

Something on Hermeneutics and Communication in Kierkegaard After All

Alastair Hannay
University of Oslo

[Delivered as the Opening Address at the Fourth International Kierkegaard Conference, June 9, 2001]

Why 'after all'? Well, when told the themes of the conference for which I have the great honour of holding this opening address, I confess I shuddered slightly. These topics are hard enough to deal with separately let alone in combination, to say nothing of in relation, separately or together, to our principal topic: the thought of Søren Kierkegaard. I said to Dr. Marino and he kindly told me that so long as I mentioned them at least once I could talk about whatever I liked. Well, having done that, I could now go on to something easier, but I won't. After a little home-work, I have put together -- and not out of sense of duty or in gratitude for the great honour of standing here before you, but from plain curiosity -- a few thoughts on both of our themes, as well as on their combination, *and* their combined relevance for Kierkegaard -- thoughts which, though I'm sure none of them will be new to you, will I trust call for your comment and above all criticism.

Let me start by stating a problem I have with each of these topics in relation to Kierkegaard. It isn't the same problem in each case and has nothing to do with their complexity. As for the first, 'hermeneutics,' I have difficulty seeing what use this word has, as an addition to the others we already have, in relation to understanding Kierkegaard's thought; while with regard to 'communication' I think it important to say that this word, so familiar to us in the age of the multilane informational highway, has no significant bearing on Kierkegaard's thought at all, or if it has, then only negatively. You may think that in the one case I am being naïve -- to understand is to interpret and what else is hermeneutics but interpretation?, and in the latter deliberately obtuse -- what of the thorny matter of 'indirect' communication? I nevertheless hope to show you otherwise. Kierkegaard's thought is antithetical to hermeneutics and communication is not among his central topics.

Since I will be talking mainly about hermeneutics, let me first dispose of 'communication.' You will think I'm joking when I say this term does not designate a central topic in Kierkegaard's thought. But you will not be quite so quick to think so if you are a Danish reader, and for readers of the original text the point will be all too obvious. Although 'Communication' is a term that does occur in the Danish, it does so very rarely and not at all in connection with the famous distinction between what we English-readers call direct and indirect communication. What we all translate 'communication' is, as most of us know, 'Meddelelse'. This term is better if less idiomatically translated as an 'imparting,' even better but still less idiomatically a 'with-parting' (as against a 'parting with'). 'Sharing' also captures it quite well, but it is a sharing of something that is given, a piece of news perhaps or something you want to 'put across' or 'let someone in on'. No doubt nowadays 'Meddelelse' does often serve as a synonym of 'communication,' yet it still bears on its face this sense of a sharing that is a giving, a sense it seems clearly to have had for Kierkegaard. For how otherwise could he make play as in such remarks as that '[i] Forhold til at meddele er det ogsaa af Vigtighed at kunde fratage'? There is no wit in the remark that in relation to *communicating* it is important also to be able to take away. Except for what is required for the sharing or imparting to become a fact (and that, in some case, might be that something must first be taken away), *Meddelelse*, unlike communication, is essentially a one-way relation -- also in the case of sharing where what is shared is something first in the possession of the sharer.

For us nowadays 'communication' brings to mind mutual and reciprocal ways and means

of transport and information channels. These, unless we think of teaching as no more than a leveling up of information quanta, offer no foothold to a one-way teacher-learner relation. It was not always so, and the Latinist Kierkegaard would know that the primary sense of 'communico/communicare' was precisely that of to 'share,' or to 'make a sharer in.' The root 'munis' in 'communication,' but also in 'communal' and its cognates, has the double sense of 'charge' (in the sense of what one is charged with doing – hence also 'immunis' for one who is excused) and, derivable from the related 'munus,' that of a 'gift' or 'present' (as in 'munificence'). But by Kierkegaard's time the new technology of transportation had already made topical what we *now* call 'communication,'^{ii[i]} a notion lacking any vestige of the connotation of a 'giving' that can be contrasted with a taking, as against, say, a withholding.

But now for our main topic. What is this thing called hermeneutics? Or: What does *that* word signify? As a brief glimpse at our programme shows, the term in its various grammatical forms is very much in the air. Indeed the sheer variety of its forms makes one wonder whether there is anything more substantial in the wind than just the words themselves. Some evidently use the term 'hermeneutics' merely to signal a style of interpretation, or a key to a reading. Others give it greater philosophical clout, staking in the name of hermeneutics a claim to an exciting new vantage-point from which new advances in self-awareness are to be gained, new levels of cognitive maturity which apprise us at once of our freedom and of our limitation, but where above all we are armed with a better appreciation of why the things that strike us as true, and not other things, do so strike us.

In the course of its long history hermeneutics has been several things. One of the most influential ideas behind it is captured by Gadamer's proposed 'best' definition of hermeneutics as '[letting] what is alienated by the character of the written word or by the character of being distanced by cultural or historical research speak again.'^{ii[iii]} It is a definition that should interest all of those who like myself feel there is some problem letting Kierkegaard's words speak again.

If we look in the dictionaries we find that hermeneutics is first and foremost a method of interpretation. That word 'method' should already put us on our guard. Method is surely a typical offshoot of objective thinking, even its very manner of being. Some have claimed hermeneutics amounts to a *science* of interpretation, but even if we settled for the word 'art' instead, though still adding that it is a method, shouldn't we still be just a little suspicious?

I think so. Primarily, hermeneutics is concerned with texts, though nowadays that notion has an application much wider than the written word and texts include practices, institutions, and practically anything that can go by the name of social construction, or in Derrida's case the whole world. It is a presupposition of all hermeneutics, which, as followers of its history well know, is itself preoccupied with what is presupposed, that texts disclose truth. And that is true, we might add, whether we spell 'truth' with a capital or a lower-case 't,' one single truth or a diversity of local truths. Or rather, its concern has been with texts about which it has been believed that truth, important truth of some kind, whether single or local, the truth that does or should concern us as the beings we are, is disclosed in them, that is, in the texts, the practices or whatever. That other presuppositions too underlie hermeneutics is a point I shall come to in conclusion.

In its origins as Bible-interpretation the link with truth is obvious; it was through hermeneutics that the word of the one God was allowed to speak to us. But when truth became the possession of philosophers, who spoke with many voices, a certain confusion reigned until (or at least as a tourist's guide to philosophy might have it) Hegel put things in order by providing the notion of self-evolving spirit as self-consciousness. History was now allowed to proceed in ascending steps and those who climbed enjoyed increasingly compendious notions of the truth – though not before Schleiermacher had put in a word for the Romantics and a role for subjectivity in the project of interpretation. Heidegger, in our own (rapidly receding) time gave hermeneutics a professedly non-philosophical twist. Instead of an aid to unearthing the truth of the philosophers, Hei-

degger called his hermeneutics Dasein's 'wakefulness to itself.' Its task was the quasi-Kantian one of charting the limits on human beings' ability to pose the kinds of questions answers to which had been the many philosophers' versions of the truth. Hermeneutics, said Heidegger, 'wishes only to place an object which has hitherto fallen into forgetfulness before today's philosophers for their "well-disposed consideration".^{iii[iii]}

There is an unclarity in Heidegger as to whether, once the hermeneutic results are in, the philosopher or theologian for that matter has anything further to add. Although part of Heidegger's exercise is to stress the merely historical nature of human being, its confinement to time, in his early work it is what is true of Dasein in general that he aims to bring out from under the historically changeable dross. And only later does he poke about in the dross to look for interesting changes of perspective that might inform human being's relations to its world. Although the text, as we may well imagine, was no longer a central datum for Heideggerian Hermeneutics, his student, Gadamer, brought the text back into its own. Now, however, the text became, in what may seem an extension of Heidegger's Dasein archeology, as the locus, or rather medium, of a dialogue with the past aimed at enriching Dasein's view of itself, though always with the limitations imposed by its structure and confinement to finitude in view. What appears to be unclear with Gadamer, in his turn, is how far he is bringing philosophy in again by the back- or even the side-door – though from some of what he says you might think he is giving good old-fashioned philosophy the red-carpet treatment, re-inviting the traditional questions on the nature of the good life, and their answers too, through the front door. This unclarity, even ambiguity, is noted by John D. Caputo in his recent *More Radical Hermeneutics*. Seeing Gadamer as something of a back-slider in relation to Heidegger, Caputo exploits this characterization of him to define his own hermeneutical position, which he calls 'radical.' A radical hermeneutics is firmly opposed to any intrusion of 'the reassuring framework of a classical, Aristotelico-Hegelian metaphysics of infinity.'^{iv[iv]}

This is the moment in the history of hermeneutics on which I want to focus, the point at which metaphysics is officially dispensed with. I want to raise two questions. First, what relation has Kierkegaard to hermeneutics as a method of interpretation designed to bring out truth, *prior* to the alleged death of metaphysics? Second, what relation has the anti-metaphysics in Johannes Climacus's critique of objective thinking to so-called radical hermeneutics, a hermeneutics of truth with only a little 't'? The latter question has added significance, since Caputo designates as the hero of his book one Johannes Climacus.

First, then I need to get a fix on the relation of Johannes Climacus (and anything we feel we can extrapolate to Kierkegaard himself) to hermeneutics in its non- or pre-radical version. Like Caputo, I take Gadamer to be the most topical representative for our comparisons. The question of how far Gadamer regresses to a point that precedes the subversiveness of Heidegger's early writings is something I must leave aside here; just as I shall also ignore the question of how subversive Heidegger really meant to be. The point at which I want to arrive is where Kierkegaard and Gadamer may reasonably be thought to differ fundamentally. Then if this throws light on where to place Kierkegaard, or at any rate Johannes Climacus, in relation to radical hermeneutics, so much the better.

The only possibility I have time to pursue here is this: Kierkegaard and hermeneutics crucially oppose each other over the status of *the universal*. Bearing in mind, that 'det Almene' is seldom best translated by the officious English term 'the universal,' better by 'the general' or even just 'the commonplace' (Kierkegaard frequently uses 'det Almene' and 'det Almindelige'), but suggesting at the same time that the sense in which Gadamer says of the *text*, as he does, that *it* is something 'universal' comes significantly close to Kierkegaard's use of 'det Almene' as what *is*, or *belongs to* the, commonly accessible, we may look with profit at two cases.

One is where Johannes *de silentio*, thinking respectfully but without comprehension of Abraham as he writes the third of the *problemata*, says that 'the relief of speech is that it translates me into the universal.'^{v[v]} As we know, in intending to sacrifice Isaac Abraham deprives himself of the ability to explain his action. It is not a facility with speech he

loses, he can still say things; it is just that, if he does say anything, his words will be unintelligible, for what they say flatly subverts a basic principle of moral discourse. In a perfectly clear sense then, Abraham, if he speaks, is emptying the words of their normal meaning, without, moreover, or so it seems, at the same time proposing an alternative. On the other hand, we find Gadamer saying things like this: 'The interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal thing, the text; i.e. to understand what this piece of tradition says, what constitutes the meaning and importance of the text.'^{vi}[vi] I shall return to what Gadamer might mean by these two words 'meaning' and 'importance' in a moment, but for the present let us just ask ourselves why we should expect Abraham to be able to speak to the hermeneuticist any more than he can to Isaac, Sarah, Eleazar, Johannes *de silentio* or the rest of us. Is Abraham by his example not actually engaged in *alienating* us from a language we want to share and, precisely through the character of the words he would write were he to present us with his own account of the matter? If so, then where the hermeneutical enterprise seeks to make initially unintelligible or easily misunderstood expressions meaningful, the Kierkegaardian view seems to be that the nearer we approach truth, the more the words in which we express it have to be *emptied* of their meanings, the very meanings that time over distance has given them.

This puts us in mind of a Socratic move that Kierkegaard makes central in his dissertation on irony. The reference also, by the way, provides an illustration of what I said earlier about Kierkegaard's use of the term 'Communication.' Kierkegaard says that the way in which Socrates finally gets the better of his judges is by 'frustrating any more meaningful communication with the thought of death'^{vii}[vii] – not by communication *about* the thought of death but with the very thought itself. An alienating move if ever there was one.

To show that the point is not local to the early pseudonyms, nor present merely in the pseudonyms, we can refer to a late-ish journal entry where Kierkegaard is writing of his need to preserve his heterogeneity. To be heterogeneous, more or less so, is to be more or less out of context with the universal, or to relax the terminology a bit, we might say it is to be out of tune with the commonplace. According to Kierkegaard we are all a little heterogeneous but there can be an absolute heterogeneity, which is, however, either demonic or divine. He himself is somewhere in between, that is to say, more than a little heterogeneous. The passage conveniently gives us our cue for that difficult notion I shall have to say something about: indirect communication.

[... E]very person of depth has heterogeneity to a degree. For as long as he goes about pondering something in himself [*gaaer og grunder i sig selv over Noget*] and only lets drop indirect utterances, he is heterogeneous. With me, it has happened on a larger scale... . Absolute heterogeneity remains in *indirect communication* to the last, since it refuses absolutely to put itself in context with the universal.^{viii}[viii]

But why, in order to share what you ponder, must you express yourself indirectly? Surely 'What I'm pondering is...' is a form of expression that lends itself quite easily to normal communication. All right, but what about ponderings that take a Socratic turn away from a shared language, putting certain key terms out of play, as in the case of Socrates and his judges with regard to the word 'death'? If direct communication depends on a *shared* language, what is pondered in this way will not be expressible transparently in that language, and anything in that language that does serve as its expression will express it only indirectly. That could be one way of getting a grip on the notion of indirect communication. The 'text,' if read literally, will not express directly what the utterer means. What about reading it metaphorically? Yes, but then metaphors are also part of a shared language, indeed shared languages are largely made up of metaphors; so the distinction between what can be expressed literally and what only metaphorically won't help. We might try something else, based on a direct correlation between points at which communication (*Communication*) is frustrated and what can be communicated (*meddelt*) only indirectly. How about trying to identify the range of what can only be communicated indirectly with topics of the kind Johannes Climacus deems appropriate for

subjective thinking? These would include what it means to die, where ponderings on this as another existential topics give them a personal pregnance that takes them out of the commonplace, or in Heidegger's parlance out of the *Das Man* domain.

That the parallel with Heidegger is more than merely verbal is suggested by noting further that heterogeneity is 'at the starting-point of particularity but then seeks back to the universal.'^{xix} This puts us in mind of the early Heidegger's account of *Dasein's* emergence from the historically contingent norm-constituting background of its established practices to radical individualization in Being-towards-Death. The self, thus self-singled-out by facing the inescapable fact of its own total demise, re-engages the world of practices but now authentically. But what actual help this notion of singling out (for a slightly differently angled notion of singling-out, see *A Literary Review*)^x gives to an understanding of indirect communication remains to be seen.

But let us now ask straight out whether Abraham's lack of the relief of speech and an idea of heterogeneity involving frustrated communication with certain key terms imply, as might seem to be the case, that Kierkegaard and the hermeneutical tradition are at loggerheads.

Let's get a possible red herring out of the way. One way of arguing such an implication is with reference to what Andrew Cross calls the 'radical verbal ironist.' A concoction of the dissertation on irony, this imaginary figure is in a situation somewhat analogous to what Kierkegaard calls absolute heterogeneity (not quite like it, since according to Kierkegaard, that can be demonic or divine). The radical verbal ironist *never* means what he actually says, or – the traditional paradigm of irony – always says the opposite of what he means, and vice versa. Kierkegaard, speaking in the dissertation on behalf of the romantics, describes this as a freedom from *the universal*: 'If what I said is not what I meant or is the opposite of what I meant, then I am free in relation to others and to myself.'^{xi} If such freedom were indeed a possibility, and we put the hermeneuticist in the position of the radical verbal ironist's interlocutor, how can the hermeneuticist ever tell what *is* meant? Arguing in the way one does for general scepticism, one might conclude from the possibility of irony, and the impossibility in principle of telling sincerity and irony apart, that the hermeneutical enterprise – what we recall Gadamer defined as 'letting what is alienated by the character of the written word of by the character of being distanced by cultural or historical distances speak again' – can never get started.

The argument is not convincing. Even the radical verbal ironist is bound by certain conventions that allow the irony to be legible, and as in the analogous case of general philosophical scepticism, what is claimed always to be possible, namely that the meaning is other than the one expressed, presupposes some established verbal practices (straightforward and sincere utterance) from which irony and insincerity are departures.

In appealing to a stronger argument, I am assuming, or guessing, perhaps even hermeneuticizing, that for Kierkegaard truth, human truth – and it is an ethico-religious notion – has its proper habitation in a life lived in a certain way, not either in contemplation of a theory of the nature of things or in a life lived according to such a theory. A life lived in a certain way is a life informed, consciously or not, by a life-view. As far as texts are concerned, then, the kind of text that aims to express human truth will not be a bit of philosophy, nor of course science, but nor yet, I suggest, a dialogue in which new versions of this truth can benefit from renewed communication with interlocutors re-invoked from the past. It will if anything be an expressive work, a novel perhaps, or even a poem. The vital thought here is that textual expression will not be essential to the truth itself. It will not be what we must first have in mind in order to acquire truth, let alone be what by simply having it in mind affords truth. What expresses truth is the acting person. The actions expressing truth may be those of a person writing, as Kierkegaard perhaps hoped for his own case, but that will not be visible in the writer's texts themselves – whether they express human truth will be evident only from the results, the perlocutionary effects, of the presentation of the texts. In general, what anyone writes can have only an ancillary role, assisting a reader to see the point of talking about truth in this way.

In a well-worn Kierkegaardian metaphor, the life-view expressed in a novel is what gives the novel its own centre of gravity (*der giver denne at have Tyngdepunktet i sig*).^{xii[xii]} Without going into what this means I simply point out that Kierkegaard thinks Thomasine Gyllembourg's writings have this centre-point while at least Andersen's *Only A Fiddler* doesn't. A proposal I wish to offer you here is that one way of interpreting the pseudonymous works, at least the first batch, is in terms of this metaphor. My suggestion is that, unlike novels, these works do have centres of gravity but they are not in them. Except perhaps for *Repetition*, which does have something like a plot or action, they in any case bear little or no resemblance to novels, though that isn't to say that something rather like a novel might share the same feature of, what – de-centricity? In all of them something is missing but hinted at. I suggest it is a centre outside them towards which they incline their reader to gravitate. Whether by default, because that is where it leads, or by design because Kierkegaard had *Religiositetens Idee* in mind all along, as *The Point of View* claims, there is, even if only by implication, this religious life-view persistently in the offing, or behind or beyond. Just for that reason the pseudonymous works *cannot* have their centres of gravity in themselves.

Many will claim that the pseudonymous works do have their own centres of gravity, arguing that this is a main point behind their pseudonymity. They may add that it is their pseudonymity that makes their communication indirect. Alasdair MacIntyre's radical choice reading, which I think many of us reject, assumes something like this. One reason to reject it is extra-textual; it is that it strains the notion of choice beyond recognition – choosing as against just picking requires a principle of selection that cannot be chosen in the same choosing. But rather than argue that point further I shall, and as a preface to my conclusion, put together a line of thought offered to you as an alternative.

I begin with the concluding section of the dissertation, called 'Irony as a Controlled Element: the Truth of Irony.' Kierkegaard says that to master irony is to infuse a work with irony, and that once no non-ironical holds are left the work frees itself from the author and the author from it. He also says that for that very reason the work can tell us nothing of the author and of his or her own personal mastery of irony. For all we know she or he may be well down the path of despair. But that cannot be true of someone with something to impart or share. A teacher must be a master of irony in his or her own life and the assumption that the author of some text is such a master is an assumption about the actual life of the poet, one of those facts of a poet's personal life that Kierkegaard says we are normally not supposed to bother about.^{xiii[xiii]} So at least two facts should concern us, namely the vision of truth that the author's works are intended to express and that he did indeed intend his texts to express that vision of truth.

In notes for a lecture series he never gave on 'Den etiske og den Ethisk-Religieuse Meddelses Dialektik' Kierkegaard says that 'as soon as he thinks of what it is to impart something four things come to mind: the object, the imparter, the receiver, and what is imparted [*Gjenstanden, Meddeleren, Modtageren, Meddelelsen*].'^{xiv[xiv]} We note, but without being too quick to deplore the fact, that no provision is made for a fifth component: the *text*. Let us translate 'object' (*Gjenstand*) as 'topic' or 'matter,' that about which something is said and may be known if what is said about it is true. Kierkegaard says, for reasons I have no time to go into, that it drops out where what is imparted is some ability (*Kunnens Meddelelse*), and at the same time claims a correlation between there being no object and the need for indirect communication. Where the 'topic' is the existing subject's way of grasping and coping with his or her own life, this being what a *Meddelelse*, an imparting, is paradigmatically concerned with, there is no common reference at which to point. Being 'existential,' such 'communication' differs from that on topics about which people can advise one another, discuss and agree on how to deal with them, or give each other general rules or prescriptions for doing that. An existential matter requires, as it were, a self-provided personal boost on the part of the recipient, something more than the recognition and acceptance of some such rule. So the imparter (*Meddeleren*) we take to be someone who has something to impart, he or she is to some degree a teacher, wants to give something of him- or herself to the learner (*Modtageren*), but realizes the lesson can only be learned by the latter catching on, not by

being instructed.^{xv[xv]} You could say that it is an application of the Aristotelian distinction between *techné* and *praxis*, the latter a form of knowledge, moral knowledge in Aristotle's sense, which unlike *techné* – which controls things in ways that eliminate disturbances – is open to whatever hazards and interruptions the world can and does bring. In the case of moral knowledge, experience keeps getting in the way more and more, not less and less. Thus moral knowledge increases with experience. But whereas Aristotle thinks of the increase of such knowledge as bringing the learner into closer harmony with the world, the world of other people as well as nature, for Kierkegaard the hazards are ones the learner has to learn to identify *within* him- or herself. Third, then, the learner is, as we see, one who begins by not seeing the hazards, or by taking them to be, as Aristotle took them, as coming from outside. Finally, the message itself, the teaching, what is to be conveyed, what is said about the topic, which can be of the order of grace, will be something that the learner should be in a position to grasp provided only the obstacles to doing so are removed, or at least presented to the learner in a way that can lead to the learner seeing them for what they are, namely obstacles, wrong avenues, convenient defences, or whatever else makes them get in the way of – well, in the way of what? – in the way of truth as it can be for the individual.

This shows among other things why Kierkegaard should say that when you impart something you also take something away,^{xvi[xvi]} and that imparting something to someone can even mean cheating (*at franarre*)^{xvii[xvii]} them out of something else, in short why indirect *Meddelelse* involves deception.^{xviii[xviii]} The deception is not in the pseudonymity but in a point of view being presented as if it were a place to stand yet leaves the reader finally with no place to stand *from that point of view*.

Are we any closer now to what is meant by indirect *Meddelelse*? We should be able to assume at least that to call a communication indirect implies that the sender is still somehow involved. Grammar tells us as much, for how can there be an indirect relation between a sender and a receiver unless the sender is still one of the *relata*? Accordingly, for the imparting or sharing to be indirect, the *Meddeler* as well as the *Modtager* must still be in place, though no longer in a *direct* relation to one another. What form does the indirectness take? Kierkegaard says in one place that the pseudonyms 'represent [*repræsenterer*] the indirect communication.'^{xix[xix]} That might mean that it is these authors who convey indirectly the meaning and importance that the real author attaches to the texts he has penned in their names. Kierkegaard does say that the fact that he has written a foreword to Anti-Climacus's *Sygdommen til Døden* means that it is no longer indirect,^{xx[xx]} which sounds as though simply by owning up to the pseudonym that the pseudonym writes is no longer communicated indirectly.^{xxi[xxi]} But if owning up did cancel indirectness, then everything that precedes *Postscript's* concluding 'Declaration' will cease to be indirect, and then again, everything before *The Point of View*.^{xxii[xxii]} For us nothing would be indirect.

Alternatively, the remark could be saying that these authors communicate indirectly, the texts embodying *their* intentions, the indirectness being, as noted above, that the intention is not stated but present somehow in the text in a way intended to allow a qualified reader to catch on with no further reference to the teacher. The teacher is not there on call, if the reader wants points verified, but on the other hand the text is one that was written with the intention of being just such a text, where any further action on the basis of, or provoked by, what it says is entirely up to the reader. An indirect communication is not just a text. There is no reason to suppose that to make a communication indirect means letting the leaves fly loose to be gathered and read in just any way. It is not up to readers to decide what is and what is not a text; texts are bound to the communications they are intended to effect. An indirect communication is an act of communication in which one person tries to share, with another, something that requires a freely made, personal advance of some kind on the part of the one with whom that something is shared. The indirect communicator is someone who has some idea of where the truth must be looked for, and of the ways in which, when found, it should manifest itself. And it is in so far as we can say that this idea is embodied in the text that there is no stage where Kierkegaard's four components in communication would permit the emergence of

a fifth component, the text itself.

Yet, if that leaves us with a concept of a text *enriched* by an intention that it embodies, then in another sense, given the relation of human truth to texts in general, the text itself even when thus enriched tends to vanish into insignificance. What is to be conveyed is not something that *can* be conveyed or perhaps even expressed in a text at all, even indirectly, unless a text can be seen somehow as part of an actual exercise in truth – in the way that Kierkegaard seems to have wanted to conceive his own writing activity. The title of a piece by George Pattison goes ‘If Kierkegaard is Right, Why Read Kierkegaard?’^{xxiii} There are two Kierkegaardian reasons for not reading Kierkegaard. In the one case you shouldn’t even begin; what the indirect communicator is trying to do is allow other versions of the truth to grow on the ground prepared, but if the ground is fallow, giving no chance of a new version taking root there, then as Kierkegaard says in the postscript to the preface to his very first publication, the reader might just as well skip over the work as the preface. In the other case, the reason for not reading Kierkegaard is the one he tries to convey to a reader who, having read him, should then see that reading was not the right thing to do.

The teacher’s task or goal is not quite that of producing mental or memic clones, as in Schleiermacher version of hermeneutics, which attributes a state of mind, a version in the successful interpreter that mimics that of the writer wanting to convey it. The task is to put something across that then takes off on its own, and in ways that can differ widely from whatever the teacher might be able to say of his or her own case. The metaphor of vision is probably wholly inappropriate for what Kierkegaard, in his maturer thoughts, means by truth, though it was popular at the time, and we note how closely Kierkegaard’s language, when first describing a life-view, follows that of Schleiermacher’s account of the ‘got it’ or ‘Eureka’ moment of hermeneutic insight when all particulars fall into place.

Let me formulate a few suggestions in conclusion. First, to the question, Where does Kierkegaard stand with regard to the Gadamerian tradition?, I suggest that by placing truth (or if you like, truths) outside the text Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms are engaged in something antithetical to the project of Gadamerian hermeneutics, which places truth within the scope of what texts can impart in and of themselves, without (as against Schleiermacher) reference to authorial intention or any states of the author’s mind. But then what Gadamer means by the *meaning* and *importance* of a text can point to something authorial that a text really embodies after all, in so far as it is more than a ‘mere’ text, and is still linked in a way with its author’s purpose to ‘impart’ something. Moreover, that something can well be that truth has nothing to do with writing and reading. Gadamerian hermeneutics is a set of rules of thumb, very reasonable ones, for bringing the past and present together through a staged dialogue in which, once concessions have been made to the past by the present, the past is allowed to speak for itself. It is true that Kierkegaard’s writings appear designed to provide the materials of a dialogue, but the dialogue is supposed to take place in the individual, a dialogue in the form of a dialectic in which conflicting aspects of the individual are brought to light in the same individual. This is Climacus’s dialectic of finite and infinite, a dialectic the very terms of which surely disqualify him for the role of hero in a hermeneutics – radical hermeneutics – that abandons the very distinction.

Suppose now, however, that Gadamerian hermeneutics were truly hospitable and willing to place this matter of the locus of truth or truths *in relation to texts* on its agenda. A momentous step, since it would be to risk giving up one of the major presuppositions of the new hermeneutics itself. Advocates of subjective thinking, wielding copies of *Post-script*, will meet in dialogue with the kind of thinkers and hermeneuticists Caputo also opposes, those who still keep to ‘the reassuring framework of a classical, Aristotelico-Hegelian metaphysics of infinity.’ Gadamer for instance, if Caputo is right. The optimal Gadamerian outcome would be a fusion of horizons. But how could such two radically opposed points of view fuse in anything that remained recognizably either Gadamerian or Kierkegaardian? Don’t we have there an either/or that, to be resolved, would require

something like mediation, or elevation to some third position that necessarily leaves these two behind, 'preserving' them only in a Pickwickian sense?

Finally, even if a Gadamerian dialogue with the agenda proposed ended in deadlock rather than fusion, two projects remain untouched: that of assessing what limits Johannes Climacus and/or Kierkegaard himself would put on concessions made to our present before their work ceases to be recognizably Kierkegaardian, and the quite different project of elaborating their thought and work in the light of what interests us today. The former is an historical project, the latter an attempt to determine the extent of what might be called our Kierkegaardian inheritance. The term 'recognizably Kierkegaardian' might be used in both cases but not with the same sense. There is a tendency to confuse these two projects, due I suppose to a form of almost inescapable Hegelianism that infects us all, a standing belief that the past is always more transparent to some present, to which it is a past, than it was to itself. Although Gadamer's ideal of fusion is infected with the same Hegelianism, his actual approach involves a healthy weakening of its effect. The initial step toward fusion is to be to move from an attitude of 'It's crazy, he can't mean it!' to one of conciliation, 'Maybe there's something in it after all.' This requires a loosening of the hold on the interpreter of deeply laid current assumptions which, once loosened, may no longer prevent what appears alien becoming plausible. My own perception, however, is that interpreters of the past tend to make undue concessions in the name of the past, more than the past would make for itself if actually engaged in a Gadamerian dialogue. The result is that we are in danger of living in a hermeneutic illusion – an illusion not just of compatibility but of companionability. Instead of forging a bridge to the past we skim off what we recognize of ourselves in its texts and lose sight of what was there. Under the false cover of seeking to have what was alienated speak again, we alienate.

The advertisement for a conference some of you will be contributing to in about a month, in the United Kingdom, announces that 'Kierkegaard now rivals Nietzsche in terms of the wide diversity of hermeneutical traditions which have claimed him as their own.' What are these traditions? Are they ways of looking at the world, or are they ways of reading Kierkegaard? If the latter, they clearly need take no issue on the former; we can read Kierkegaard any way we like without arguing for or against the way or ways he would have us look at the world. On the other hand I see no special point in describing a way of reading Kierkegaard in that way as 'hermeneutical.' However, Kierkegaard was himself very much in the business of providing ways of looking at the world. So it is only natural that, if we engage him at all, we engage him on that point too. You might like to call the business in question hermeneutical; it is, after all, a matter of interpretation. But I have suggested that the direction in which the views Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms offer on that score is towards a way of looking at the world that exceeds the reach of anything that culture historians have so far called a hermeneutical way of looking at it.

Revised 27 June 2001

^{i[i]} See *A Literary Review*, trans. Alastair Hannay, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2001, p. 56: 'how ironic that the rapidity of the transport system and the speed of the communication [*Communicationens Hastværk*] stand in inverse relation to the dilatoriness of indecision.'

^{ii[ii]} Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Practical Philosophy as a Model of the Human Sciences,' *Research in Phenomenology* 9 (1980), p. 83.

^{iii[iii]} Martin Heidegger, *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999, pp. 12 and 16.

^{iv[iv]} John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 47.

^{v[v]} *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, København: Gads Forlag, Bind 4 (SKS 4), p. 201 (*Fear and Trembling*, trans.

Alastair Hannay, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, p. 137).

^{vi}[^{vi}] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. William Glen-Doepel, London: Sheed & Ward, 1975, p. 289. He adds: 'In order to understand [the meaning and importance of the text], he must not seek to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation, if he wants to understand it at all.'

^{vii}[^{vii}] SKS 1 (1994), p. 308, *Kierkegaard Writings*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, Volume II, p. 271.

^{viii}[^{viii}] Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. Alastair Hannay, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996, p. 464 (entry X 2 A 375 from 1850).

^{ix}[^{ix}] This is one of those places where Kierkegaard uses the terms 'det Almindelige' and 'det Almene' interchangeably – heterogeneity is in relation to 'det Almindelige' while absolute heterogeneity refuses absolutely to be in context with 'det Almene' but all heterogeneity seeks back to the same 'Almene,' which is also that with which the category of 'drawing attention to' is contextualized.

^x[^x] *A Literary Review*, op. cit., p. 55.

^{xi}[^{xi}] SKS1, pp. 247-8; see Andrew Cross, 'Neither Either Nor Or: The Perils of Reflexive irony,' in Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 130.

^{xii}[^{xii}] SKS 1, p. 36.

^{xiii}[^{xiii}] SKS 1, p. 353; KW II, p. 324.

^{xiv}[^{xiv}] *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, ed. P.A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting, 2nd ed. by N. Thulstrup and Index by N.J. Cappelørn, 1968-78, Volume VIII, 2 B 83, pp. 158-59, and B 89, p. 188.

^{xv}[^{xv}] In respect of *Kunnens Meddelelse* Kierkegaard distinguishes between ethical knowledge, in imparting which the imparter as it were steps aside, and religious knowledge to impart which implies authority and thus reintroduces an 'object' of 'knowledge.' See Poul Lübcke's contribution to this volume.

^{xvi}[^{xvi}] *Papirer*, op. Cit., VI B 52.

^{xvii}[^{xvii}] *Ibid.*, VIII, 2 B 81.30.

^{xviii}[^{xviii}] *Ibid.*, VIII, 2 B 81.22.

^{xix}[^{xix}] *Papirer*, op. Cit., X, 6 B 145, p. 203.

^{xx}[^{xx}] *Ibid.*, X, 3 A 624, p. 407.

^{xxi}[^{xxi}] There may be other reasons for taking that particular text not to be a piece of indirect communication. The foreword itself says it is part treatise, part edifying work, and so not properly either. Maybe for some obscure reason it is these canceling each other out that makes it indirect, but each in itself is typically a signed category in Kierkegaard.

^{xxii}[^{xxii}] That the Declaration itself ends with Kierkegaard 'wanting to communicate indirectly' to Mynster his wish for Mynster's support (J. Garff, *SAK: A Biography*, Gads Forlag, København 2000, p. 352) doesn't contradict the view in so far as it seems unlikely we should regard this as a case of indirect communication in the sense we are discussing.

^{xxiii}[^{xxiii}] In N.J. Cappelørn and H. Deuser (eds.), *Kierkegaard Revisited*, Kierkegaard Studies – Monograph Series 1. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1997, pp. 291-309.