

Illusion and offense in *Philosophical Fragments*: Kierkegaard's inversion of Feuerbach's critique of Christianity

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Abstract The article shows the “Appendix” to Søren Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments* to be a response to Ludwig Feuerbach’s critique of Christianity. While previous studies have detected some influence by Feuerbach on Kierkegaard, they have so far discovered little in the way of specific responses to Feuerbach’s ideas in Kierkegaard’s published works. The article first makes the historical argument that Kierkegaard was very likely reading Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* while he was writing *Philosophical Fragments*, as several of Kierkegaard’s journal entries from that period discuss Feuerbach in relation to central ideas in *Fragments*. The article then shows how Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus inverts Feuerbach’s projection theory, turning it against critics like Feuerbach. At the heart of Feuerbach’s critique of Christianity is the claim that religion is a conceptual illusion, whereby the individual projects his or her personal limits onto the species and then projects the unlimited onto a supposed divine being. Furthermore, Feuerbach sees Christianity as rife with absurdities that tell against its reasonableness. In exploring a hypothetical transcendent avenue toward the truth, Climacus inverts both of these philosophical moves. He argues that on the transcendent hypothesis, the immanentist critic is himself a victim of an “acoustical illusion”: the absolute paradox of the appearance of the god in time is in fact not judged by, but rather judges, the critic as absurd. In inverting and not repudiating Feuerbach’s critique, Climacus reveals the critic as a Socratic figure who displays the heights—and ultimately, the limits—of secular philosophy’s capabilities.

Keywords Alienation · Feuerbach · Illusion · Kierkegaard · Offense · Paradox · Projection theory of religion

The relation between the thought of Ludwig Feuerbach and Søren Kierkegaard remains insufficiently understood despite the rapid growth of Kierkegaard studies in recent decades. Only a few commentators have gone into any depth at all in exploring this relation, and there is little consensus as to what exactly Kierkegaard thought about Feuerbach. One commentator claims without further explanation that “the perceptive reader could find evidence of

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the fertility and importance of Feuerbach's ideas" in Kierkegaard (Kamenka 1970, p. viii; see also p. 150). Another finds this claim "dubious," citing the lack of direct commentary on Feuerbach's best-known work, *The Essence of Christianity*, in Kierkegaard's writings (Arbaugh 1980, p. 9). Others see similarities between Feuerbachian and Kierkegaardian ideas, but do not assert that Kierkegaard was influenced by or even responded to Feuerbach (Wartofsky 1977, pp. 169, 180, 443; Elrod 1976; Mercer 2001, p. 21). Considering Feuerbach's great notoriety at the time Kierkegaard was beginning his career, and considering the two thinkers' many common philosophical interests (with agreement over their critiques of the Hegelian system but disagreement over the cognitive status of Christian theology), it is reasonable to expect that there is more than an atmospheric relationship between the two. It is indeed reasonable to expect that Kierkegaard responded to very specific ideas of Feuerbach's.

The recent studies that have gone into some depth in exploring this relation show that Kierkegaard had an ambiguous relation to Feuerbach's thought. While these studies are right in demonstrating this ambiguity, they are incomplete, overlooking important places in Kierkegaard's body of work where a response to Feuerbach can be found. In his book *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*, Van Harvey notes that in *The Sickness unto Death*, attributed to the pseudonymous Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard greets the Feuerbachian and Straussian equation of the human species and the divine with "biting sarcasm" (Harvey 1995, p. 119; see also Kierkegaard 1980/1849, pp. 117–118). But *Sickness* reveals as well that Kierkegaard in fact shared certain affinities with Feuerbach (Harvey 1995, pp. 129–130). Harvey sees other similarities between Feuerbach's thought and Kierkegaard's, but he does not acknowledge any *response* by Kierkegaard to Feuerbach beyond the single sarcastic one. Kierkegaard knew of Feuerbach's work years before he wrote *The Sickness unto Death*; a fuller view of Kierkegaard's view of Feuerbach and his conceptual critique of Christianity will come only upon examining earlier works by Kierkegaard that explore conceptual issues surrounding religious faith.

István Czakó has undertaken the most thorough investigation of Kierkegaard's view of Feuerbach to date, examining every instance where Kierkegaard refers explicitly to Feuerbach in Kierkegaard's published and unpublished works. On Czakó's account, Kierkegaard saw Feuerbach as "a scandalized free-thinker" whom Kierkegaard respected as a critic of Hegelian-tinted Christian theology (Czakó 2001, p. 396). Although Czakó's study does much to advance the understanding of Kierkegaard's view of Feuerbach, it takes account only of those places where Kierkegaard makes explicit reference to Feuerbach. In light of Kierkegaard's penchant for indirection in his writing, we should look as well for veiled references to Feuerbach—places where Kierkegaard seems to pick up concepts or keywords associated with Feuerbach, even where there is no explicit mention of Feuerbach's name. Although it is true, as George Arbaugh points out, that Kierkegaard "never engages in a critique of Feuerbach's naturalistic hypothesis regarding Christianity or religion" (Arbaugh 1980, p. 9) in a direct fashion, this does not mean that he has nothing to say about that hypothesis. As I will show, Kierkegaard engages in something far cleverer than the direct critique in dealing with Feuerbach—he turns Feuerbach's own intellectual moves against the naturalistic hypothesis.

I argue that Feuerbach was essential to the development of Søren Kierkegaard's thought on religious faith. Kierkegaard incorporates key elements of Feuerbach's critique into his analysis of religious faith, and he does so in precisely the place where he responds most directly to the immanentist critique of religion. But Kierkegaard incorporates those elements of Feuerbach's critique only to reflect them back on Feuerbach himself. In doing so, Kierkegaard actually shows a great respect for Feuerbach as a practitioner of naturalistic philosophy at

its very best and as someone committed to understanding and explicating Christianity, even though he ultimately remains offended by it.

The two major loci for my inquiry are inquiry are Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* and Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*. I consult other Kierkegaardian sources only to aid in the interpretation of *Fragments*. *The Essence of Christianity* is certainly Feuerbach's best-known work today, as it also was in Kierkegaard's time. *Philosophical Fragments* addresses, more than any other of Kierkegaard's works, the question of religion's immanent and transcendent status, placing it in conversation with *The Essence of Christianity* simply by virtue of its subject matter. I maintain that there is a deeper, more direct connection between these works, given Kierkegaard's discussion of illusion, offense, and paradox in the *Fragments* and in journal entries on Feuerbach that Kierkegaard wrote around the time he was working on *Fragments*. I will demonstrate that Kierkegaard likely had Feuerbach on his mind when he was writing the *Fragments*, and it shows. Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus turns Feuerbach's theory of projection back on Feuerbach himself in order to emphasize that a religion of transcendence necessarily offends the understanding. In describing offense, Climacus suggests that the immanentist critic himself, and not the Christian, is the victim of an illusion.

Precedent for my argument comes from Bruce Kirmmse's characterization of the relation between Kierkegaard and Feuerbach concerning a different matter. In commenting on the Foreword to Kierkegaard's "Two Notes" concerning "The Individual" (written in 1848, but published posthumously in 1859), Kirmmse writes that "If Feuerbach ('theology is anthropology') or Marx felt that they were inverting Hegel, SK certainly seems to be inverting Feuerbach" in his remarks about how religion is the "transfigured reproduction" of the aims of the political (Kirmmse 1990, p. 412). Kirmmse also provides precedent for a difficulty facing anyone who attempts to discern the relationship between Kierkegaard and Feuerbach, admitting that he cannot establish with absolute certitude that Kierkegaard intended this Foreword as a response to Feuerbach (p. 517). Indeed, Kierkegaard never directly owned up to being influenced (whether positively or negatively) by Feuerbach. But given Kierkegaard's penchant for indirect communication, we should expect him to conceal his influence and respond to Feuerbach indirectly; a later section of this essay shows how Kierkegaard does this in *Philosophical Fragments*. First, however, we will see that evidence from Kierkegaard's unpublished papers and from a remark by one of his close friends suggests that Kierkegaard gave Feuerbach much thought, especially in relation to the central ideas of the *Fragments*.

Kierkegaard's familiarity with *The Essence of Christianity*

Kierkegaard was, without question, familiar with Feuerbach's work.¹ Kierkegaard's friend Hans Brøchner reported that "K. often referred to Ludvig [sic] Feuerbach in our conversations" (as cited in Kirmmse [Ed.], 1996, p. 233). The height of Kierkegaard's interest in Feuerbach coincided with the time when he was conceiving and writing *Philosophical Fragments*. He would have first heard of Feuerbach's reputation from his graduate school professors and colleagues, and (graduate students being basically the same through the centuries) would likely have debated his significance, even without having yet read him. According to the historian of philosophy Jon Stewart, "the publication of Feuerbach's *Wesen des Christentums* [1st ed., 1841] and Strauss' *Christliche Glaubenslehre* [2 vols., 1840–41] caused great alarm among the Danish intellectual community" at the time Kierkegaard was

¹ Kirmmse (1990, p. 517) calls Kierkegaard, "like Marx, an avid reader of Feuerbach."

completing his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, in 1841 (Stewart 2003, p. 140). By the next year, Kierkegaard knew enough about Feuerbach to take offense at Dr. Andreas F. Beck's placement of Kierkegaard in the same philosophical camp as Feuerbach. In the postscript to an 1842 "Public Confession" in the Sunday book review section of the newspaper *Fædrelandet* (no. 904, June 12, 1842), Kierkegaard responded to the review of his dissertation that appeared in the newspaper two weeks before, objecting to Beck's characterization of Kierkegaard as a Straussian like Feuerbach (Kierkegaard 1982, p. 10).

Kierkegaard's interest in Feuerbach increased thereafter, in tandem with the development of *Philosophical Fragments*. Kierkegaard purchased the second (1843) edition of *Das Wesen des Christentums* no later than March 20, 1844, on credit from the book dealer P.G. Philipsen (Kierkegaard 1968, p. 8, editor's fn.). The seeds of *Fragments*—the central idea that the appearance of the god in time is the absolute paradox—had been planted in Kierkegaard's mind during a May, 1843, trip to Berlin, but Kierkegaard did not begin the book until several months later, writing it between December, 1843, and April, 1844, during a break in his work on *The Concept of Anxiety* (Garff 2005/2000, pp. 265, 267). *Philosophical Fragments*, attributed to the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus and edited by S. Kierkegaard, was published on June 13, 1844.

That was the year of Kierkegaard's greatest interest in Feuerbach. Of the 13 instances where Kierkegaard mentions Feuerbach's name in his published and unpublished works, 7 occurred in 1844: 5 in the journals and 2 in *Stages on Life's Way*, which was published in 1845 but written by the end of 1844 (Czakó 2001, p. 407). The most important direct references to Feuerbach in the journals are three undated papers from 1844. One of them concerns a major idea in the *Fragments*:

Feuerbach's indirect service to Christianity as an offended individuality. The illusion it takes in our age to become offended, since Christianity has been made as mild as possible, as meaningless as the scrawl a physician makes at the top of a prescription. – The formulation is absolutely correct according to the Hegelian maundering mediation endeavor (As cited in Kierkegaard 1985a, p. 217).

In addition, in a paper titled "What is it to be a hero?" Kierkegaard brings up Feuerbach's offense at Christianity again, stating that "Feuerbach in *Wesen des Christentum* [sic] is scandalized at Pascal's life, that it is a story of suffering" (as cited in Kierkegaard 1988a, p. 637). Finally, Kierkegaard says in another paper that Feuerbach "is consistent and illuminates by contrast. This does not mean, however, that one has to go through that Fire Brook" (as cited in Kierkegaard 1985a, p. 217). These references show that Kierkegaard thought rather well of Feuerbach. Feuerbach even can serve Christianity, although he is offended by it and cannot embrace it. I will explain how these remarks relate to the *Fragments* below. For now, we can take them simply as evidence that Kierkegaard was thinking about Feuerbach in 1844.² Indeed, he was thinking about him in relation to the issues he raises in *Philosophical Fragments*.

It is impossible to determine with absolute certitude when in 1844 Kierkegaard made these journal entries. The editors of Kierkegaard's *Papirer* arranged the papers thematically within each volume, physically cutting Kierkegaard's notebooks apart in the process. Thus it is possible that the entries date from the second half of 1844, after *Philosophical Fragments* was published. But two of the three entries also concern issues addressed in Frater Taciturnus's "Letter to the Reader" in *Stages on Life's Way*, which Kierkegaard worked on throughout

² On Czakó's (2001, p. 408) view, "The records from 1844 verify unequivocally that Kierkegaard not only purchased, but also studied *Das Wesen des Christentums* in this year." My translation.

1844. Because he wrote the second half of this book (the part that mentions Feuerbach) first (Hong and Hong 1988, pp. viii–ix), the likeliest scenario is that after purchasing *Das Wesen des Christentums* in March of that year, Kierkegaard read and wrote about Feuerbach soon after, while he was working on parts of *Fragments* and *Stages*.

Does this evidence prove unequivocally that Kierkegaard read *The Essence of Christianity* and specifically intended *Philosophical Fragments* to be his response? No. Regarding this issue, as with any concerning Kierkegaard's intellectual influences and opponents, we are dealing with degrees of probability and speculation. Kierkegaard's relation to other thinkers is often hard to pin down in part because he did not read or write in the style of philosophers today, studying books and articles carefully and then weighing in on the debate with explicit reference to the arguments of others. Instead, according to his biographer Joakim Garff, Kierkegaard "read zigzag style," skipping briskly from book to book and from page to page in the book, not feeling especially constrained by an author's numbering of pages. For Kierkegaard, reading was done in the service of understanding himself as an author, not in order to understand some other author (Garff 2005/2000, p. 125), almost as if he had heard and heeded Ralph Waldo Emerson's admonition in his 1837 address, "The American Scholar," that books "are for nothing but to inspire" the creative genius (Emerson 1883/1837, p. 91). Kierkegaard, then, need not have read a book cover to cover in order to "respond" to it; it is likely that what a philosopher today would call a cursory acquaintance with a text could have been enough for Kierkegaard to become inspired, develop an opinion on the issue, and write in response to what he had read.

Because Kierkegaard read to be inspired and placed no value on directness in his philosophy, *Philosophical Fragments* could be considered Kierkegaard's response to *The Essence of Christianity* even without Kierkegaard making explicit references to Feuerbach's writing. Still, the historical plausibility that *Philosophical Fragments* is a response to *The Essence of Christianity* is, if nothing else, a hermeneutical clue, telling the reader to look for Feuerbachian themes and tropes in the *Fragments*. Doing so leads the reader to Climacus's discussion of illusion and offense, in which he inverts Feuerbach's theory of projection in order to use it against critics like its author. First, however, we must understand the intellectual moves Feuerbach makes in his conceptual critique of Christianity.

Projection and illusion in *The Essence of Christianity*

Feuerbach sets out his basic theoretical position in the introduction to *The Essence of Christianity*. In the two parts that follow, "The True or Anthropological Essence of Religion" and "The False or Theological Essence of Religion," he puts the projection theory into action, applying it to a range of Christian beliefs and practices. My discussion of *The Essence of Christianity* in this section is necessarily very brief. I aim only to set out major concepts in that book so that I can later show in some detail how they bear on a small but important part of *Philosophical Fragments*.

Feuerbach argues that religion's origin is in human nature, specifically, in our natural activity of self-reflection. For Feuerbach, we human beings begin to reflect on our own nature when we recognize that we are limited. For example, we—as individuals trying to come to consciousness of our membership in a species—realize that we cannot know everything we want to know, cannot accomplish everything we would like to accomplish, and cannot love perfectly. But our recognition of those limitations is at the same time a recognition of the unlimited, something that lies on the other side of each limit. So the idea that our knowledge is limited is necessarily accompanied by an idea that there must be some-

one whose knowledge is unlimited. A god, we suppose. It could not be a human being who is unlimited in ability to know, accomplish, or love, we think, because, lacking any other handy measuring stick, we each assume our own personal limitations to be the limitations of the entire species, or in other words, the limitations of human nature. Not “man is the measure of all things,” then, but “I am the measure of all things.” Religion arises from self-reflection and self-centeredness, but its product, a nonhuman god, is a self-alienated human nature, stripped of the individual human’s limitations. For Feuerbach, the “theological” projection of perfected human characteristics is a necessary step in the dialectic of humans’ coming to full self-consciousness (Wartofsky 1977, pp. 199–200), but it is nonetheless incomplete and incorrect.

Thus Feuerbach’s theory of projection is in fact a theory of two related projections: (1) the projection of a person’s limits onto the species, which immediately precedes (2) the projection of the unlimited onto a being that is not human. Perhaps Feuerbach’s best example of this reasoning comes in a discussion of how consciousness of individual sins is easily mistaken for universal human sinfulness:

[T]he lamentation over sin is found only where the individual does not recognise himself as a part of mankind, but identifies himself with the species, and for this reason makes his own sins, limits and weaknesses, the sins, limits, and weaknesses of mankind in general. Nevertheless man cannot lose the consciousness of the species, for his self-consciousness is essentially united to his consciousness of another than himself. Where therefore the species is not an object to him as a species, it will be an object to him as God. He supplies the absence of the idea of the species by the idea of God, as the being who is free from the limits and wants which oppress the individual, and, in his opinion (since he identifies the species with the individual), the species itself. (Feuerbach 1957/1843, p. 157)

This means that when a person realizes that she cannot see into other people’s heads and hearts, she will assume this to be a limitation of her species; her god, however, will be omniscient. When she realizes that she cannot control natural forces, her god will become omnipotent. When she realizes that she cannot always do the good thing, her god will become omnibenevolent. And so on with the rest of the individual human’s limits and the divine attributes. This, for Feuerbach, is the religious impulse. As he puts it,

Religion, at least the Christian, is the relation of man to himself, or more correctly to his own nature (i.e., his subjective nature); but a relation to it, viewed as a nature apart from his own. The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective—i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature. (p. 14)

This impulse is also a pernicious illusion, and “the illusions of theology” are precisely what Feuerbach aims to purge from religion (p. xviii). As Stephen P. Thornton maintains, the illusion depends on the religious person mistaking “a conceptual distinction for an ontological one” (Thornton 1996, p. 112). The conceptual distinction here is between the religious person’s attributes and her existence. According to Thornton, for the religious person, “human existence seems to be a necessary precondition for the possibility of possessing human attributes.” Feuerbach, however, espouses a “quasi-phenomenalism,” in which “the subject is . . . merely the sum of the attributes which are predicable of it. Apart from these attributes there

is no subject” (Thornton 1996, p. 111). Divine attributes, then, can exist without a divine subject if they are recognized as human attributes, potentialities of human nature that really can be instantiated in individuals. This quasi-phenomenalism, in which “God” is nothing more than a phantom onto which we can hang those attributes we most highly esteem, enables Feuerbach to say, “The fact is not that a quality is divine because God has it, but that God has it because it is in itself divine: because without it God would be a defective being” (Feuerbach 1957/1843, p. 21). Overcoming religious illusions entails recognizing that the human species bears these qualities, placing humans in a position to judge the drive.

Offense and the acoustical illusion in *Philosophical Fragments*’ “appendix”

The basic epistemological move Feuerbach thinks the individual human psyche makes in positing a God who exists apart from human nature—assuming itself to be the measure of all of humanity and projecting its limitations outside itself—appears in a key section of Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*, although it appears in reverse, as in a mirror. Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous author of *Philosophical Fragments*, turns Feuerbach’s theories of illusion and alienation back against him in order to portray the critic as someone unable to grasp the fact of his own limited understanding. According to Climacus, an individual becomes alienated from the object of his religion by projecting not his latent unlimited attributes, but his limitations, onto that object. As for Feuerbach, for Climacus this projection is an illusion. But Climacus’s individual remains subject to this illusion only for as long as he clings to the deeper illusion that his understanding is the measure of all things. Climacus, then, must make a case that there could be an epistemological standard outside the human person against which all human knowledge is judged.

The stated issue in *Philosophical Fragments* is, “Can the truth be learned?” (Kierkegaard 1985b/1844, p. 9). In fact, the issue is *how* the truth can be learned. Climacus is certain about one way: the Socratic way of recollecting an immanent truth. He wonders if there might be another way, so he supposes for argument’s sake that there is and constructs how that way must work. If the Socratic method assumes the truth’s immanence, then the non-Socratic method must assume the truth’s transcendence. If history is not decisive in the Socratic method, then history must be decisive in the non-Socratic. Throughout the book, Climacus throws the contrast between the two approaches to the truth into high relief, repeating variations on the refrain, “If the moment is not decisive, then we are back to the Socratic” (pp. 14, 19, 25, 28, 30, 51, 55, 58, 62, 63, 70, 100, 105, 106). The hypothetical non-Socratic means to learning the truth resembles Christianity (the divine-human teacher *is* the truth, he accuses the individual of sin, the way to truth is to accept faith, etc.), though Climacus only makes explicit mention of Christianity at the end of the book (pp. 109–110). This transcendent hypothesis, labeled “B” in the *Fragments* (pp. 13, 30), will become “religiousness B” in the other work attributed to Climacus, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (Kierkegaard 1992a/1846). Despite Climacus’s attempt to draw a contrast between the two paths to the truth, it is not simply the case that one path is right and the other dead wrong. They are both in fact far superior to the many paths to falsehood. Viewed from this wider perspective, even if one hypothesis is seen as superior to another, the second-best hypothesis should still command much respect.³ Climacus ultimately does not decide

³ On Climacus’s deep respect for Socrates as the greatest exemplar of a philosophical life, see Howland (2006), especially pp. 13–16, 28–33, and 52–53.

between the hypotheses in *Philosophical Fragments*, noting in “The Moral” (Kierkegaard 1985b/1844, p. 111) that they are actually incommensurable.

Climacus’s characterization of the B hypothesis shows Feuerbach’s influence most clearly in an appendix titled “Offense at the Paradox (An Acoustical Illusion)” placed between the *Fragments’* Chapters III and IV. The title gives two clues that it is the site of Climacus’s response to Feuerbach. First, the appendix is principally about offense, which Kierkegaard linked to Feuerbach in some of his unpublished papers, as noted above. Second, the offense involves an illusion, which Feuerbach claims is the product of the human understanding’s basic religious movement. In this brief appendix, Climacus turns the tables on Feuerbach, arguing that in fact the one who takes offense at the paradox is the victim of an illusion, blaming the paradox itself for the limits of his understanding.

We define a paradox by two characteristics: it is a contradiction, and it is true. Throughout the Kierkegaardian corpus, contradictions are, importantly, never resolved. Climacus makes this point explicit, contrasting his view with Hegel’s mediation of all contradictions (p. 86). Instead of being mediated, the paradox’s contradiction is the grounds for taking offense at it and the opportunity for the understanding to “step aside” so that the individual can receive faith, the condition for accepting (though not understanding) the truth of the paradox. As C. Stephen Evans points out, the paradox remains a paradox for all human beings, whether they have faith or not. That is, there is no higher level of understanding from which vantage point the paradox appears not to be a contradiction (Evans 1983, pp. 221–225).⁴ Faith is a “new organ” (Kierkegaard 1985b/1844, p. 111) that enables the believer simply not to be offended by the paradox’s contradiction.

For Climacus, the encounter between the understanding and the paradox (variously described as the god-man [p. 62] or the appearance of the eternal in history [p. 61], i.e., as either ontological or temporal) can either be “happy” or “unhappy.” In the happy encounter, the understanding “steps aside,” receives the “happy passion” of faith from the paradox, and accepts the truth of the paradox (p. 59). Climacus characterizes the “unhappy” encounter between the paradox and the understanding as offense (p. 49), the understanding’s rejection of the paradox. Here Climacus compares offense to an “unhappy [erotic] love.” This comparison is not unique to the *Fragments*, however. In *Stages on Life’s Way*, the pseudonymous Frater Taciturnus names Feuerbach as “someone offended by the religious,” analogous to an “unhappy, a jealous lover [who] can know just as much about the erotic as the happy lover” (Kierkegaard 1988b/1985, p. 452) further establishing this appendix as a strong link between Kierkegaard and Feuerbach.

In the terms Climacus sets out in *Philosophical Fragments*, Feuerbach’s being “an offended individuality” means that Feuerbach’s understanding encounters the paradox unhappily—his understanding suffers from offense because it refuses the paradox on the grounds that it is a contradiction. Indeed, in Part II of *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach expounds Christian doctrine in terms of what he sees as its many contradictions: “The Contradiction in the Existence of God,” “The Contradiction in the Revelation of God,” “The Contradiction in the Trinity,” and so on. Each of these contradictions arouses Feuerbach’s offense, and his offense in turn arouses Climacus’s admiration. Feuerbach is probably the “scoffer” Climacus mentions in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*⁵ who criticizes Christianity but in doing

⁴ In an 1845 journal entry, however, Kierkegaard considered the possibility that there might be “an eternal and divine point of view” from which the paradox ceases to be a paradox (as cited in Kierkegaard 1985a, pp. 221–222).

⁵ Hong and Hong claim in a note that this remark is “probably an allusion to Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christenthums*” (Kierkegaard, 1992b, p. 270). Hans Brøchner believed that that it was “undoubtedly directed at Feuerbach” (as cited in Kirmmse [Ed.], 1996, p. 234).

so “expounds it so creditably that it is a delight to read him, and the person who is really having a hard time getting it definitely presented almost has to resort to him” (Kierkegaard 1992a/1846, p. 614). Feuerbach “illuminates by contrast” (as cited in Kierkegaard 1985a, p. 218) because while he takes offense at Christianity, he at least takes offense at the right parts of it: the understanding is right to take offense at the appearance of the god in time. In this respect, Feuerbach does Christianity the service of depicting it as scandalous, something Kierkegaard consistently thought the Church in its liberalizing theology was failing to do.⁶

In the same unpublished note in which he claims Feuerbach to be a paradigm of offense, Kierkegaard marvels at “the illusion it takes in our age to be offended” by Christianity. Climacus explicates this link between offense and illusion in the appendix, arguing that the offended individual only takes offense at the paradox by virtue of an “acoustical illusion” that bears a strong resemblance—in reverse—to Feuerbach’s description of the illusion of projection. Van Harvey perhaps realizes this, too. At one point, in generalizing about Feuerbach’s theory of religion, Harvey invokes Kierkegaard’s *Fragments* without explicitly citing it: he writes that Feuerbach’s theory “does not just dismiss religion as superstition but regards it as an ‘acoustical illusion’ of consciousness, an illusion that arises naturally in the process of self-differentiation and that meets certain fundamental human desires” (Harvey 1995, p. 134).

On Climacus’s view, offense begins when someone who is seeking the truth comes up against the limits of the understanding—the paradox—and says to the paradox that it is absurd because it refuses to be reduced to the understanding’s logic or categories. This accusation, however, actually originates in the paradox itself, as the paradox claims “that the understanding is the absurd” (Kierkegaard 1985b/1844, p. 52), and the offended individual mistakenly thinks that he is the one making the accusation because he is subject to an “echo from the offense” (p. 52), an illusion.

Climacus establishes offense as precisely the opposite of Feuerbach’s religious consciousness in his comment, “just as truth is *index sui et falsi* [the criterion of itself and of the false], so also is the paradox, and offense does not understand itself but is understood by the paradox” (p. 50). Recall that Feuerbach’s true religionist takes her human understanding to be the measure of all things, and her religion is self-consciousness (Feuerbach 1957/1843, p. 13). For Climacus’s hypothesis B, by contrast, the paradox is the measure of all things, and the paradox alone understands the offended one. The offended individual is not self-conscious, insofar as she pridefully refuses to accept an essential truth about herself—that her understanding is absurd. Instead of accepting her absurdity, the offended individual accuses the paradox of being absurd, projecting her limitation onto the paradox itself: “Thus, although the offense, however it expresses itself, sounds from somewhere else—indeed, from the opposite corner—nevertheless it is the paradox that resounds in it, and this indeed is an acoustical illusion” (Kierkegaard 1985b/1844, pp. 50–51). The understanding is self-centered; its projection of its own absurdity onto the paradox is accompanied by a retrojection of what it actually learns from the paradox onto itself. As Climacus explains it, “Everything [offense] says about the paradox it has learned from the paradox, even though, making use of an acoustical illusion, it insists that it itself has originated the paradox” (p. 53).

This is a pointed indictment of Feuerbach’s critique, one that uses Feuerbach’s own phenomenology of illusion against him. The Feuerbachian adherent to true religion (and not illusory, theologically-tainted religion) would realize that she was limited, but instead of placing the unlimited onto the god (the action that alienates her from her own nature), she would recognize her own species as unlimited. Because she would believe her species—and

⁶ On the ambiguity of Kierkegaard’s evaluation of Feuerbach, see Czako 2001, pp. 412–413.

thus, herself, by participation—to be unlimited, the paradox would naturally strike her as offensive. To her mind, the paradox must be absurd, for her understanding is (in principle) unlimited. If she cannot appropriate the paradox, then it must be the paradox's fault.

The offended individual cannot understand the paradox, but, by virtue of the very tendency that Feuerbach says leads to religious illusion—the tendency to take oneself as the measure of all things—the individual assumes that the paradox is at fault for her inability to understand it. Climacus insists, however, that the paradox, as the limit of the understanding, is the measure of the understanding. Thus, the acoustical illusion is analogous to the situation of a frustrated student who throws his math book across the room, saying, “Math is stupid!” In fact, the book is passing judgment on the student, saying that he is stupid, that his understanding is limited. The book's accusation, “You are stupid,” echoes in the student's consciousness, and he imagines the words to be his own. Offense, then, for Climacus, hinges on illusion and results in alienation, The understanding is alienated from that which would give it the truth: the paradox. Feuerbach saw alienation—the self-alienation from one's own nature—as a major problem for the Christian and a major reason for why Christianity needed to be corrected through his immanentist critique. As Climacus does with Feuerbachian illusion, so does he also turn alienation back against the immanentist critic. Like Feuerbach, Climacus thinks that offense at the paradox—alienation from the object of religion—is basic to his hypothesis B. But Climacus does not see this offense or alienation as something that should be rooted out of religion. Instead, the offense indicates something in the self that needs to be criticized: the understanding's prideful insistence on its own categories. As Michael Buckley puts it, for Feuerbach, “Divinity despoils human beings of what is rightly theirs” (Buckley 2004, p. 85). Climacus agrees entirely. The paradox causes the downfall of human understanding. But this is precisely “the ultimate passion of the understanding” (Kierkegaard 1985b/1844, p. 37); it allows the individual to receive the condition (faith) for obtaining the truth. In criticizing the understanding in this fashion, Climacus does not mean to disparage the understanding, but rather to show that a person cannot, solely by using the understanding, get the whole truth. He needs faith.

As his thinking on matters of immanence and transcendence continued to develop, Kierkegaard made his critique of Feuerbach more explicit. In 1846, Kierkegaard was still thinking about Feuerbach in relation to “the issue in *Fragments*.” Climacus notes in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (published on February 28, 1846) that

If ... the coming into existence of the eternal in time is supposed to be an eternal coming into existence, then Religiousness B is abolished, “all theology is anthropology,” Christianity is changed from an existence-communication into an ingenious metaphysical doctrine addressed to professors, and Religiousness A is prinked up with an esthetic-metaphysical ornamentation that in categorical respects neither adds nor detracts. (Kierkegaard 1992a/1846, p. 579)

The rhetorical structure of this passage is identical to many sentences in the *Fragments* in which Climacus highlights the essential differences between the Socratic and non-Socratic alternatives. For example, “if the god did not come himself, then everything would remain Socratic, we would not have the moment, and we would fail to obtain the paradox” (Kierkegaard 1985b/1844, p. 55). The principal difference between these two passages—that Climacus has dropped the indirection that characterizes the *Fragments*—points directly to Feuerbach. The reference to Feuerbach in the passage from the *Postscript* is blatant—perhaps Feuerbach's most famous claim is that “the true sense of Theology is Anthropology” (Feuerbach 1957/1843, p. xvii). Hypothesis B, now Religiousness B, is clearly connected to Christianity,

Furthermore, Climacus reveals in this passage exactly what was at stake in the *Fragments*—by removing the Incarnation from history and relegating it to the “eternal,” the purely meta-physical realm, Christianity ceases to be about redeeming the world from sin and becomes strictly an intellectual curiosity. Thus, what was only latently and indirectly about Feuerbach and Christianity in *Philosophical Fragments* becomes explicit in the *Postscript*, the book in which Kierkegaard also owns up to being the author of the *Fragments* and other pseudonymous works (Kierkegaard 1992a/1846, p. 625). In effect, Kierkegaard claims in the *Postscript* that Climacus was actually himself, hypothesis B was never truly hypothetical, and Socrates was in fact Feuerbach, who posed a genuine alternative to Christianity and, in doing so, threatened it with virtual irrelevance.

If Kierkegaard saw Feuerbach as a Socratic figure, then Jacob Howland’s recent contention—that Kierkegaard held Socrates in the highest esteem as the greatest of philosophers and someone holding an analogue to faith (Howland 2006)—might then mean that although Kierkegaard ultimately thinks Feuerbach insists on the understanding where he should allow the paradox to grant him faith, Kierkegaard nonetheless held Feuerbach in great esteem as a philosopher who managed to avoid the typical philosophical sin of denying the offensiveness of the paradox. Perhaps Kierkegaard understood Feuerbach better than most of his contemporaries did—Wartofsky maintains that *The Essence of Christianity* has as a latent aim “a radical reinterpretation of what philosophy itself is,” which Feuerbach’s first critics and devotees did not notice (Wartofsky 1977, pp. 204–205).

Conclusion

Given that the simplistic but long-standing view that Kierkegaard was straightforwardly anti-Hegelian has been discredited (Stewart 2003), it is time to reconsider his relation to other important philosophers of the period. As I have shown, *Philosophical Fragments* reveals Kierkegaard to be neither a straightforward Feuerbachian (as at least one contemporary reviewer thought him to be) nor a straightforward anti-Feuerbachian. His notion of offense shows signs of Feuerbachian influence; specifically, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus appears to have turned Feuerbach’s theory of projection back on Feuerbach himself, in order to emphasize that a religion of transcendence necessarily offends the understanding, thereby allowing the understanding to achieve the highest by stepping aside so that the individual can receive the condition, faith, that enables him to accept the truth of the paradox.

This inversion—not simply a repudiation of Feuerbach’s theory of projection—shows the respect Kierkegaard had for Feuerbach. Rather than denouncing the critic who appears to threaten orthodox Christian belief, Kierkegaard adopts elements of that critique, inverting the religious illusion into an acoustical illusion, the projection into a leap of faith. The “offended individuality” is in fact close to having faith. This individual has faith in something—human understanding—or else he would not even be offended.

For Harvey, Feuerbach’s criticism of the Hegelian equation of thought with being anticipated “a similar criticism made two or three years later by Søren Kierkegaard” in *Philosophical Fragments* (Harvey 1995, p. 140).⁷ Harvey does not consider that Kierkegaard might have gotten the idea for that critique from Feuerbach. But Harvey’s apt recognition of Feuerbachian elements in *Fragments* should lead scholars to look for Feuerbach’s

⁷ To Harvey, the Feuerbachian critique appears not in the appendix, but in the “Interlude” that follows Chapter IV.

influence on Kierkegaard in other works as well, looking, as I have, for Kierkegaard's use of Feuerbachian concepts and keywords, even where no explicit reference to Feuerbach is present. The affinity Harvey sees indicates "a more fundamental commonality between the two young anti-Hegelian thinkers" on the issue of the necessarily "spatial and temporal situation" of the individual in society (p. 141). Harvey locates differences between Feuerbach and Kierkegaard "on the importance of sensuousness" and "on the social nature of the self" (p. 142). He does not, however, acknowledge their absolute disjunction over the issue of whether the individual—situated in space and time—can relate to an eternal that is also, paradoxically, spatial and temporal.

To the extent that Feuerbach is a stand-in for all later critics of religion—including the "masters of suspicion" Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—Kierkegaard is also a stand-in for all later critics of those critics, for even the defenders of orthodox Christianity typically engage the critic at least partially on his or her own terms. The contemporary critic of critics must, like Kierkegaard, admit that Christianity's critics are at least criticizing the right things—such as the refusal of secular reason—even if ultimately, religion's defenders wish to turn the critics' own arguments against them. In his willingness to recognize Feuerbach's contribution to the understanding of Christian concepts, Kierkegaard anticipated the theologian Karl Barth's assessment of Feuerbach as someone who rightly criticized the liberal Christianity of his time and in that respect could aid the project of ridding European Christian thought of its tendencies to accept ideology and to idolize the human (Barth 1957/1928). As Kierkegaard wrote in an 1849 paper that begins with an acknowledgment of the soundness and helpfulness of Feuerbach's critique, "It is easy to see that dialectically Johannes Climacus's defense of Christianity is as radical as it can be, for dialectically the defense and the attack are within a single hair of being one" (Kierkegaard 1978, p. 245). But a reflective surface need be no thicker than a hair's breadth—the attack and the defense look exactly the same, but they nonetheless face in opposite directions.

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