

The Happy Passion: Faith in the *Philosophical Fragments*

John C. Médaille

[T]he third something...is that happy passion to which we shall now give a name, although for us it is not a matter of the name. We shall call it faith.

Philosophical Fragments, IV 224

Paradox: The Passion of Thought

“Can the truth be learned?” With this question Johannes Climacus begins his *Philosophical Fragments* (edited one by S. Kierkegaard). To recap the first half of this work, he first proposes the Socratic solution, namely that the truth is a matter of recollection and the teacher provides the “occasion” and the “condition” for knowledge, but does not provide the knowledge itself, for “every human being is himself the midpoint, and the whole world focuses only on him because his self-knowledge is God-knowledge (IV 181).” In the schema of Socrates, time is merely an accident, for the occasion can occur at any time and no time is particularly privileged; Socrates may be the mid-wife, but time is not pregnant, and one moment is as good as another. Further, even the teachings of Socrates (or anyone else) are not important, since the truth lays within the student, not the teacher. Hence, time has no significance because the “eternal” is what was always within the learner.

Climacus asks if the moment can have any real significance, if the moment can be the time when “the eternal, previously non-existent, [comes] into existence’ (IV 183). He seeks, in short, to go beyond the Socratic. Within

this *Thought Project*, the Socratic terms assume new and even opposite meanings. The learner still discovers the truth within himself, in good Socratic fashion, but this “truth” he discovers is *untruth*, that is, sin. The teacher becomes the god, who must also be a man, truly a man, and the lesson itself becomes the absolute paradox of thought: “To want to discover something that thought cannot think” (IV 204). This idea of paradox is the theme of many of the authors edited by Kierkegaard, and they even call it “absurd.” Nevertheless, “One must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: A mediocre fellow” (IV 204).

This passion of thought is even comparable with erotic love:

...for now the understanding’s paradoxical passion that wills the collision awakens and, without really understanding itself, wills its own downfall. It is the same with the paradox of erotic love. A person lives undisturbed in himself, and then awakens the paradox of self-love as love for another, for one missing (IV 206).

And just as erotic love is not always happy, especially when rooted in a misplaced self-love, the encounter with

the paradox can lead to *offense* (IV 216). Whether this encounter will be in understanding or in offense depends on whether or not one has received the *condition*; up until this point, Climacus has not identified this condition, but will do so in the act of defining the condition as it affects the followers of the God-man.

The Happy Passion

“How, then, does the learner come to an understanding with this paradox?” (IV 224). It is not through “understanding”, or else there would be no paradox. Rather, it occurs when the “understanding steps aside” and the paradox gives itself in that “happy passion” called faith. “This passion, then, must be that above-mentioned condition that the paradox provides” (IV 224). Note that the learner does not “understand” the paradox, but “comes to an understanding *with* the paradox.” The paradox seems to be personified, since we normally come to an understanding with persons, not things. Indeed, the paradox seems to be God himself, since in this passage the paradox which provides the “condition,” while in chapter I and elsewhere the god provides it

The paradox unites the contradictories and cannot be “understood” in any other way:

[It] is the eternalizing of the historical and the historicizing of the eternal. Anyone who understands the paradox any other way may retain the honor of having explained it, an honor he would win by his unwillingness to be satisfied with understanding it. (IV 227)

This interpenetration of the historical and the eternal is precisely

what happens at the moment of the incarnation, in the “fullness of time,” and can only be understood by a faith which is itself paradoxical, for, “How else could [faith] have its object in the paradoxical and be happy in its relation to it? Faith itself is a wonder, and everything that is true of the paradox is also true of faith” (IV 230).

The paradox that is faith is not a form of knowledge:

It is easy to see... that faith is not a knowledge, for all knowledge is either knowledge of the eternal, which excludes the temporal and the historical as inconsequential, or it is purely historical knowledge, and no knowledge can have as its object this absurdity that the eternal is in the historical. (IV 227)

What then is this paradox of faith? It is nothing less than the fact that the object of the faith is not a proposition, but a person, a divine person who nevertheless is human.

[T]he object of faith becomes not the *teaching* but the *teacher*... Faith, then, must constantly cling firmly to the teacher. But in order for the teacher to be able to provide the condition, he must be the god, and in order to put the learner in possession of it, he must be man. This contradiction is in turn the object of faith and is the paradox, the moment. (IV 227, italics in original)

Further, faith is not an act of the will, but the precondition of the will, “for it is always the case that all human willing is efficacious only within the condition...If I do not possess the condition...then all my willing is of no avail” (IV 227).

We may summarize Climacus' position on faith by saying that it is the condition of understanding given by God alone through the paradox and is itself paradoxical; that it is neither "knowledge" nor an act of the will but the way by which we know; and that it has for its object not a proposition but a person. This view stands in stark contrast to the received wisdom. For example, in St. Thomas faith is a mean between science and opinion and is completely about *propositions* (ST 2-2.1.2). By faith, we assent to propositions in an act of the will and assent to propositions that are based entirely on authority (ST 2-2.2.10). Thomas establishes a clear priority of faith over reason, but this priority is purely temporal and contingent. In St. Thomas, faith and knowledge are mutually exclusive, since a thing "cannot be seen and believed at the same time" (ST 2-2.1.4.R2). Thus, concerning any particular proposition, one has faith or one has knowledge, but never both. Faith is needed for reasons which are purely negative and related only to our present state. We need faith because of the "initial weakness of the human mind, which reaches its perfection only at the end" (DT 3.1). Thus for St. Thomas faith is a stopgap, and the gap is clearly our sinful and ignorant condition. It is faith that fills the gap, but only until something better comes along, namely knowledge; as the gaps are closed, the domain of faith diminishes. Thus faith lacks any ontological validity; like the Marxist state, it will whither away with the advance of knowledge and will disappear entirely in the light of the Beatific Vision.

It should be pointed out that the word "faith" as used in the *Fragments* does have another sense, which in fact is

its "direct and ordinary meaning" (IV 250) and which the translator calls "belief", but for which Climacus uses the same Danish word that he uses for "faith" (*Tro*— see footnote 42, page 311). When taken in this sense, faith is indeed an act of the will, the act that affirms the "to be" and the "thus and so" of an object (IV 247). But even in this sense, belief is "not a knowledge, but an act of freedom, an expression of will" (IV 247). Thus, "The conclusion of belief is no conclusion but a resolution" (IV 247). Here belief serves the same function that it does for St. Thomas: it terminates doubt. "It believes the coming into existence and has annulled in itself the incertitude that corresponds to the nothing of that which is not" (IV 247). Just as doubt is sustained by an act of the will, it can only be terminated in the will (IV 246). Here, Climacus takes a swipe at modern skepticism. The Greek skeptic (as opposed to the modern):

Would not terminate his skepticism precisely because he *willed* to doubt. We must leave that up to him, but we must not lay at his door the stupid opinion that one doubts by way of necessity, as well as the even more stupid opinion that, if that were the case, doubt could be terminated. (IV 246)

Leaving the skeptics aside, be they ancient or modern, we run across a difficulty, since the same word (in Danish) is used to describe contradictory things. On the one hand, faith is not an act of the will, but the condition for seeing the paradox as paradoxical; on the other hand, faith (or belief) is an act of the will which affirms the "to be" of the God-man in history. As a way out of the difficulty, we could say, at least tentatively, that faith in the "pre-eminent" sense is the gift of God that is

the condition for grasping the truth, while faith (belief?) in the “ordinary sense” is the will’s assent to what is grasped. Faith in this second sense operates wholly on objects in the order of time. Thus, “ones does not have *faith* that god exists, eternally understood, even though one assumes that god exists” (IV 250). The existence of God is not “proved,” cannot be proved, as in some philosophical “system.” Rather, the problem for faith is the historical:

The historical is that the god *has come into existence* (for the contemporary [of Christ]), that he has been one present by *having come into existence* (for the one coming later). But precisely here is the contradiction. In the immediate sense, no one can become contemporary with this historical fact, but because it involves coming into existence, it is a matter for faith. (IV 251)

The Followers and Faith

Since the historical is the problem for faith, we come to the question of the followers and their relation to the historical coming into existence of the god-man, for it would seem that followers at a different distance from the *moment* would necessarily have a different relationship to that moment. Climacus separates the problem into two groups: the contemporary follower and the followers at second hand.

The contemporary of Christ would seem to have the advantage of being able to see and hear, to be taught by him directly. However, if this were really an advantage, then Christ would be no more than a Socrates, and his appearance no more than a Socratic occasion. The contemporary can have

historical knowledge, but that knowledge is by no means partial to faith. For what is seen historically is not the god but the servant, and as such he may actually alienate the learner (IV 222). The difference will lie completely in the *condition*, that is, in faith, and that can only be given by God. Without this condition, the contemporary will see only the form of the servant and not the reality of God.

What then of the follower at second-hand, who has not the occasion of the contemporary? “If the fact is regarded as a simple history fact, then being contemporary counts for something” (IV 261). But if the fact is an absolute fact, then it cannot be apportioned in time. However, since the fact is both an historical and an absolute fact, is in fact the paradox. This paradox, as we have seen, can only be grasped by receiving the condition, and the condition can only be received from God, or the follower is not a follower at all (IV 263). If the follower at second hand receives the condition from the contemporaries of Christ, then he is a follower of the contemporaries and not of Christ. Does this mean that the “historicity” of the Church is collapsed? Climacus does not address this question directly. However, the relationship between followers and generations of followers is Socratic, and within this relationship an “historical” church seems at least possible. Certainly the contemporary’s report is the occasion for belief in all subsequent followers, and only through these reports can the occasion occur at all. But the condition comes from God. Hence, “there is follower at second-hand; the first and latest generations are essentially alike” (IV 266). The paradox of the historical moment and the eternal truth enfold all

the followers, the first and the latest alike, into “real contemporaries” (IV 231).

The Religion of Paradox

Christianity is pre-eminently a religion of paradox. It is a faith that demands belief in a tri-personal god, in the eternal that becomes historical, in the impassible god that undergoes the passion, in wine that becomes blood and in bread that becomes body. Those who lust for “clear and distinct ideas” might be better served in a less distinctive Church. Seeing that the religion is paradoxical, it should not surprise us that the faith by which we follow it is also paradoxical. Kierkegaard confronts the paradox with paradox. He does not seek to collapse the paradox and still less to “explain” it. Rather, he tells us that it is only by embracing the paradoxical that we can embrace the faith in its fullness.