

## A critique of Alastair Hannay's interpretation of the »Philosophical Fragments«

By Robert C. Roberts

*Philosophical Fragments*, says Professor Hannay, is addressed to Hegelians, who believe that there can be knowledge of eternal and thus necessary truths, and that this knowledge can (indeed must) have a historical point of departure. Furthermore that point of departure is the incarnation in which Christians centrally believe. According to *Fragments* this is a confusion. The confusion is clarified through the exposition of two standpoints. The Socratic or A position assumes that we already know eternal truth, and only need to have it drawn out of us by appropriate stimuli such as a Socratic teacher. The important corollary of this is that no particular historical point of departure (stimulus) is essential to an eternal consciousness. »According to the B-position [by contrast] there is no knowledge of the eternal. It is its denial of the possibility of this knowledge that distinguishes it from the A-position ... According to the B-position ... there is no eternal determinant. The knowledge available to the existing individual is exclusively historical (empirical, contingent, approximate)«. (p. 105) So if an historical event connects us in any way with the eternal, the connection cannot be knowledge. The Hegelian position is thus a piece of conceptual confusion attempting, as it does, to conflate these two viewpoints.

The philosophical center of *Fragments*, on Hannay's reading, is the Interlude where the dichotomy of the historical versus the necessary (eternal) is defended. From this dichotomy it follows that »it is contradictory to talk of an eternal historical fact«, (106) and that the incarnation of God in Christianity is thus the absolute paradox. »... the paradox appears as the contradictory claim that the necessary (eternal) has demonstrated, by

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Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* in the series *The Arguments of the Philosophers* edited by Ted Honderich (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982) pp. 385 + XII.

coming -- necessarily freely -- into existence, that it is at the same time not necessary ... Here the paradox presents itself as a direct breach of the general logical principle that nothing can simultaneously have and lack the same property« (p. 107) The property in question is that of in-time: as historical the incarnation was necessarily in-time, while as eternal the incarnation was necessarily *not* in-time. One might think it a little heavy-handed of Professor Hannay not to allow Kierkegaard two different uses of the word 'eternal', one as in 'eternal happiness' being a logical one. If this were allowed then the contradiction would disappear, since 'eternal' would not imply 'incapable of entering into time', though the incarnation might remain paradoxical in some looser sense.

Professor Hannay says, »I assume we are to think of the eternal here as that in which all temporal distinctions vanish or are illusory. That this is a correct assumption is confirmed by, amongst other things, Kierkegaard's insistence in the *Postscript* on the 'absolute' difference between God and man ...« (p. 107) But in the texts that Hannay cites in the footnote, Climacus does not make Hannay's point. In one of them he seems to be saying that man is in process of becoming a self and needs to renew this struggle daily and to keep the upward call constantly in mind, while God is not striving towards ideality and is thus not in process in *this* sense:

But the absolute difference between God and man consists precisely in this, that man is a particular existing being (which is just as much true of the most gifted human being as it is of the most stupid), whose essential task cannot be to think *sub specie aeterni*, since as long as he exists he is, though eternal, essentially an existing individual, whose essential task it is to concentrate upon inwardness in existing; while God is infinite and eternal. (CUP 195, Eng. tr.)

Note two things here: Climacus makes his point about the absolute difference in the context of a polemic against an abuse of man's thinking capacity. The intelligentsia falsely try to resemble God through their great contemplative intelligence and thus forget that they are existing human beings. There is no denial that God's life has a successive aspect. Secondly, Climacus straightforwardly admits that man is eternal; but if man can be both eternal and in time, it is hard to see why God shouldn't also be capable of this. Professor Hannay also cites pp. 439f. of CUP (Eng. tr.) in support of God's timelessness. Climacus is discussing human love of God. He admits that love presupposes a certain equality between the parties, but complains that monasticism, which tries »to preserve the [God-] relationship without interruption«, has been misled in its understanding of this equality by the analogy with love between human beings; it is more human humbly to admit one's inequality with God and to take a diverting ride in the Deer Park once in a while.

But since there is this absolute difference between God and man, how

does the principle of equality in love express itself? By means of the absolute difference. And what is the form of this absolute difference? Humility. What sort of humility? The humility that frankly admits its human lowliness with humble cheerfulness before God, trusting that God knows all this better than man himself.

Humility here is the cheerful acceptance of one's own psychological and spiritual limitations, and the admission that God has powers which one lacks. There is no reason to think that the absolute difference is constituted by God's timelessness. One might wonder what the rationale for humility might be if that *were* the difference. It seems to me in general healthy, when reading about 'the absolute', 'absolute difference', 'infinite', 'eternity' etc. in Kierkegaard's writings, to keep far in the background the philosophical traditions in which these words have figured. Kierkegaard's agenda is quite different, and the attempt to read him in the light of these traditions is likely to distort him.

Professor Hannay cites *Fragments* (pp. 49 and 55, Eng. tr.) as further evidence that Kierkegaard conceives the paradox as »a direct breach of the general logical principle that nothing can simultaneously have and lack the same property«. God, according to *Fragments*, is absolutely unknowable:

The contrast between the unknowable deity and what is accessible to human understanding is so complete that the former can be defined only negatively as lying beyond the limits of intelligibility. Kierkegaard says here (and we should bear in mind that it is a view attributed to his pseudonym) that the term 'the deity' merely conveys that it *is* unknown, and that as the 'absolutely different ... it can have no identifying characteristic'«. (107-8)

Here the paradox takes the form of the claim that what is absolutely unknowable has made itself known.

I wish that Professor Hannay had drawn out for us a bit the consequences of bearing in mind that calling the deity the Unknown »is a view attributed to [Kierkegaard's] pseudonym«. The pseudonym in question is of course John the Climber, a young man whose passion in life is inference:

Inference formed his *Scala Paradisi*, and his bliss in mounting this ladder was to him more glorious than that of Jacob's angels. When he had reached a higher thought, it was an indescribable joy and a passionate delight to him to precipitate himself headlong down the same set of inferences till he reached the point from which he started. (*Johannes Climacus*, p. 104 [Eng. tr.])

I believe that if Professor Hannay had reckoned more with the ladderlike character of *Fragments*, and with Climacus' irony, he would be even more cautious about attributing to Kierkegaard the view that in religiousness B

God is absolutely unknowable. The first three chapters of *Fragments* are a continuous deductive argument in which Climacus climbs up and quite »impudently«, as he himself says, enters the heavens by »inventing« Christianity with nothing more substantial to go on than a simple hypothesis and a fancy for inferences. In the first chapter the deduction establishes that the disciple must be in a state of sin, the »teaching« must take the form of the recreation or rebirth of the disciple, and the »teacher« must be the deity. The second chapter establishes that the »teacher« is motivated by love for the disciple, that his purpose is to establish a love-relationship with the disciple, and that he can perform this act of »teaching« only by becoming incarnate as a human suffering servant. The third chapter asks what attitude the potential disciple (here often called the »Reason«) takes to the »teacher's« enterprise, and Climacus deduces that the disciple's attitude is ambivalent: He longs for such a »teacher« but is at the same time repulsed by him, seeing him as the Absolute Paradox, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Greeks. In the second half of *Fragments* (chapters IV and V, with the Interlude between) Climacus stops climbing (i.e. deducing) and does some exploring of the heights he has reached. Here we have a more descriptive account of Faith, which is an historical judgment (i.e. a judgment concerning the identity of an historical person) that is the basis for an eternal happiness.

Climacus' assertion that the deity is the Unknown is one of the rungs near the top of the ladder. It is a way of reaching the deductive result that Climacus has in view, namely that the »teacher« is a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Greeks (in Hegelian, the Absolute Paradox). Where the assertion itself comes from is not entirely clear from the text. Earlier in chapter III Climacus has described the »paradoxical passion of the Reason«, Reason's desire to think the unthinkable, to know the unknowable. One statement suggests that Climacus is just *stipulating* that we will call the object of the paradoxical passion 'the deity'. For he says, »So let us call this unknown something: *the God*. It is nothing more than a name we assign to it« (p. 49, Eng. tr.) But immediately following the assertion are five or six pages (a rather large number, by *Fragments* standards) in which Climacus attempts, rather clumsily, to show that it is impossible to prove God's existence. Perhaps the discussion of the proofs is another rung in the ladder, logically just below the assertion that the Unknown is the God. The inference would then go something like this:

1. Whatever it is that the Reason desires paradoxically to know must be unknowable to Reason.
2. But the God is unknowable to Reason since reasoning to the conclusion that the God exists always fails.

So the God is what the Reason desires paradoxically to know. I shall not remark on the validity of this inference, nor try to decide whether Climacus is merely stipulating that the Unknown shall be called 'the deity' or establishing that this is appropriate. For my point is simply that the

assertion is embedded in a highly artificial and humorous context, and ought not to be taken in a »doctrinizing« way. (see CUP p. 245 note) Earlier I drew the moral that we will do well not to read Kierkegaard's vocabulary in any very great continuity with the philosophical tradition; rather than translate 'the absolute', 'the infinite', etc. into philosophy, we ought to translate them into Christianity. The moral to be drawn from the present discussion, it seems to me, is that we should read Kierkegaard's work not as contributions to Kierkegaard's philosophical system, but instead as individual pieces to which we pay formal literary, as much as philosophical-doctrinal, attention. In the present case it seems to me that Professor Hannay would have been saved some rather tortuous interpretive moves, as well as an outrageous picture of Kierkegaard, if he had paid closer attention to the literary context in which the statement about the God's unknowability is embedded.

Another reason for doubting the doctrinizing of *Fragments* p. 49 is that Climacus, like Kierkegaard and others of his pseudonyms, believes that everybody has a knowledge of God. In a footnote which did not make it to the final draft of *Fragments* Climacus says, »... but just as no one has ever proved [God's existence], so has there never been an atheist, even though there certainly have been many who have been unwilling to let what they knew (that the God exists) get control of their minds«. (*Journals and Papers* III: 3606, tr. Howard Hong) This fact raises a question about Professor Hannay's interpretation of the relation between religiousness A and religiousness B. If it is true that everybody has a knowledge of God, and also true that »According to the hypothetical B-position there is no knowledge of the eternal«, (Hannay, p. 105) it follows that religiousness B is false. But since Christianity is a form of religiousness B, and Kierkegaard thinks Christianity is true, it is highly unlikely that Kierkegaard believed that according to the B-position there is no knowledge of the eternal. Certainly the B-position is that, apart from the historical incarnation, we are dead in our trespasses and sins. But this »death« does not imply total darkness about God. If the breach between A and B were as complete as Professor Hannay suggests, it is hard to see what the point would be, for an author bent on re-introducing *Christianity* into Christendom, in spending much energy expounding religiousness A. And yet this is what Kierkegaard does. All of his edifying discourses, Part I of *The Sickness Unto Death*, *Purity of Heart*, and vast stretches of the *Postscript*, are devoted to expositions of »Socratic« religiousness, a religiousness which Kierkegaard clearly thinks is *preparatory* for and a *presupposition* of Christianity. Precisely what the continuities and discontinuities are between A and B would be an interesting topic for an essay. But for the present it is quite clear that Professor Hannay has painted the distinction more contrasty than Kierkegaard does.

I can't help thinking that it is Professor Hannay's project of bringing Kierkegaard into better alignment with professional philosophy which is behind his distortion of Kierkegaard's concept of the paradox. He seems to

read religiousness B as a kind of logical positivism differentiated from the Vienna variety by the proviso of a leap of faith. But if there are continuities between A and B, then this rubric from the history of philosophy is not particularly enlightening. Kierkegaard is an avowed religious writer, indeed a Christian. He made use of a philosophical vocabulary, no doubt, but he turned it consistently to his very own purposes, which were different from the ones for which it was originated. We might say that he Christianized a philosophical vocabulary. If so, then rather than read Kierkegaard in the light of the philosophical tradition, a more fruitful strategy for interpreting him might be to re-interpret the philosophical vocabulary in terms of the Christian tradition. But best of all would be just to read him in that primitive way in which he desired to be read, by »that individual whom with joy and gratitude I call *my* reader, that individual whom [the discourse] seeks, toward whom, as it were, it stretches out its arms ...«. If Kierkegaard is a philosopher (and surely he is at least a *kind* of philosopher), then it seems to me his unprofessionalness is a kind of virtue, standing less in need of remedial exercises than of imitation. Despite Professor Hannay's valiant attempt, let us hope that Kierkegaard's thought and writings will remain primarily the possession, not of the professional philosophers, but of a few Christians and other marginal people who are seeking to make something of themselves.