence-inwardness are required. But first and last, passion" ([19] I, p. 350). In passion, "the setting is not in the fairyland of the imagination, where poetry produces consummation . . . the setting is inwardness in existing as a human being" ([19] I, p. 357). Indeed, the subjective thinker is "an artist":

To exist is an art. The subjective thinker is esthetic enough for his life to have esthetic content, ethical enough to regulate it, dialectical enough in thinking to master it. ([19] I, p. 351. Cf. [19] I, p. 130)

That artistry is the subjective thinker's task: "to *understand himself in existence*" ([19] I, p. 351, original italics).

If the task of the subjective thinker is "to understand himself in existence", what then of the "form, that is style" of the subjective thinker? Focused upon existence, the subjective thinker, the existing individual, is like an artist skilled in several media:

His form must first and last be related to existence, and in this regard he must have at his disposal the poetic, the ethical, the dialectical, the religious. ([19] I, p. 357)

As a thinker, she relates abstract thought to herself. Ethically, the subjective thinker does not *admire* others but attends to the ethical as a personal *requirement*, not in the "form of actuality", that is, as already realized, but in the "form of possibility", for "then whether or not the reader wants to exist in it is placed as close as possible to him" as a requirement ([19] I, pp. 358–359, p. 359). So, too, religiously, the subjective thinker does not *admire* a religious prototype like Job: "that Job believed should be presented in such a way that for me it comes to mean whether I too, will have faith" ([19] I, p. 359). In short, the movement at the heart of the subjective thinker is one of passionate interest in moving from imagined possibilities to actuality *in one's own existence*. This is at the heart of Kierkegaard's refashioning of a pluralist epistemology, oriented cognitively not only to objective knowledge but to the passionate "subjective knowledge" found in ethics and religion.

Kierkegaard, thus, broadens the realm of cognition to include the emotions. In contrast to non-cognitive accounts of religious belief, Kierkegaard rather presents a religious knowing of "the subjective thinker" that embraces not only beliefs but the entire context of passion and emotions in concrete existence[24].

But if this is Kierkegaard's portrayal of "the subjective thinker" as an existing human being, how then shall philosophy engage such a phenomenon?

### 2.1.3. Poetry as Investigative Tool

If "subjective thinking" dialectically combines imagination, feeling, and dialectics, then philosophy itself must combine imagination, feeling, and dialectics.

If "subjective thinking is an art", then philosophy itself must become poetic.

Philosophy becomes "poetic" because existence can be "poetic". Climacus complains that people "oust and dismiss poetry as a surmounted element because poetry corresponds most closely to imagination". But "as long as there is a human being who wants to claim a human existence, he must preserve poetry, and all his thinking must not disturb for him the enchantment of poetry but rather enhance it. It is the same with religion" ([19] I, p. 348)<sup>9</sup>.

Kierkegaard relies here on Aristotle's finding "the poetic" within the realm of "the possible". Climacus writes the following:

Aristotle remarks in his *Poetics* that poetry is superior to history, because history presents only what has occurred, poetry what could and ought to have occurred, i.e., poetry has possibility at its disposal. Possibility, poetic and intellectual, is superior to actuality; the esthetic and the intellectual are disinterested. But there is only one interest, the interest in existing; disinterestedness is the expression for indifference to actuality. ([19] I, p. 318)<sup>10</sup>.

In this passage, Kierkegaard reflects, too, the Kantian and Romantic conceptions of the poetic as "disinterested", and a few pages earlier, Climacus writes the following:

Poetry and art have been called an anticipation of the eternal. If one wants to call them that, one must nevertheless be aware that poetry and art are not essentially related to an existing person, since the contemplation of poetry and art, "joy over the beautiful", is disinterested, and the observer is contemplatively outside himself *qua* existing person. ([19] I, p. 313n)<sup>11</sup>.

Yet Climacus agrees with Aristotle that "poetry is superior to history", or as Aristotle puts it in *Poetics*, "poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars" ([19] II, p. 246n535, quoting, again, Aristotle's *Poetics*).

"Poetry is something more philosophic". While the poetic continues to deal in possibilities, the poetic in Kierkegaard's hands becomes a descriptive investigative tool for philosophy, and this, in turn, transforms both philosophy and poetry. In a manner perhaps unparalleled in modern philosophy, Kierkegaard, as a "poet of the religious", imaginatively employs his literature as a philosophical investigative tool to explore the "how" of ethico-religious existence. Discursive philosophy joins with concrete representation; philosophy is rethought as literature, engaging the reader's imagination. Philosophy recruits literature not as ornament but as a tool for understanding, for it is only by presenting examples of an extraordinarily wide range of human psychological, aesthetic, ethical, and religious possibilities that one can "understand" human existence.

Striking in Kierkegaard's rethinking of the role of philosophy in relation to ethics and religion is how, in approach and technique, analytic and poetic dimensions are intertwined. Dialectic analysis and poetic concreteness are both needed to provide careful descriptive accounts of human subjectivity and, in this way, philosophy for Kierkegaard becomes poetic. Yet it is also the case that, in an important sense, Kierkegaard sees his new philosophical and poetic approach as descriptively "objective". We can explore this dimension of Kierkegaard's rethinking of philosophy's approach in the next subsection, on Kierkegaard's fictional "observer figures" and their use of "imaginative constructing".

#### 2.1.4. Observer Figures and Imaginary Constructing

Kierkegaard, in light of his interest in exploring the realm of human subjectivity, especially "the subjective thinker", transforms philosophy by fusing it with poetry to forge an investigative tool oriented to human pathos, creating fictional philosophical "observer figures" who use "imaginative constructions", "experiments", or "portrayals" to delineate, from their own stances, a wide range of human psychological, aesthetic, ethical, and religious possibilities. In this imaginative, descriptive approach, Kierkegaard anticipates much of the contemporary philosophy of religion.

Climacus says that his philosophical approach is against the "objective orientation" "which wants to turn everyone into an observer [*Betragter*]" ([19] I, p. 133). Yet despite his criticism of being "an observer", Climacus, and many of Kierkegaard's other pseudonymous authors, are indeed self-conscious observers. Judge William in *Either/Or*, Part II, not only represents an ethical way of life but is also an avuncular if also a stern observer of his young friend, the aesthete. Constantine Constantius observes and reports on the (perhaps fictional) Young Man of *Repetition*. Johannes de Silentio observes Abraham.

And Climacus, after all, is a great observer of Socrates and the unnamed “teacher” of *Philosophical Fragments*.

A central means of the pseudonyms’s observation is to use “imaginary constructions” to “experiment” [*Experiment*], a central theme in *Repetition* and a feature of other pseudonymous works. As Sylvia Walsh points out, the later Kierkegaard, focusing on Christianity, moved away from the term and increasingly says that as a “poet of the religious”, “he merely describes or portrays (*fremstille*) the existential ideals”, not “imaginatively constructs (*experimentere*) them”. For the later Kierkegaard, she continues, “The function of imagination in the ethical-religious . . . is better understood as depicting or portraying the ideal self rather than imaginatively constructing, making, or creating it”. Walsh goes on to say that the later Kierkegaard still holds that the “Imagination nevertheless plays an important role in bringing us to the point of reduplication in existence” ([25] pp. 206, 230). For our purposes, focusing on the earlier pseudonymous writings, we will use the phrase “imaginary constructions”.

Eleanor Helms has recently, convincingly to my mind, argued that it is important not to understand “imaginary construction” in *Repetition* as “mere observation and ironic distance”. Rather, “imaginary construction”, with its background in science, especially H.C. Ørsted, should be seen “as a tool for gaining insight and understanding”, especially concerned with tracing out the structures of selfhood, including the self’s continuity through changes in time. Constantine, the author of *Repetition*, Helms points out, expresses the hope that his own written work will allow more sustained attention in the reader, that “new objects of attention reveal new capacities in the self, new kinds and capacities of inner life” [14]<sup>12</sup>.

Climacus, in *Postscript*, returns to these themes of “imaginary constructing” and “an imaginary psychological construction” several times in his second-order “glance” at the pseudonymous books, *Repetition*, *Stages on Life’s Way*, and *Fear and Trembling*, revealing Kierkegaard’s own intense interest in relating “poetry as medium of the imagination”, “observation” of the same imagined figure in “the medium of existence”, and the demands of relating poetry and observation to “actuality” ([19] I, pp. 263–264; II, p. 234n384; I, pp. 500–501n).

Several features of Kierkegaard’s use of “imaginative constructions” and “observer figures” for descriptive–philosophical purposes are worth noting.

1. Kierkegaard uses “imaginary constructions” to fuse dialectic and poetic features of philosophical thought by attending to particular characters: a central tool for his goal of a descriptive philosophy capable of exploring subjective existence.
2. Imaginative constructions enable the descriptive philosopher of subjective thinking to explore the immense differences, indeed, breaches within ethical and religious existence, the particular features of ethics, of “immanent” religiosity, and forms of religion that break the mold of immanent religion. This is accomplished primarily by how various observed “figures” or “characters” embody the passional qualifications appropriate to each. A central motif of many of these figures is their struggle. Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* is, of course, a prime example, as his devotion to God and his love for Isaac are tested in the command to sacrifice the child of promise, a breach with the ethical and a situation incommunicable to anyone else.
3. These observer figures, employing imaginative constructions alert to religious particularities, embody epistemic humility. They are keenly aware of what they can understand and cannot understand in the figures they observe. A prime example is Johannes de Silentio, the author of *Fear and Trembling*. He explores Abraham with all the force of his dialectical imagination, but finally, “Abraham I cannot understand”, for Abraham’s “movement of faith must continually be made by virtue of the absurd, but yet in such a way, please note, that one does not lose the finite but gains it whole and intact” ([26], p. 37). Silentio, himself “by no means a philosopher”, says that he will not attempt to “go further than faith” but stands “amazed” before Abraham ([26] pp. 7, 23, 27). In a marvelous image, Silentio writes

I presumably can *describe* the movements of faith, but I cannot make them. In learning to go through the motions of swimming, one can be suspended from the ceiling in a harness and then presumably describe the movements, but one is not swimming. ([26] pp. 37–38, italics added)

Climacus, too, speaks of himself as a describer of religion, “a humorous, imaginatively constructing psychologist” ([19] I, p. 483). With regard to Christianity, he is “an imaginative constructor” ([19] I, p. 557), who yet, following Socrates and Hamann, can draw “the distinction qualitatively between what he understands and what he does not understand . . . can discover that there is something that is, despite its being against his understanding and thinking” ([19] I, p. 558). Displaying similar epistemic humility as Johannes de Silentio, Climacus’s imaginatively constructing descriptive approach does not dismiss what is at the *confinium* of its powers as the “absurd” and “paradoxical”, but comes to the very brink of what his observation can accomplish. This “epistemic humility” may, in turn, allow us to interrogate what they might or might not understand about their subjects. But whatever our degree of trust in them, their “epistemic humility” certainly points to the “situatedness”, the particular point of view, of philosophic observation, an example of how all of our philosophizing is always a view from “somewhere”.

4. These observer figures and imaginary constructors, even with their epistemic humility, are still confident that religious existence is philosophically “mappable”, understandable “from the outside”, and that one need not be a believer to understand religion. With regard to Christianity specifically, Climacus affirms that it can be described to someone; a pagan philosopher, for example, can be “told what Christianity is so that he could choose” ([19] I, p. 372).

That one can know what Christianity is without being a Christian must, then, be answered in the affirmative. Whether one can know what it is to be a Christian without being one is something else, and it must be answered in the negative. ([19] I, p. 372)<sup>13</sup>

The distinction between a descriptive conceptual understanding and the understanding available from participation, in this case, “knowing what Christianity is” and “knowing what it is to be a Christian”, is central to the method of Kierkegaard’s descriptive philosophy of ethical and religious possibilities. The observer is in a position to give highly detailed “imaginative constructive” accounts of such possibilities yet can also account for the experience of reaching limits in not understanding what it is “to be” a Christian. The two are not mutually exclusive<sup>14</sup>.

5. “Imaginative constructing” is, finally, central to “indirect communication”. We have seen how Kierkegaard’s “imaginative constructions” serve several important functions in his descriptive philosophy, fusing dialectic and poetic features of philosophic thought by creating particular characters, clarifying differences within ethical and religious existence, enabling the epistemic humility of the philosopher when confronting those imagined possibilities, yet at the end enabling a firm confidence that descriptive philosophy “from the outside” is possible. Now Climacus adds a further point concerning how the imaginative construction in *Repetition* relates reader with author, insisting that it

establishes a chasmic gap between reader and author and fixes the separation of inwardness between them, so that a direct understanding is made impossible. The imaginary construction is the conscious, teasing revocation of the communication, which is always of importance to an existing person who writes for existing persons, lest the relation be changed to that of a rote reciter who writes for rote reciters. ([19] I, pp. 263–264)

Climacus, describing the “imaginary psychological construction [*psychologisk Experiment*]” in *Repetition*, reveals well how this “chasmic gap” preserves the “inwardness” of reader and author:



If what is said is earnestness to the writer, he keeps the earnestness essentially to himself. If the recipient interprets it as earnestness, he does it essentially by himself, and precisely this is the earnestness. . . . The *being-in-between* [Mellemværende] of the imaginary construction encourages the inwardness of the two *away from each other in inwardness*. ([19] I, p. 264, original italics)

Imaginative constructions, finally, present a challenge to *both* the author and the reader, for each is individually responsible for how they might (or might not) engage with the imaginary construction.

#### 2.1.5. Summary

Kierkegaard's approach to a descriptive philosophy of religion is of continuing importance and relevance since it anticipates a good deal of the modern and postmodern philosophies of religion. Breaking with the dominant rationalist and speculative points of view of his day and influenced, though not uncritically, by Kant's new philosophical anthropology, Kierkegaard's own distinctive philosophical approach to religion does mark a watershed. Indeed, his approach suggests a perspective amenable to a range of not only "existential" but also analytical, phenomenological, or other postmodern approaches. Like Kierkegaard, even if not influenced by him directly, for many philosophers, the goal of understanding religion is neither, first of all, to explain religious belief reductively according to supposed universal criteria of rationality nor is it to locate religion's place within an overarching speculative system. Especially in postmodern contexts, the claims of both universal rationality and speculative totality are highly suspect. Rather, the goal is, first of all, to *describe* and, thus, to "understand" (or "attempt to understand"! ) religious discourses and religious existence. Whether as religious phenomena, religious forms of life, or religious systems of language and life, the descriptive approach is central to today's philosophy of religion<sup>15</sup>.

#### 2.2. Kierkegaard's Challenge to Contemporary Philosophy of Religion: Beyond Descriptive Objectivism

Such a fulsome account of a descriptive philosophy of religion, however, leaves out salient features of Kierkegaard's uses of the imagination for philosophy, uses that continue to challenge philosophy (and theology) today: Kierkegaard *describes* existence possibilities but also seeks to communicate indirectly such existence possibilities. Recalling Helms's sympathetic account of Constantine Constantius in *Repetition*, Constantine himself offers his book to the reader as a means for nurturing the reader's attention. The "chasm" of indirect communication that Climacus described in *Repetition*, "the *being-in-between* [Mellemværende] of the imaginary construction [that] encourages the inwardness of the two *away from each other in inwardness*" is not in the interests of objective disinterestedness but indirect communication ([19] I, p. 264).

The "teasing revocation" of indirect communication points to how Kierkegaard not only *describes* "subjective thinking" or "essential knowing" but also directs attention to "how" a reader might acquire *capabilities* of "subjective thinking" or "essential knowing" and how they might learn "passion". Indeed, the whole tenor of Kierkegaard's writing, in both conceptual content and rhetorical force, is never to promote "indifference" or "objectivism". That is amply borne out by our description, thus far, of Kierkegaard's argument with the Western philosophical tradition, his focus on "subjective thinking" and "essential knowing" as challenges to the "forgetfulness" of "pure thinking", the focus on the roles of the imagination in his descriptive ontology, his epistemological embrace of emotions and passions, his championing of poetry as an investigative tool, and the sheer verve of his use of observer figures and "imaginary constructing". But it is, of course, one thing to describe human existence, and it is another thing to attempt to shape capabilities through indirect communication. And Kierkegaard attempts both tasks, employing a number of strategies to that end.

Kierkegaard's strategies for indirectly communicating existence possibilities as capabilities are diverse, but it is instructive to begin once again with Climacus before looking at

Kierkegaard's broader literature. Two dimensions stand out: first, Climacus's high estimation of the spirit of ancient Greek philosophy, and second, Climacus's own conceptual and rhetorical strategies of communication.

### 2.2.1. Climacus and Ancient Philosophy

Climacus's first strategy against objectivism is his appeal to modern philosophy to recover the integrity of ancient philosophy, "the Greeks", with their honest conviction that philosophy is, above all, a way of life aimed at wisdom and happiness. Greek philosophy provides much of the conceptual background for his descriptive ontological account of possibility and actuality. Contrary to the Hegelian incorporation of movement in logic, the Greeks prize the importance of movement in existence, *kinesis*, the transition from imagined possibility to actuality in passion ([19] I, p. 342)<sup>16</sup>. Climacus, too, sees passion at the heart of Greek philosophy. "Existing . . . cannot be done without passion. therefore, every Greek thinker was essentially also a passionate thinker" ([19] I, p. 311).

It is, of course, Socrates, above all, who exemplifies best the Greek spirit for Kierkegaard<sup>17</sup>. Socrates is the "master of irony" against Romantic irony in Kierkegaard's magister dissertation [28]. In *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus praises Socrates as the most eminent of human teachers ([1] p. 24). In *Postscript*, Socrates embodies, above all, the subjective thinker who, unconcerned with being a "world-historical figure", "was occupied solely with himself" ([19] I, p. 147n). Socrates represents "the Greek principle" of understanding oneself in existence, though Climacus adds sardonically that "I am well aware that if anyone nowadays were to live as a Greek philosopher, that is, would existentially express what he would have to call his life-view, be existentially absorbed in it, he would be regarded as lunatic" ([19] I, p. 352, original italics). Climacus speaks of the passion of Greek thinkers by recalling Plato's image of Socratic *eros* in the *Symposium* on "how one might bring a person into passion", for human beings are like a wagon pulled by two horses, one Pegasus, the other a worn-out hack, one infinitely quick, the other plodding in time, with the existing human being as the driver ([19] I, pp. 311–312). Most importantly, Socrates represents the heart of indirect communication, for with his combination of irony and earnestness, Socrates has nothing to teach "directly", desiring only to awaken maieutically the erotic quest for "essential truth" in his listeners, a truth embodied in philosophy as a way of life. Climacus writes the following:

With regard to the essential truth, a direct relation between spirit and spirit is unthinkable . . . Socrates was a teacher of the ethical, but he was aware that there is no direct relation between the teacher and the learner because inwardness is truth, and inwardness in the two is precisely the path away from each other. ([19] I, p. 247)<sup>18</sup>.

For Climacus, and Kierkegaard, the "Greeks" represent the primary model for challenging modern philosophical objectivism, calling philosophy back, through the use of imaginary construction as indirect communication, to a concern with the existing individual and the cultivation of "essential knowing" and "inwardness".

### 2.2.2. Communicating "Subjective Thinking"

With this Socratic model in mind, we can see more clearly how Climacus, even as an elusive humorist who likes to keep whatever "earnestness" he has to himself, presents himself in his writings as having a Socratic interest in indirect communication. Because his great task, once more, is to dismantle "pure thinking" and "indifference", Climacus attacks this distancing indifference by means of both conceptual and rhetorical strategies and, thus, may qualify, I suggest, as a good example of Kierkegaard's wider philosophical strategy, as described by Lee C. Barrett, of "seeking to capacitate the individual by expanding her imaginative grasp of the passional dimensions of life-view options, and helping her to feel their attractive and repellent power" ([29] p. 23).

Among Kierkegaard's conceptual strategies is the exploration of a series of "meta-concepts" that might entice the reader's imagination to a new way of "entertaining con-

cepts”, concepts such as “interest”, “passion”, “inward deepening”, and “happiness”. For example, with regard to Christianity, Climacus says, speculative thought is indifferent as to whether anyone accepts Christianity or not, but Climacus suggests that “knowing” the truth of Christianity is a question of “eternal happiness” and, thus, a matter of one’s own “interest” and “passion”, but (phrasing it in the hypothetical “what if”)

what if this entire undertaking [of establishing the truth of Christianity “from a speculative point of view”] were a chimera, what if it could not be done; what if Christianity is indeed subjectivity, is inward deepening, that is, what if only two kinds of people can know something about it: those who are impassioned, infinitely interested in their eternal happiness and in faith build this happiness on their faith-bound relation to it, and those who with the opposite passion (yet with passion) reject it—the happy and the unhappy lovers? ([19] I, p. 52)

If “subjective truth” is a matter of passion, Climacus’s task as a philosopher is to help the reader see, even if only descriptively, the interest, the passion, in the question of “eternal happiness”. In contrast to the style of an “observer [*Betragter*]”, he offers virtuoso imaginative thought-experiments demonstrating the kinds of questions that readers might ask about a philosophical issue. For example, in “Becoming Subjective” in *Postscript*, Climacus portrays how one might consider from a subjective point of view what it is to “know” in relation to ethics, prayer, death, immortality, thanking God for the good, and marriage ([19] I, pp. 133–188).

In each instance, Climacus repeatedly brings the abstract concept back to what it might mean for an existing person. He begins his discussion of “ethics”, for example, with a “few introductory observations regarding the objective orientation: *what ethics would have to judge if becoming a subjective individual were not the highest task assigned to every human being*” ([19] I, p. 133, original italics). “Ethics” “would have to despair” for “the system” excludes it. Rather, “The ethical is not only a knowing; it is also a doing that is related to a knowing” and a doing that “can at times . . . become more difficult than the first doing” ([19] I, pp. 160–161).

So, too, “What it means to die” is not a matter for dispassionate reflection but requires “an act to think [one’s] death”, otherwise we do not really *know* what we are talking about when talking about “death” ([19] I, pp. 165, 169). In this act, a human being’s life becomes immersed in the idea of *one’s own death*, not “death” in the abstract<sup>19</sup>. As Climacus later puts it, “All essential knowing pertains to existence” as “knowledge . . . related to the knower” ([19] I, p. 197)<sup>20</sup>. Climacus’s explorations of “ethics” and “death” are uses of imagination, indeed, imaginative exercises, prompting the reader’s potential “inward deepening”.

In addition to this conceptual nimbleness in subjective thinking, Climacus also possesses a carefully crafted rhetorical voice. Although he may certainly be described, in Furtak’s words, as “not the most literary or the most religious of Kierkegaard’s authors”, he is certainly a serious philosopher ([4] p. 110). So, too, while it is also the case that, as Barrett states, “his persona manifests the ambivalence and instability” of his humoristic lack of commitment to existential options ([29] p. 24), Kierkegaard, at the same time, ironically presents his fictional Climacus as seeing himself, in contrast to the grandeur of the “systematician”, as (merely) a “subjective author” ([19] I, p. 188). Attacking the system, Climacus presents himself, humorously and Socratically, as one whose philosophical task is “to make difficulties everywhere” ([19] I, 187)<sup>21</sup>.

Climacus deploys another rhetorical device: the use of the personal voice. Even though he is not a Christian, he frames the question of the truth of Christianity in terms of the “I”:

Simply stated: How can I, Johannes Climacus, share in the happiness that Christianity promised? The issue pertains to me alone, partly because, if properly presented, it will pertain to everyone in the same way. ([19] I, p. 17)

Climacus’s rhetorical stance as a “subjective author” attacks objectivism by *inviting* his reader to entertain, at least imaginatively, a shift in perspective, directing attention to the

question of passion; indeed, his strategies seek to evoke passion. Climacus, as a philosopher, unites description with indirect communication, seeking to undercut the pretensions of objectivist “speculative thought”. These multiple strategies, despite appearances, are not at odds but are two sides of the one philosophical and poetic endeavor.

Beyond Climacus and the observer figures we focused upon, Kierkegaard’s literature includes many voices and moods of discourse aimed at dismantling not only the illusions of philosophical “objectivism”, Climacus’s concern, but any of a range of “diseases of reflection” that prevent “subjective thinking” and its passions. His pseudonymous authors and subjects occupy a range of their own positions, from aesthetes to the specifically Christian voice of the pseudonym Anti-Climacus. In addition, Kierkegaard’s veronymous literature, published often simultaneously with the pseudonymous writings and intended to “accompany” them, adopt yet other voices and moods. Straightforwardly “upbuilding”, some of these discourses may be ethical or generically religious in conceptual content; other discourses are explicitly Christian. As we have seen, Kierkegaard, later in his career, rethinks how the religious poet, and especially the poet describing Christian ideality, will see himself not as engaged in “imaginary constructing” but as “describing or portraying”, with greater attention to the source and authority of those ideals and the demands of bringing them more insistently to bear upon the requirements of “actuality”. Thus, the voice and mood of this veronymous, meditative literature are often of address, with various degrees of insistency, and underlying it all is a call to seriousness, to change one’s life. But all of this literature, pseudonymous and veronymous, is alike imaginative and concerned with descriptive precision as well as evocative power conveying the passions of their respective stances.

One can fruitfully address these different voices and moods in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous and veronymous literature alike in terms of different audiences, for Kierkegaard was very mindful of the different kinds of illusions that might need a philosophical or literary or religious address and that need to be attended to in their particularity. His philosophical style provides “dialectic”, and his poetic style portrays “feeling”, and together, they imaginatively convey the pathos of particular ways of life, not one way of life, exploring, too, not only the connections but also the collisions among those ways of life <sup>22</sup>.

The entire literature is then, by necessity, “without authority”, and even when most “direct” in either exhortation or in conveying specifically Christian conceptual content, it is always still in the broader and most important sense “indirect”, for it also never claims to impart ethical and religious *capacities* “by rote”<sup>23</sup>. The response is left to the reader. Whether pseudonymous or veronymous and in the diversity of their voices and moods addressed to different audiences, Kierkegaard’s texts point back to ourselves.

In fact, Kierkegaard’s literature, in its multiple voices and moods of discourse, its awareness of various audiences, and its firm adherence to the impossibility of directly communicating ethical and religious capabilities, also takes one further step, and that is it does not finally put forward a *single* triumphant point of view. The philosopher Paul L. Holmer put this point succinctly, comparing Kierkegaard to Plato:

Like Plato in the *Gorgias*, Kierkegaard also presents contrasting views of life; but unlike Plato, who uses Socrates as the ethical representative to conquer each of his antagonists by superior argumentative skill, Kierkegaard refuses to allow a philosophical victory for even the view of life he espouses. Philosophy remains *descriptive* and *neutral*. ([31] p. 19, original italics)

Philosophically and theologically, this is an important interpretative point in approaching Kierkegaard’s writings since he is so often portrayed as, for example, “a Christian existentialist”. Even if, as Holmer implies, he does himself espouse Christianity, he always presents the Christian faith as one point of view among several, and in that sense, philosophy remains “*descriptive* and *neutral*”. But “neutral” is not “indifferent”, and Kierkegaard presents the *passion* of Christian faith in relation to other passionate stances, allowing the reader to make up her own mind.

Kierkegaard's writings are then indeed mirrors of various kinds, within which readers are invited to imaginative, passionate engagement with questions of subjective existence, whether for or against the ethical and religious possibilities presented<sup>24</sup>. Anticipating much later "reader-response" readings, philosophy allows the reader to imaginatively see themselves and their world in a new way that may challenge and enrich their life. "Thought-experiments", after all, may be exercises in shifting *one's own point of view*, imagining another way of looking at things, in Wittgenstein's sense of shifts in "seeing-as", leading to the "dawning of an aspect"<sup>25</sup>.

Even "observing" itself, finally, is, for Kierkegaard, a matter of "how" one sees. In the first of his two 1843 discourses on the theme "Love Will Hide a Multitude of Sins", Kierkegaard reflects that the old proverb "love is blind" does not, as one might imagine, point to an imperfection:

It does not depend, then, merely upon what one sees but what one sees depends upon how one sees; all observation is not just a receiving, a discovering, but also a bringing forth, and insofar as it is that, how the observer himself is constituted is indeed decisive. When one person sees one thing and another sees something else in the same thing, then the one discovers what the other conceals. ([36] p. 59; cf. p. 208)

"How one sees" another person, Kierkegaard continues, points to "a person's inner being" ([36] p. 60).

If, however, the ability to see is so dependent upon "a person's inner being", this suggests that the task of existing, and philosophy too, is to have one's own imagination changed, perhaps delivered from illusion and "fantasy", and to a new conception of the self, with new cares and concerns<sup>26</sup>.

Far from philosophical "indifference" or "objectivism", Kierkegaard's literature displays then a profound vision of the uses of the imagination that both describe and seek to elicit all the pathos surrounding questions of human, especially ethical and religious, existence, thus continuing to challenge the practice of philosophy to this day.

### 2.2.3. Afterword: Kierkegaard and Hadot

Because of Kierkegaard's deep sense of the necessity of recovering the classical Greek and Roman philosophical traditions, especially Socratic strategies of indirection aimed at personal transformation, a number of scholars have found it illuminating to compare Kierkegaard with Pierre Hadot, who presents an important rereading of ancient philosophy. For Hadot, classical philosophy was, to be sure, "a theoretical and 'conceptualizing' activity", but "in antiquity it was the philosopher's choice of a way of life which conditioned and determined the fundamental tendencies of his philosophical discourse" ([38] pp. 272–273).

Yet, Hadot concludes, if philosophy after the *Symposium* "was viewed as an exercise of wisdom, and therefore as the practice of a way of life", "what philosophers have least retained from the model presented by Socrates in the *Symposium* are his irony and his humor" ([38] pp. 49–50). Kierkegaard, however, certainly recovers Socrates's irony and humor.

Hadot's historical account of ancient philosophy parallels Kierkegaard's own insights concerning "the Greek principle" in striking ways. Socrates's passion for truth, his ironic ignorance combined with earnestness in his critique of Sophistic "knowledge", his focus on "the call from 'individual' to 'individual'", and the absolute value of moral choice all mark central features of a way of performing philosophy that both Kierkegaard and Hadot seek to recover ([38] pp. 22–51)<sup>27</sup>.

Another important parallel between Kierkegaard and Hadot is how philosophy becomes a matter of practice as part of this way of life. Hadot places the theoretical discourses of philosophy within the context of practices, "spiritual exercises" of various kinds, "intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practiced them", including "the philosophy teacher's discourse", if it "were presented in such a way that

the disciple as auditor, reader, or interlocutor, could make spiritual progress and transform himself within" ([38] p. 6)<sup>28</sup>.

Hadot traces, too, the development of transformational reading, how, in the late Roman imperial period, philosophy was no longer placed in educational institutions but was learned by reading and commenting on texts, which meant "both to learn a way of life and to practice it" ([38] pp. 147, 153). This recalls, too, how Kierkegaard strongly urges solitary but vocal reading, for instance, "My dear reader, read aloud, if possible!", in the interests of inwardness ([32] p. 4). Here, again, Kierkegaard's image of texts as mirrors fits well with Hadot's account of transformational reading in ancient philosophy [40].

Finally, it is striking how both Hadot and Kierkegaard look to ancient philosophy to critique the dominance of theoretical over practical discourse in modernity, including in the professionalization of philosophy in modern universities. Hadot speaks forcefully to the corruption of academic philosophy by "the artists of reason" (Kant's phrase) and sees, rather, the need for the true philosopher to be an outsider<sup>29</sup>. Kierkegaard's Climacus, of course, also satirizes the "assistant professors" and *Privatdocents*, and, as we have seen, by contrast, wants to make things not easier but more difficult<sup>30</sup>. Hadot's Socrates, too, is "neither quite of this world, nor quite outside this world" ([38] p. 48; cf. pp. 36–38).

In all of these ways, Hadot provides a most helpful perspective from which to see how Kierkegaard's descriptive philosophy rightly looked to a vibrant past tradition that inspired his own attempts to rethink the philosophical task. Whether Kierkegaard himself would agree, Hadot places him within a wider context of philosophers since the eighteenth century who have embodied this model of ancient philosophy, including Kant's "Socratism", as well as "thinkers as different as"

Rousseau, Shaftesbury, Schopenhauer, Emerson, Thoreau, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, William James, Bergson, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, and still others. All, in one way or another, were influenced by the model of ancient philosophy, and conceived of philosophy not only as a concrete, practical activity but also as a transformation of our way of inhabiting and perceiving the world. ([38] p. 270)<sup>31</sup>

Hadot's quest to restore the spirit of ancient Greek philosophy illuminates Kierkegaard's own attempt to create a descriptive philosophy that goes beyond theoretical disinterestedness to nurturing personal formation and places Kierkegaard's work in a broader perspective that continues to challenge the professionalization of contemporary philosophy of religion to this day.

Yet Kierkegaard strikes out in his own direction, beyond Hadot. For Climacus says, "To understand oneself in existence was *the Greek principle* . . . it is also *the Christian principle*". For the Christian, "the difficulty is greater than for the Greek, because even greater contrasts are placed together, . . . existence is accentuated paradoxically as sin, and eternity paradoxically as the god [*Guden*] in time" ([19] I, pp. 352–354, original italics).

Philosophically, Kierkegaard attends carefully, as we have seen, to *differences* within religious existence, especially to particularity, the particularity of "the Christian principle". In relation to Hadot, this raises the worry that, in the words of one scholar, unlike Hadot's interest in a philosophical rational universalism, that is, a *paideia* that is *sub specie aeternitatis et universalis*, Kierkegaard ends with "passionate, exclusivist reaffirmations of extra-rational particularisms that cannot or will not respect the common humanity of people of different traditions, including traditions with different revealed or revered sources of their own" ([41] pp. 409, 432–433).

This concern deserves, and is receiving, serious response among students of Kierkegaard<sup>32</sup>. But, here, Paul L. Holmer may be helpful again in pointing out how "Kierkegaard refuses to allow a philosophical victory for even the view of life he espouses. Philosophy remains *descriptive* and *neutral*" ([31] p. 19, original italics). This might suggest some thought-experiments of our own, beyond Kierkegaard himself. First, is there any *prima facie* reason a Muslim could not find Kierkegaard's multiple imaginative strategies, both analytic and evocative, a useful resource to plumb not only the concepts but the pathos and practices of the Islamic revelation as their way of life? Second, might not a non-Muslim, at least

imaginatively and with epistemic humility, seek to understand as deeply as possible the concepts, pathos, and practices of Islam as a way of life?

As for Kierkegaard himself with regard to Christianity, if Holmer is right, he is not Socrates as portrayed in the *Gorgias*. In refusing “to allow a philosophical victory for even the view of life he espouses”, Kierkegaard is an indirect communicator presenting “imaginary constructions” and “portrayals”, descriptive philosophical–poetic reflections with the hope of communicating the passion of “subjective thinking”, leaving the rest to the reader.

### 3. Discussion

Søren Kierkegaard both anticipates and challenges contemporary approaches to a descriptive philosophy of religion. Unlike the dominant rationalist and often reductionist philosophies of his time, Kierkegaard anticipates current approaches by directing attention to the study of “human subjectivity”, with the primary goal being a careful description of the contours of what it is to be an existing human being. Using his concept of the imagination as “engaged between possibility and actuality”, this essay sketches out some of the central features of how the imagination *functions* in this descriptive approach: a descriptive ontology of human existence, a pluralist epistemology that sees ethics and religion possessing not only cognitive but also passional dimensions. Kierkegaard then reimagines the role of the philosopher as employing the poetic as an investigative tool in describing religious existence, including creating philosophic observer figures who “imaginatively construct” thought-experiments to illuminate dimensions of human existence.

The “descriptive” nature of this approach, especially as practiced by some of Kierkegaard’s “humorist” and, thus, somewhat detached observers, might at first suggest a new form of philosophical objectivism. Yet this ignores important features of Kierkegaard’s descriptive approach: Kierkegaard’s engagement with ancient Greek philosophy as modeling “subjective thinking”, as well as his conceptual investigations and rhetorical strategies in “indirectly communicating” the passion of ethical and religious capabilities as possibilities for the reader. Contrary to philosophical “objectivism”, Kierkegaard can, thus, be seen as anticipating the more recent attempt of Pierre Hadot to recover traditions of philosophy as pointing to a “way of life”, challenging the professionalization of philosophy that continues to this day. Unlike Hadot, Kierkegaard also engages religious difference, especially the particularity of “the Christian principle”. Yet his “descriptive philosophy”, in refusing a philosophical victory for any point of view, might well provide important resources for passionate engagement with the concepts, pathos, and practices of other religious traditions as well.

### 4. Materials and Methods

The materials and methods in this essay include the following:

1. Placing Kierkegaard’s thought historically within the context of natural theology, rationalism, and speculative thought in order to describe central features of his new understanding of a descriptive philosophy of religion.
2. Close reading of Kierkegaard’s texts, in discussion with other scholars, focusing upon his concept of the imagination in a descriptive ontology of human existence, a pluralist epistemology, poetry as investigative tool, and the use of observer figures and imaginative constructing. Rather than resulting, however, in a philosophical “objectivism”, Kierkegaard’s engagement with the Greek philosophical tradition, as well as his conceptual and poetic investigations of the “passions” of “subjective thinking”, aim at imaginatively eliciting in the reader at least the possibility of new passions, always by means of indirect communication. Kierkegaard’s descriptive philosophy, therefore, remains a challenge to modern “objectivist” philosophy of ethics and religion.

3. A comparative reading of Kierkegaard's enthusiasm for "the Greek principle" in philosophy with Pierre Hadot's historical recovery and championing of ancient philosophy as a "way of life".
4. A constructive proposal regarding Kierkegaard's descriptive philosophy of religion in relation to particular religious traditions, especially Christianity, but also how his descriptive philosophy can engage religious traditions beyond Christianity.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Furtak [4] pp. 94, 98. Furtak rightly notes that not all of these features can, of course, be attributed to every thinker from Descartes to Hegel, but "there is . . . a cluster of assumptions which bear a family resemblance to each other and which *do* more or less define the modern epistemological tradition" ([4] p. 99, original italics).
- <sup>2</sup> Literature on Kierkegaard's concept of the imagination (*Indbildningskraft* or *Phantasi[e]*), and related topics, is extensive and growing. The following list is not exhaustive: Gouwens [5]; Ferreira [6]; the essays in a special issue on the topic "Imagination in Kierkegaard and Beyond", edited by Kaftanski [7]. The imagination is relevant to recent accounts of selfhood and identity, especially narrative identity, including Davenport [8]; Rudd [9]; Stokes [10,11]. Helms [12–14] is making significant contributions to the theme of imagination.
- <sup>3</sup> See Evans [16] pp. 64–65 on the appropriateness of the phrase "descriptive ontology".
- <sup>4</sup> While *The Sickness Unto Death* famously echoes Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Roe Fremstedal [17] argues for the important influence of Kant on the philosophical and theological anthropology in Kierkegaard's work, for both thinkers, first, sketch "a normative non-naturalistic anthropology that includes teleology, ethics, and religion", and second, "both emphasize what is common to all humans". Most importantly for our purposes on the theme of the imagination, "Both are concerned with human actuality, possibilities, and (objective) ideals". "For Kierkegaard, the past seems to represent the actual, the future the possibilities, and the present the moment in which the self relates to the whole by taking full responsibility for itself" (citing Stokes [11] p. 163). But Kierkegaard moves beyond Kant "particularly by introducing the concept of facticity and richer notions of historicity and selfhood", "anticipating twentieth-century phenomenology and existentialism" ([17] p. 327). With this influence from Kant, Kierkegaard thus marks a watershed in descriptive accounts of "what it means to be an embodied human being and to become a self" ([17] p. 320). As we will see, however, Kierkegaard moves even further beyond Kant in another obvious yet crucial way: his remarkable strategies of using poetry as an investigative tool.
- <sup>5</sup> See Kierkegaard [19] I, p. 314. Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness Unto Death* ([15] p. 55) speaks of a "naked abstract self" that "is the first form of the infinite self and the advancing impetus in the whole process by which a self infinitely becomes responsible for its actual self with all its difficulties and advantages". This raises interesting interpretive issues. This could mean, as Eleanor Helms [13] describes, that there is a merely "imaginary abstract self" (John Davenport) or an "abstract self as an experienced moment of isolation that we have a duty to overcome quickly" (Patrick Stokes) ([13] p. 79). She argues rather that "an abstract self is not something that one *is*" ([13] p. 89). The "abstract naked self", in Helms's view, is abstract; it is not experienced, but is formal, transcendental in the Kantian sense ([13] p. 81), required to account for how someone can undergo change and remain itself. Helms is concerned to avoid setting up an overly simply opposition of "abstract" versus "concrete", and also pragmatist or fideist readings of Kierkegaard that in one way or another prize the will, often the moment of will, effecting a transition from imagined possibility to concrete actuality.
- <sup>6</sup> See Piety [18] p. 48; "essential truth", citing Kierkegaard [19] I, p. 199n; and "subjective truth", citing [19] I, p. 21. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore Piety's discussions of "objective knowledge" and "subjective knowledge", or of various kinds of "subjective knowledge", including "immanent metaphysical knowledge" and "subjective knowledge of actuality". She argues that Kierkegaard's epistemology "is both foundationalist and nonfoundationalist, both substantive and procedural, and that it includes both internalist and externalist theories of belief justification" ([18] p. 3). She also states that "Kierkegaard's epistemology, as [C. Stephen] Evans has observed, is both in a sense 'premodern' and 'postmodern' . . . . That is, it is premodern, in terms of Kierkegaard's understanding of truth, but postmodern in its nonreductionist account of the complexities of human knowing" ([18] p. 4; citing Evans [21] p. 42). With regard to whether Kierkegaard's understanding of subjective knowledge is realist or anti-realist, Piety argues that "knowledge that there is a God", for example, is obtained "by allowing oneself to be immersed in the idea that there is a God", as Kierkegaard puts it in a journal entry. But while the idea of God has reality as *an idea*, Kierkegaard



holds further that “even though . . . ‘how one is oneself has an essential influence on one’s mental representation of God . . . he felt he was presented with religious realities that existed independently of this subjective contribution’” ([18] p. 118, quoting Martin Slotty ([22] p. 63). Crucial here, Piety argues, is that, for Kierkegaard, “the idea that there is a God is not irrelevant to the existence of the person whose idea it is” ([18] p. 119).

7 Kierkegaard’s extensive analysis of emotions, feelings, moods, and his crucial concept of passion has received extensive treatment by Robert C. Roberts and others. For a brief account of emotions in relation specifically to the passion of faith, and in discussion with Roberts, Frankfurt, Furtak, Nussbaum, and others, see Westphal [23], pp. 102–120.

8 See Kierkegaard [19] I, pp. 343–360: “The Contemporaneity of the Particular Elements of Subjectivity in the Existing Subjective Individual”, and “The Subjective Thinker: His Task, His Form, That Is, His Style”. Note again that Climacus is here describing first of all not the philosopher but rather the existing “subjective thinker”. We shall see later what this descriptive task means for the philosopher too.

9 On Kierkegaard’s critical redeeming of the “poetic” in existence, including religious existence, see Walsh [25].

10 Citing Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451 a–b; see [19] II, p. 246n535.

11 On the background of the concept of art as “disinterested”, see [19], II, pp. 244n522, 244–245n523, on Kant, Schiller, and H.L. Martensen.

12 Helms criticizes my own past “ironic” reading of Constantine in *Repetition*, and I concede that she sheds fresh new light on Constantine. I actually share with Helms, as I hope to make clear, the view that “imaginary constructing” in general should *not* be seen as “mere observation and ironic distance”, but, again, “as a tool for gaining insight and understanding”. I do however continue to see “imaginary constructing” in light also of its “poetic” associations, Kierkegaard’s critical engagement with the German Romantics, Climacus’s (and Kierkegaard’s) interests in relating “poetry as medium of the imagination” to “imaginary constructing”, and the central role of the “poetic” for Kierkegaard’s own self-understanding.

13 Compare [19] I, p. 272.

14 Evans [16] pp. 23–24 makes this point very well.

15 Such a descriptive approach does not avoid critiquing ethics and religion. Kierkegaard himself was a master of the hermeneutics of suspicion, witness *Two Ages* and his attack upon “Christendom” in *The Moment*. He was sympathetic as well to insights from the great critics of Christianity. Climacus praises “a scoffer who attacks Christianity and at the same time expounds it so creditably that it is a delight to read him”, likely Feuerbach ([19] I, p. 614; II, p. 270n862).

16 Compare [19] I, p. 309 on the importance of motion in Greek philosophy. The contrast is to Hegel’s concept of movement in logic, a particular target of Kierkegaard’s. See [19] I, pp. 106–125, and p. 110 on F.A. Trendelenburg, “sober as a Greek thinker”.

17 On Kierkegaard and Socrates, see again Furtak [4]. As Furtak notes elsewhere, Climacus’s understanding of Socrates stands within the context of other thinkers Climacus finds exemplary, such as Kant and Lessing as well as Jacobi and Hamann. But Climacus holds Socrates to be the ideal superior to them all, for Socrates alone is capable of “kindling the intellectual fire that . . . [Climacus] is trying to light” ([27] p. 2).

18 Compare Kierkegaard [1] pp. 23–24.

19 See Stokes ([30] pp. 277–278) on Kierkegaard’s discussion of “thinking my death” in this section of *Postscript* in relation to the concept of “watchfulness” or “attention”.

20 See Furtak ([4] p. 107) for a commendable description of Climacus on death in relation to the “limits of epistemology”: “‘subjective knowledge’ is also called ‘essential knowing’ . . . because “not only are we quite intimately involved in these questions, but the meaning of our existence is at stake in the way that we answer them”.

21 See Climacus’s delightful account of how he became a philosophical author ([19] I, pp. 185–188). “Making difficulties everywhere” is at the heart of yet another rhetorical strategy Climacus employs: satire.

22 Barrett [29] p. 23 deals very well with both the importance of the multiplicity of voices and the variety of “life-views” in the literature.

23 In Kierkegaard’s overall communicative strategy, even though Socrates’s *maieutic* method of eliciting the truth from within is reversed in Climacus’s “Thought-Project” in *Philosophical Fragments* ([1] pp. 9–22) with reliance upon the “moment in time” of “the god as teacher and savior” ([1] pp. 23–36), nonetheless indirect communication, as the communication of capabilities rather than knowledge, continues to be essential throughout Kierkegaard’s literature.

24 See especially Kierkegaard’s “What Is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?” in Kierkegaard [32] pp. 7–51, and Stokes [11].

25 Wittgenstein [33] II, pp. 194, 206, 210, 212. Against volitionist readings of Kierkegaard on the “leap of faith”, it is important to see how transitions in Kierkegaard are not by sheer “will-power”, but by perceptual shifts in “imaginative vision”. See Ferreira [6]. As Eleanor Helms recently puts it, “Kierkegaard draws on the flexibility and changeability of the imagination, which enable imaginers to see the world in new ways . . . Rather than a “leap of faith” as believing without evidence (or with only practical evidence) . . . Kierkegaard’s leap is instead a shift in perspective motivated in part by such imaginary constructions” (Helms, [14] italics added). For a recent spirited defense of the “leap of faith” in terms of “a restricted, sophisticated, and plausible version of direct doxastic voluntarism” in contrast to “indirect doxastic voluntarism”, see Z Quanbeck [34]. (I am indebted to a reviewer for bringing

this to my attention.) Helms’s emphasis on the imaginative shift in perspective, and her critique of the “leap of faith” by sheer “will-power”, need not diminish the role of conscious decision in such transitions. On this point, see, for example, Sylvia Walsh’s response to M. Jamie Ferreira on the transition to specifically Christian faith in *The Sickness Unto Death*. While “wholeheartedly” agreeing with the importance of the imagination, Walsh affirms too the themes of the “inversion of the will” and “faith against the understanding” ([35] p. 170n11). I suggest that light can be thrown on this matter of imagination and will by attending concretely to the importance of philosophical and theological practices, including “spiritual exercises” of exhortation and training, in using imaginative insights to, as Helms puts it, “enable imaginers to see the world in new ways”. We will return to these “spiritual exercises” in the next section.

- 26 For a good recent overview of current scholarship on “fantasy” and “imagination”, in the context of contrasts between Kierkegaard and Iris Murdoch, see Compaijen [37].
- 27 On Socrates’s “call from ‘individual’ to ‘individual’”, Hadot says, “This is the Individual dear to Kierkegaard—the Individual as unique and unclassifiable personality” ([38] p. 30).
- 28 See also Irina [39] on Kierkegaard’s “influencing Hadot’s own views regarding the way philosophy should be practiced as a spiritual exercise, that is, as a dedication to a way of life based on a set of existential practices” ([39] p. 170).
- 29 Hadot [38] pp. 258–261, wherein he cites Wittgenstein as an example of a philosophical outsider.
- 30 See, for example, how Climacus mocks the “assistant professors” and “even Hegel” for being devoid of a sense for the comic ([19] I, p. 281), and Kierkegaard’s journal entry mocking the *Privatdocents*, cited in the Hongs’s notes to [19] II, p. 133.
- 31 On Kant’s “Socratism”, which Hadot sees paralleling Kierkegaard, see Hadot [38] p. 266. Placing Kierkegaard in this company of thinkers interested in philosophy as “transformation of our way of inhabiting and perceiving the world” suggests future research into his contributions to recent interest in genre and style in the writing of philosophy more generally. (I am indebted to a reviewer for this observation.)
- 32 See Connell [42] who deals extensively with the complexity of universalistic and particularistic themes in Kierkegaard.

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