

Article

Epistemological Aspects of Dialogue: Some Kierkegaardian Perspectives

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Abstract: This article explores the epistemological aspects of dialogue through an engagement with the Danish existence thinker, Søren Kierkegaard. I argue that dialogue plays an integral role in the epistemic process tentatively sketched by Kierkegaard. To show this, I start by examining Kierkegaard's criticism of non-dialogical approaches to knowing. Offering a corrective, Kierkegaard instead operates with a contact theory of knowledge analogising knowing and breathing to underline the importance of receptivity and relationality in the epistemic process. By placing Kierkegaard in conversation with his pseudonym Johannes Climacus, dialogue can be seen to play a crucial role in two ways. Firstly, Kierkegaard and Climacus creatively re-appropriate and reconstruct dialogical aporia textually to encourage receptivity and make the needed space for knowledge. Secondly, Kierkegaard's and Climacus's invocations of dialogue implicitly and explicitly centre the second-person perspective in different ways to emphasise the importance of "contact" and relation in knowing. I argue that although this perspective can ultimately be considered a second-order perspective, it points not only to receptivity, but also to relationality as both an object of knowledge and as part of the epistemic process itself.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; dialogue; dialogical aporia; second-person perspective; epistemic process; existential thought; I and You



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1. Introduction

Are two heads really better than one? While received wisdom has long held this to be the case, a 2010 study sought to prove it (Bahrami et al. 2010). Researchers found that in perceptual decision-making tasks two observers of similar visual sensitivity fared better than one. However, a further condition was required: These two observers had to be "given the opportunity to communicate freely" and "accurately communicate" their observations and confidence-levels in trials (Bahrami et al. 2010, p. 1081). In other words, two heads are better than one, provided the heads in question are in dialogue. And yet, giving a clear account of the epistemological aspects and benefits of dialogue proves challenging. One reason for this could be that dialogue, unlike a theory of knowledge, is no theory at all. As Paul Mendes-Flohr underlines, the implications of entering into dialogue are not merely epistemic or cognitive, but existential too (Mendes-Flohr 2015, p. 3). Rather than a theory, Dmitri Nikulin designates dialogue "the art of being" (Nikulin 2010, p. x). In dialogue, the I and the You—the first and second-person—are in communion with one another. As such, dialogue is always, at the very least, dually oriented. According to Nikulin, it is partly this duality that has resulted in philosophy outgrowing its own dialogical practices, and turning instead to "monological, strict and conclusion-oriented thinking" (Nikulin 2010, p. 72). Philosophical knowledge has thus turned away from the duality of dialogue towards epistemological ideals of oneness or unity; of unequivocalness and clarity—a tendency that has also been termed a "reduction" in a variety of forms of knowledge (Piety 2010, p. 3).

However, there is no guarantee that dialogue will lead to such epistemic unity. On the contrary. As the early Socratic dialogues attest to, dialogue may not only deny us one clear

answer; it can also strip away the knowledge we thought we had. This feature of dialogue is known as *aporia*, from *a-poros* meaning “without passage”. *Aporia* refers to the way in which interlocutors find themselves at an impasse where no clear conclusion can be drawn, or discover that rather than provide certainty, dialogue instead turns everything upside down (see for example [Kofman 1988](#); [Frede 1992](#); [Nikulin 2006, 2010](#)). Dialogue, then, might not lead to consensus or even dissensus, but *allosensus*. And yet, with this possibility of an opening or continuation of conversation, dialogical *aporia* still tells us *something*. Any reflection on the epistemological possibilities of dialogue and its dual perspectives must then necessarily engage the tension that arises due to the way dialogical duality and *aporia* inherently problematise the pursuit of a unified, completed theory of knowledge.

To address this tension and explore the neglected epistemological aspects of dialogue, a resort to dialogue, at least textually, seems appropriate. I suggest that engaging the polyphonous and multifaceted authorship of the Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) proves instructive. I argue that a number of dialogical features are made integral to Kierkegaard’s existential re-envisioning of the pursuit of knowledge. One way to bring these to light is by reading Kierkegaard’s discussions of dialogue under his own name in conversation with his pseudonym Johannes Climacus. The matter of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms—how we should read them, how they relate to each other and to Kierkegaard himself—is a profoundly complex matter, rightfully treated as its own subject of research¹ (see for example [Garff 2006](#); [Nun and Stewart 2015](#); [Westfall 2018](#); [Pattison 2019](#)). Not only is Kierkegaard in dialogue with his pseudonyms, but his pseudonyms and their works are also in dialogue with each other.² Kierkegaard claims that the pseudonymous writings are “mine, but only insofar as I . . . have placed the life-view of the creating, poetically actual individuality in his mouth . . . in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me”. ([Kierkegaard \[1846\] 1992](#), pp. 625–26; see also [Kierkegaard 2008](#), p. 264). This of course does not mean that Kierkegaard cannot share views with his pseudonyms. Kierkegaard expresses agreement with Climacus on a number of occasions. However, he importantly also distances himself from his playful and humorous pseudonym ([Kierkegaard 2012](#), p. 188; [Kierkegaard 2014](#), pp. 70–71; [Kierkegaard 2015](#), p. 42; [Kierkegaard 2017](#), pp. 393, 440). In relation to Climacus, who “places himself so low” by denying being a Christian, Kierkegaard explicitly characterises himself as “higher”³ ([Kierkegaard 2013](#), pp. 127, 133).

Kierkegaard’s pseudonymity is a key aspect of his method or theory of “indirect communication” (see for example [Tietjen 2013](#); [Rumble 1995](#); [Poole 1993](#); [Lübcke 1990](#)), which on the one hand, finds a direct source in dialogue—specifically Socratic dialogue. Maieutically assisting with the delivery of his interlocutors’ ideas, Socrates never lectures or directly tells them what to think or do. Modelling himself on Socrates, Kierkegaard denies having any authority and communicates indirectly through his pseudonyms to activate his readers to work towards their own edification and development ([Kierkegaard 2008](#), p. 276; see also [Hermann 2008](#), pp. 77–78; [Mooney 2007](#), pp. 12, 46). On the other hand, many have questioned whether Kierkegaard’s indirect communication can be characterised as truly *dialogical* in relation to his reader: indirectness seems opposed to the directness and mutuality of dialogue between two interlocutors.⁴ In spite of Kierkegaard’s repeated accentuation, questioning and addressing of his reader, it is hard to see how in turn his texts can listen to or be influenced by the reader (see for example [Christensen 2019](#), p. 885; [Welz 2017](#), pp. 371–76; [Jensen and Pattison 2012](#); [Hannay 2003](#), pp. 20–22; [Grøn 1997](#), pp. 248–49). Indeed Kierkegaard acknowledges the inhumanity or supra-humanity of “pure” or “absolutely indirect communication”, which would become directly “demonic” if employed human to human ([Kierkegaard 2012](#), pp. 81–82, 290; See also [Kierkegaard 2014](#), p. 480). One thing is clear: Kierkegaard’s theory of indirect communication displays difficult and “intriguing perplexities” ([Rumble 1995](#), p. 312), which this paper neither can nor claims to resolve.

Rather than assessing whether Kierkegaard’s own theory of communication is truly dialogical, I will focus on how Kierkegaard’s texts use and reflect on certain dialogical features in relation to the process of knowing. By reading Kierkegaard (to the extent we

can even say such a unified voice or perspective exists) and Climacus together, I aim to bring into relief the nuanced insights Kierkegaard's authorship offers for considering dialogue's unique epistemological aspects and possibilities. To show this, I start by exploring how Kierkegaard's criticism of non-dialogical approaches to knowing put into relief his own, admittedly sketch-like, vision of the epistemic process. Taking into account Kierkegaard's repeated analogy between breathing and knowing outlines a contact theory of knowledge in which a receptive "breathing space" for knowing is made integral to the epistemic process. Dialogue can therefore be seen to play a crucial role in supporting this contact and receptivity in two ways: Firstly, through Kierkegaard's and Climacus's creative re-appropriations of dialogical aporia, which in different moods encourage receptivity and make the needed space in which knowledge can be gained. Secondly, by examining Kierkegaard's and Climacus's both implicit and explicit centring of the second-person perspective. While it can ultimately be considered a second-order perspective, Kierkegaard's and Climacus's differing emphases on this perspective supports an existential vision of knowing by highlighting receptivity and relationality as a part of the epistemic process itself but also as objects of knowledge. Letting their agreements and disagreements stand, I argue that the reflections on and textual performance of dialogue that appear between Kierkegaard and Climacus can illuminate certain epistemic possibilities that arise in the aporetic and relational space between the first and second-person.

2. A Dialogical Corrective: Kierkegaard on Dialogue and Knowing

In shedding light on the epistemological aspects of the dialogical encounter, Kierkegaard may not seem like an obvious resource. Often cited as a crucial forerunner of dialogical philosophy, Kierkegaard's status as a dialogical thinker has nevertheless remained a disputed matter (see for example, [Bergman 1991](#), p. 143; [Theunissen 1984](#), p. 268). In part, it has been suggested that Kierkegaard's ultimate emphasis on the divine-human relation renders the interhuman relation and dialogue inessential (see [Buber 2002](#), p. 251; [Bergman 1991](#); [Šajda 2011](#)). Furthermore, as a thinker who challenges the prospect of epistemological certainty through his emphasis on paradox and the noetic effects of sin, Kierkegaard offers no systematic theory of knowledge. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard was not only deeply concerned with dialogue and its possibilities, but as I will show below, dialogue was important to him precisely because of its potential for correcting misguided approaches to knowledge in his own time.

Like Nikulin, Kierkegaard diagnoses a development from dialogical to monological and result-oriented modes of inquiry and knowledge in both the philosophy and theology of Golden-Age Denmark. An important reason for Kierkegaard's opposition to Hegelian speculative philosophy and its Danish adherents was its pursuit of a totalising system, static and finalised results, and its objective disinterested approach to knowledge. For Kierkegaard, such an approach leaves no room for the concrete, existing individual and the actual plight of existence. As a result, Kierkegaard would describe his age as one where [a]ll personal communication and all personality has disappeared; no one says "I" or speaks to a "you", because people are now only "able to talk [*tale*]"—but not converse [*samtale*]" ([Kierkegaard 2013](#), pp. 156–57). This 1849 entry starts as a criticism of the general failings of society and the human race as a whole, but it quickly narrows down to target a single person and a single work: The theologian Hans Lassen Martensen and his *Christian Dogmatics* from 1849. A prominent Protestant theologian in the nineteenth century, Martensen's renown was to be eclipsed by that of his former student Kierkegaard, in the following century. As a result, Martensen is today primarily known for being one of Kierkegaard's favoured targets among the Danish Hegelians. Kierkegaard continues his journal entry with the following:

"In the whole of Martensen's *Dogmatics*, or at any rate in the portion I have read thus far, there is not one single sentence that is an honest Yes or No. It is the old sophistry of being able to talk [*tale*]"—but not converse [*samtale*]. Because conversation [*Samtale*] immediately establishes You and I, and questions that

require Yes and No. However, the talker expounds: On the one hand—and on the other hand. Additionally, in the meantime, the listener and reader are distracted, so that he completely fails to notice [*slet ikke mærker*] that he has not r[e]ally learned anything [*ikke fik Noget at vide*]"

(Kierkegaard 2013, p. 157, translation modified).

This mention of Martensen as someone who talks rather than converses holds an important clue for understanding the connection Kierkegaard sees between dialogical practices and knowledge. The *Dogmatics* formed Martensen's attempt to establish a coherent science of faith [*Troesvidenskab*] and an epistemology grounded in faith itself according to "Christianity and revelation's own laws" (Martensen 1849, p. ii). The type of knowledge that underpins this science of faith is for Martensen based in the idea that religion in its truest sense is an existential relation between God and the human being—"a life in God" (Martensen 1849, p. 8). As a result, religious knowledge is not "knowledge in the form of abstract thought", but knowledge in which "the idea of God assumes shape in a comprehensive view of the world and of human life in its relation to God" (Martensen 1849, p. 13). This relation is expressed in the human *conscience*, in its original sense of "co-knowledge", which Martensen defines as the human's original knowing and unity with God. Co-knowledge with God ensures certainty of both "divine and human things" (Martensen 1849, p. 9) and this certainty forms the starting point for speculative theology. For Martensen, the systematic and scientific exposition of faith and the Christian doctrines constitutes the highest expression of faith itself. Commentators have remarked that Martensen thereby equates, or reduces, dogmatics to epistemology and faith to knowledge (Nielsen 1849, pp. 10–11; Arildsen 1932, p. 210; Piety 2010, p. 11).

Upon stating his programme to establish a science of faith, however, Martensen is quick to divulge that he under no circumstances wishes to be in disagreement with Christian believers. Rather he would "willingly ... give up each of my propositions, if it is proven to me that they really lead to such a disagreement" (Martensen 1849, pp. iii–iv). The project of Martensen's *Dogmatics* might therefore be characterised as a project of harmony, seeking not just coherence and continuity in intellectual and spiritual matters, between faith and knowledge—between humanity and God—but also between humans. Regardless of whether Martensen actually believed his propositions would cause disagreement or whether he would actually have been willing to retract them, he attempts to signal that agreement with his readership and congregation takes priority above his scientific contribution. It is especially this impulse towards coherence and harmony that Kierkegaard targets by describing Martensen as a speaker, not a conversationalist, who offers no "honest yes or no". One could, and perhaps should, interpret this as Martensen's attempt to take seriously the second-person perspective of his readers and congregation. Nevertheless, for Kierkegaard, this assimilation of positions negates any true relation between an I and You. For by explicitly seeking agreement with his readers, Martensen fails to posit his own "I" and as such is incapable of relating to or engaging the "You" in conversation.

According to Kierkegaard, Martensen's lack of true dialogue fails to deliver on his promises of knowledge. Without conversation that establishes and differentiates a You and an I, and in which there is a distinction between "yes" and "no", Kierkegaard rejects that a transfer of knowledge has taken place—even if we think it did. There is thus a moment of deception involved in Martensen's expounding. The *Dogmatics* jumps from position to position to establish their internal harmony, but this distracts the reader, who in turn fails to realise that he or she in reality learns nothing—or, in direct translation, "is given nothing to know". Kierkegaard thereby implies that whereas speaking only gives the illusion of providing knowledge, true conversation or dialogue *does* communicate or convey knowledge. There is something we are given to know in this dialogical space between one another, and this something cannot simply be agreement or unity. However, what Kierkegaard believes this knowledge to consist of requires further exploration.

Kierkegaard is not, nor does he claim to be, an epistemologist. Nevertheless, this does not mean he is not concerned with epistemological questions. In reconstructing a

view of Kierkegaard's approach to knowing, M. G. Piety has argued that Kierkegaard can be considered an epistemological pluralist because knowledge for him is relative to the knowing subject and known object. The problem with Hegel's and Martensen's emphasis on the possibility of absolute knowledge is that they lack recognition of the contingency of human knowledge. C. Stephen Evans observes that Kierkegaard's epistemology is "premodern" in its account of truth and "postmodern" in his account of knowledge, which emphasises the "tentative, never finalized character of empirical inquiry," grounded in the "complexity and flux-suffused qualities of what is known as well as the finitude and uncertainty linked to . . . the knower" (Evans 2006, p. 42). Knowing must be understood as a continual process because the existing human being is herself in a process of becoming. Piety argues that where most epistemologies can be characterised as reductionist for taking a broad sense of "knowledge" and reducing it to "a single essence" (Piety 2010, p. 3), Kierkegaard operates with several kinds of knowledge and knowers. Broadly, these can be distinguished under the two categories *objective knowledge* and *subjective knowledge*: Respectively, knowledge that is detached from the subjectivity of the knowing person and knowledge that is essentially bound up with the subjective and existing knower.

Kierkegaard pinpoints this distinction already in his earliest journal entries. In 1835 he rhetorically asks what use "objective truths", such as having knowledge of "philosophers' systems" and "separate facts" would have for his life if it "were to stand there before me, cold and naked, not caring whether I acknowledged it or not", rather than being taken up "alive in me" (Kierkegaard 2007, pp. 19–20). This distinction is further developed in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus clarifies that objective knowledge is focused entirely on the object, the *what*, to which cognition relates itself (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 199). In contrast, subjective knowledge is not about the content, but about *how* the individual knower relates to the content of knowledge. Or as Climacus succinctly puts it: "Objectively the emphasis is on *what* is said; subjectively the emphasis is on *how* it is said" (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 202).

In some respects, this distinction between objective and subjective knowing can be mapped onto the distinction Kierkegaard draws between speaking and conversing. In Kierkegaard's 1841 dissertation *On the Concept of Irony, "Samtale"* (literally a "together-talking") is positioned over and against "*Tale*" an expounding, one-sided speech-giving—a distinction attributed to Socrates. In this work, Kierkegaard describes the Socratic dialogue as beginning with and being intricately engaged with the multivalence of lived existence, "the motley variety of life endlessly interwoven within itself" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, p. 32). To do justice to the complexity and diversity of human life and to the enactment of dialogue itself, dialogue cannot be characterised straightforwardly or statically as a philosophy or theory. Instead, similar to Nikulin, Kierkegaard labels it an art, remarking that

"an exceptional degree of art is needed to unravel not only itself but also the abstract of life's complications . . . The art we are describing here is, of course, the rather well-known Socratic art of asking questions or, to recall the necessity of dialogue for the Platonic philosophy, the art of conversing".

(Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, pp. 32–33)

Kierkegaard aligns the art of dialogue with the ability to encounter and engage life's complications. This art, however, stands in stark opposition to the skill of speaking or answering questions—a skill connected to the Sophists. As Kierkegaard points out, the Sophists know how to speak, but not how to converse. Elaborating in a footnote, Kierkegaard remarks that the Sophists exhibit a self-seeking greed for questions as an opportunity to showcase their knowledge, so "their wisdom can really gush forth" and they can "take flight upon the deeps of truth where one loses sight of land" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, p. 33). Kierkegaard explains that Socrates draws the contrast between speaking and conversing to censure the "self-seeking element in eloquence that craves what could be called abstract beauty, versus *rerum inopes nugaeque canorae* [verses void of thought, and sonorous trifles], that sees in the expression itself, disassociated from its relation to an idea, an object for pious veneration." (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, p. 33) Speaking is then connected

to a form of abstract, detached, or objective expression that fails to properly relate itself to the idea(s) it purports to communicate. Speaking thereby proves to be “void of thought” because it “loses sight” of actual existence. Similarly in *Postscript*, Climacus underlines that objective knowing “leads to abstract thinking . . . and always leads away from the subjective individual”, rendering existence and the knowing subject “infinitely indifferent” (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 193) echoing Kierkegaard’s emphasis on Sophistic speaking which showcases their extensive knowledge, but loses sight of concrete existence.

Consequently, speaking and objective knowledge are detached from the subjectivity of the knowing person and consequently can be characterised as disinterested and abstract. While Kierkegaard does not deny that objective knowledge has its place, he underlines it cannot be the only kind of knowing. The danger of objective knowing is precisely that it abstracts away from actuality. Contrastively, dialogue and subjective knowledge are both described as essentially bound up with the subjective knower in his or her concrete existence in all its subjective complexity.

In addition to this broad distinction of modes of knowing, Kierkegaard’s somewhat scattered remarks on epistemology include several different analogies that illustrate how knowledge is gained and what it means to know something. In an early journal entry from 1838, Kierkegaard suggests that knowing, or specifically bringing concepts to mind, is similar to prayer. In prayer, he writes, “one would think that here man placed himself in relation to the Deity in the freest, most subjective way; and yet we are told that it is the Holy Spirit that effects prayer” (Kierkegaard 2007, p. 261). We might think we play the active role in obtaining knowledge. However, by comparing the epistemic process to prayer, Kierkegaard underlines that while knowing may feel and look like something we actively do and acquire, knowledge is really brought to us through an external effect in the same way the Holy Spirit enables and effects prayer. In the process of praying, and thereby of knowing, we are therefore more correctly thought of as receivers as the object of knowledge is brought into contact with us. Piety similarly suggests that knowledge for Kierkegaard is gained through “the substantive contact of the knower with the object of knowledge” (Piety 2010, p. 4). Kierkegaard’s epistemological vision can be characterised as ‘contact theory’ in which the knower comes into contact with an external object of knowledge. Kierkegaard affirms this view as he remarks there are “no deductive development of concepts . . . man can only call it to mind, and willing this . . . is what corresponds to this single prayer, and, just like it, is effected in us” (Kierkegaard 2007, p. 261).

In a footnote to this entry, Kierkegaard provides a further analogy: “One can therefore also say that all knowing is like the drawing of breath a *re-spiratio*” (Kierkegaard 2007, p. 261). He repeats this analogy a few years later, stating that “all knowing is like breathing, a *re-spiratio*” (Kierkegaard 2008, p. 48). This statement is made in contrast to the view Kierkegaard specifically ascribes to “the philosophers”, who believe *all* knowledge, including knowledge of God’s existence, is produced by the human mind and who therefore dismiss the actuality of revelation. Kierkegaard suggests that these philosophers believe their understanding of knowledge and revelation is explained by the image of rain: for while rain appears to “fall from the heavens,” they point out that “this rain is nothing but the vapor produced by the earth” (Kierkegaard 2008, p. 48). In other words, these philosophers claim that even if knowledge looks like it is given to us externally or revelation is granted by God from above—our knowledge in reality comes from below, from ourselves. But Kierkegaard chastises these philosophers for forgetting “that in the beginning God divided the waters of heaven and earth, and that there is something higher than *the atmosphere*.” (Kierkegaard 2008, p. 48).

Returning to the analogy of breathing in 1839, Kierkegaard muses that it should “be possible to say ‘a drawing of thought [*Tankedrag*]’ just as one says ‘a drawing of breath [*Aandedrag*]’.” (Kierkegaard 2008, p. 91) This accentuates the idea that knowledge is something external to be drawn in and received. Furthermore, by conceiving of the epistemic process in terms of breathing, a further characteristic can be added to Kierkegaard’s contact theory of knowledge: like breathing, knowing must be understood as a recurring and

continual rhythm enabled by on-going connection and exchange—a rhythm upon which our very lives depend. Kierkegaard seems to be suggesting that like breathing, epistemic contact should not be thought of as a single and finalised event, but rather as repeated contact—or perhaps an ongoing relation.

Even so, Kierkegaard does not explicate *how* this contact or relation occurs. Matthew D. Kirkpatrick has suggested that in characterising Kierkegaard's epistemology, we must therefore account for a certain interplay between activity and passivity or receptivity as a crucial step towards knowledge. The passivity of receiving and having knowing somehow effected upon us, which is intimated in Kierkegaard's admittedly fragmentary reflections on epistemology, reveals our *active* responsibility to make ourselves receptive to knowledge. According to Kirkpatrick, this active responsibility is located in the way we orient ourselves towards existence and the world around us: "At the heart of Kierkegaard's epistemology, therefore, is the belief that the authentic disposition of the individual toward existence will lead to that single truth or idea breaking in" (Kirkpatrick 2018, p. 347). For knowledge to break in and make (continued) contact, we must become receptive to this knowledge. It is here dialogue can support the epistemic process. As I will show in the following, dialogue for Kierkegaard and Climacus points us towards the need to become receptive.

3. Dialogical Aporia as Epistemic Breathing Space

In his dissertation, Kierkegaard notes that when Socrates asks questions in dialogue, the intention is not necessarily to extract an answer—to fill the void implied by his question—but rather to "suck out the apparent content by means of the question and thereby to leave an emptiness behind" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, p. 36). Describing this method of emptying, Kierkegaard explains that "Socrates' questioning was essentially aimed at the knowing subject for the purpose of showing that when all was said and done they knew nothing whatever" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, p. 37). Kierkegaard emphasises that numerous Socratic dialogues "end without a conclusion" and with Socrates and his sophistic interlocutor being left "vis à vis *au rien*"—face to face with nothing. Instead, Kierkegaard humorously suggests that the Socratic interlocutors "stand face-to-face like the two bald men, who, after a long, drawn-out quarrel, finally found a comb" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, p. 55). However, Kierkegaard clarifies that although the ironic structure of these dialogues may mean there is no definite answer or conclusion, this is not "synonymous with a negative conclusion", for a negative conclusion "always" still implies a conclusion—as he notes, even a skeptical position has a conclusion. Irony on the other hand makes the "tantalizing attempt to eat up everything and thereupon to eat up itself" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, p. 56). Thus, dialogue is self-aware about its own lack of a conclusion or result and directly delights in "the magic of annihilation [*Tilintetgjørelsens hele Trylleri*]" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, p. 56). In Danish, "tilintetgjørelse" literally means "to make into nothing". With specific reference to Socrates' dialogue with the Sophist Protagoras on the nature and teachability of virtue, Kierkegaard remarks that through his questioning, Socrates thus operates with a kind of knowledge that "basically cancels itself out" and erects "a kind of epistemology that annihilates itself" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, p. 61). Although Kierkegaard does not use this term, what he is describing here is dialogical aporia. Kierkegaard even argues that in dialogues that are *not* aporetic "there is no conversation anymore" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, p. 53). However, why is this the case?

Climacus's project in *Postscript* exemplifies the utilisation of dialogical aporia and a self-annihilating theory or approach to knowing. The book is framed somewhat dialogically by Climacus's introductory and concluding address to the "You"—his reader. The introduction of the work even begins with the word "You": "You will perhaps recall, my dear reader, that there was a remark at the end of *Philosophical Fragments*, something that might look like the promise of a sequel" (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 9). This opening sentence not only calls attention to a continuing relationship between Climacus and his reader, it also suggests that *Postscript* is partly a result of this relation. For a promise to someone indicates that the relationship has a future. Climacus is referencing the following remark from *Fragments*: "If

I ever do write a second section—because a pamphlet writer such as I have no seriousness . . . why, then, should I now in conclusion pretend seriousness in order to please people by making a rather big promise? . . . to write a pamphlet is frivolity—but to promise the system, that is seriousness and has made many a man a supremely serious man both in his own eyes and in the eyes of others” (Kierkegaard [1844] 1985, p. 109). This does not sound much like a promise at all. It is rather the opposite: Climacus gives us no big promise of a system. *Postscript* precisely fulfils this anti-promise, as Climacus redefines communication as a “taking away”.

As Climacus underlines, the problem and misfortune of his times is not that people do not know enough, but that they know *too much* and as a result have forgotten the fundamental fact that they exist. Climacus vividly illustrates this by describing a man, who has crammed so much food into his mouth that he is unable to eat and faces the sorry end of “dying of hunger” because of an *excess* of food (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 275). Climacus therefore asks his reader whether giving this man nourishment consists of “stuffing his mouth even more”, or rather in taking some food away? Climacus draws a direct parallel between this man and the person who is “very knowledgeable” but whose knowledge is meaningless for the existing human and obscures rather than illuminates what it means to exist. Climacus asks again whether “sensible communication” then consists of giving this person “more to know” or “in taking something away from him?” (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 275).

While it may seem counterintuitive, Climacus declares that the art of communicating becomes “the art of being able to *take away* or to trick something away from someone”, (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 275) and that “this taking away is precisely communication” (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 276). This idea of “taking away” to make the space required for being receptive to real nourishment, real knowing, gains greater depth when understood in light of dialogical aporia. As the philosopher Gillian Rose put it, Climacus reaffirms the Socratic “quest to find a *form* by which to reinsinuate the aporia, ‘the difficulty’, into over-educated minds” (Rose 1992, p. 38). The individual who forgets his or her own status as existing through the epistemic pursuit of systems of objective and essentially monological knowledge, will according to Climacus not become more knowledgeable, but rather “become more and more absent-minded” (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 121). Because this forgetting of existence and such absent-mindedness are caused not by a lack of knowing, but from an excess of knowing, an aporetic approach is needed to make people receptive and open to ensure the possibility of knowing. Like Socrates, Climacus thus turns the matter upside down as he re-envision communication not as an imparting, but as a taking away.

Climacus’s aporetic approach of “tricking” and taking away to paradoxically support the reception of knowledge can be helpfully illuminated by the concept of ‘epistemological shudders’. This concept has been described as the encounter with a paradox or contradiction that rather than eliminating meaning, opens up new potentials for sense-making or knowing. It has been characterised as a “cracking apart”, a “fragmentation” (Guigni 2005, p. 83) as a dilemma or conflict that has a disorienting effect (Mezirow 1990, p. xvi), but also as the experience of an “aha moment”⁵ (Kounios and Beeman 2009). It offers the opportunity for breaking apart that which we might take for granted or assume and therefore leave unexplored or unquestioned. These shudders may cause a period of “confusion or anxiety (aporia)” since one’s previous understanding is disrupted (Charteris 2014, p. 105). However, this aporia is not simply an impasse or obstruction. It becomes an opportunity to push beyond this initial barrier and form a new “conceptual space” (Guigni 2005, p. 82) and new ways of knowing. Nikulin explains that aporia “is precisely that moment of dialectical ‘non-viability’ or interruption that points not so much at a mistake in one’s deduction, but rather is a productive tip for the further development of a thought, or even points at the need for a radical change in the whole theoretical framework.” (Nikulin 2010, p. 117). In other words, aporia constitutes the obstruction, which at the same time points beyond itself to the need for on-going contact between dialogue partners. Sarah Kofman calls this

aspect of aporia paradoxical, for while aporia constitutes an impasse, aporia is also the only thing capable of saving the dialogue partners. Rather than being paralysing or stifling, the aporetic state, “encourages one to find, stimulates one to invent some . . . *poros* to find a way out; it forces one into the water, to swim in the hope of encountering a miraculous dolphin” (Kofman 1988, p. 23).

It is precisely this paradoxical effect of aporia that makes it so fruitful for Climacus. To further explicate the epistemological significance of aporia, Climacus explicitly draws on the imagery of breathing. Discussing his earlier work *Fragments* in its *Postscript*, Climacus notes that it was by omitting certain information, by eliminating knowledge, that this work was able to “obtain a breathing space” (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 362). Climacus is here specifically referring to the fact that he does not mention Christianity in *Fragments*, although this is clearly the subject under investigation. Climacus’s point is that because there was already so much assumed (and confused) knowledge about Christianity among his contemporaries, that this had become “overstrained and soon short of breath and meaningless” (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 363). To establish breathing space, which in turn is space for knowing, Climacus removes or suppresses information from his reader.

This invocation of aporia is nowhere more evident than in Climacus’ ultimate revocation of *Postscript*. Importantly, this revocation is made in the final section entitled “An Understanding with the Reader”. This concluding section points back to the introduction framing the work around Climacus’s relation to his reader. However, we see that the promise of a sequel made in the introduction culminates in a revocation rather than a conclusion.

“Just as in Catholic books . . . one finds a note at the back of the book that notifies the reader that everything is to be understood in accordance with the teaching of the holy universal mother Church, so also what I write contains the notice that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked, that the book has not only an end but has a revocation to boot”.

(Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 619)

It is this revocation, this taking away, that constitutes the understanding between Climacus and his reader. For as he emphasises at the end, only his “dear reader”, the You, believes his claim that what he knows is that he does not know (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 623), which is signalled by the revocation. Climacus still had to write the book—had to enter into dialogue with his reader—in order to revoke it at the end. Writing a book to revoke it is not the same as never writing the book in the first place. Instead, the *act* of revoking is crucial, for as Kierkegaard underlined in *Concept of Irony* there is no dialogue without aporia. Thus, with his revocation, Climacus challenges our assumptions about what we think we know by eschewing static results and taking away any conclusion to confront us with epistemological shudders—with aporia. As Nikulin notes, it is this unfinalizability which makes dialogue “meaningful at every moment” and enables it to “always be carried further” (Nikulin 2010, p. 77). Although it is a taking away, Climacean aporia does not leave the reader with nothing: it places both Climacus and the reader in a dialogical relation through which the reader gains the breathing space that makes knowing possible as an on-going process.

In this way, Climacus’s use of dialogical aporia has important epistemological significance. By invoking this aporia, Climacus avoids two important aspects which he criticises monological approaches to knowing for: pursuing finished results and conclusions, and neglecting the duality of the epistemic process. Even so, Kierkegaard warns that with Climacus’s revocation, “everything drowns in humour” (Kierkegaard 2013, p. 133). We cannot be sure that Climacus’s revocation is not simply a jest, rendering his dialogical understanding with his reader an elaborate joke—a joke that is further heightened when Climacus teases the idea that the ideal reader is an imagined reader (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 621). Conversely, Climacus responds in kind as he chastises Kierkegaard for not understanding or appreciating Socrates’ teasing manner (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 90).

As John Lippitt and Evans both stress the humourist goes no further than to “jest”, whereas the Christian worldview combines jest with gravity (Lippitt 1997, p. 197; Evans 1987, p. 184). There is thus a difference in mood that informs the way Climacus and Kierkegaard, respectively, engage in this discussion.

As Kierkegaard envisions it, the epistemic process calls for receptivity in the knower. Receptivity is important to the epistemic process because Kierkegaard envisions knowing as form of repeated contact, or relationality. An important epistemological aspect of dialogue is therefore the way in which dialogical aporia serves a role in making space for this receptivity. For this space is not simply established and sustained from the side of Kierkegaard’s or his pseudonyms’ narrative “I”. While the humorous space Climacus establishes may be aporetic, it emphasises Climacus’s own ingenuity and wit. By contrast, Kierkegaard calls attention to the way in which this space for receptivity can be expanded through relationship and contact with the perspective of an Other—of the “You”.

4. Insights from the Kierkegaardian “You”

Despite being a dissertation—a formal academic work being assessed—Kierkegaard seizes upon the opportunity to address the second-person perspective and *be* with his reader in *Concept of Irony*. His readers would have been his examiners, and yet Kierkegaard interrupts his dissertation-writing to address them directly, carving out space to engage in a dialogue about dialogue itself:

“My reviewer [*Min Recensent*]! Allow me just one sentence [*Punctum*], one innocent parenthesis, in order to air my gratitude, my gratitude for the relief I found in reading Plato. Where is balm to be found if not in the infinite tranquillity with which, in the quiet of the night, the idea soundlessly, holily, softly, and yet so mightily unfurls in the rhythm of the dialogue, as if there were nothing else in the world, where every step is deliberated and repeated slowly, solemnly, because the ideas themselves seem to know that there is a time and arena for all of them? Indeed, when was repose ever more needed in the world than in our day, when the ideas accelerate one another with insane haste, when they merely give a hint of their existence [*Tilværelse*] deep down in the soul by means of a bubble on the surface of the sea, when the ideas never unfurl but are devoured in their delicate sprouts, merely thrust their heads into existence but then promptly die of grief, like the child Abraham à Santa Clara tells of, who in the moment it was born became so afraid of the world that it rushed back into its mother’s womb”.

(Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, p. 28, translation modified)

In this passage, Kierkegaard not only brings in and draws attention to the second-person perspective by addressing his reader, but he also reflects on his own experience of being addressed and brought to life by Plato’s dialogues. Kierkegaard brings attention to the complexities of perspectivalness itself by showing how we in dialogue function as both an I and a You. Allowing himself more than a single sentence—and a lot more than an innocent parenthesis—Kierkegaard explains his appreciation for Plato’s dialogical writing. While it is no doubt digressions such as these that left some of Kierkegaard’s examiners somewhat dubious as to its academic merits, it is precisely in digression, in the dilatoriness of dialogue, that Kierkegaard identifies a vital and needed alternative to the “insane haste”, and demand for quick results in the world of ideas. This hastiness means that ideas are not granted the necessary time and care for gaining real shape and acquiring concrete existence, but only appear as unfulfilled potential or transitory moments of possibility: bubbles on the surface that quickly disappear, or the early buds of a plant that wither before they can bloom. Instead, Kierkegaard connects the practice of dialogue with repose, with a slow and steady rhythm, which ambiguously both powerfully and gently makes the space needed for valuable ideas to form and develop. This is reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s use of breathing as a rhythmic repeated action as an epistemic metaphor.

Kierkegaard describes how the “thought development” between the two interlocutors thus fulfils itself in a reciprocal and alternating “limping to both sides”. This can be understood as a form of dialectical movement; however, without the final moment of speculative unity, as dialogue is aporetic and unfinalisable meaning “every answer contains a possibility of a new question” (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, p. 36). Kierkegaard thus describes the dialogical space between the first and second-persons, the questioner and answerer, as an outstanding debt or “account to be settled”. This, nevertheless, has a double meaning in Danish. For Kierkegaard here uses the term “*Mellemværende*”, which literally translates to “between-being”—in other words, the dialogical space is a being-between the I and the You.

Part of the enduring fascination of Kierkegaard’s works is their ability to invoke this in-between space, addressing and relating to readers, past, present, and future. Kierkegaard explicitly articulates his vision of his own reader, the Kierkegaardian You, in a journal entry from 1846. This entry is a dedication to the second-person, whom Kierkegaard designates “the Single Individual”, drafted for a collection of upbuilding discourses:

“Dear!

Receive this dedication; it is offered blindly, as it were, but therefore also undisturbed by any considerations—in earnestness! Who you are I do not know; where you are, I do not know; what your name is, I do not know—I do not even know whether you exist or whether you perhaps have existed but do so no longer, or if it is possible that one day your time will come. Yet you are my hope, my joy, my pride, my honor amid uncertainty; amid uncertainty, because if I knew you personally and with earthly certainty, this would be my shame, my offense—and my honour would be lost”.

(Kierkegaard 2011, p. 53, translation modified)

There has been much discussion of how to understand the figure of this single individual.⁶ Regardless of how we interpret this category, it is clear that Kierkegaard was deeply concerned with bringing the “You” to the forefront. The dedication begins with an unspecified address, with a hanging “Dear! [*Kjære!*]” ensuring that only *you* are addressed without exclusion. From here, Kierkegaard proceeds to deny knowledge of you in four different ways: He denies knowing who you are; where you are; what your name is and even whether you exist. Despite this admitted ignorance, Kierkegaard holds you up as his hope, joy, pride, and honour, suggesting that these would be lost if you were known with any certainty. In other words, knowledge or contact with the You requires a similar dialogical-aporetic approach to knowing—both in the sense of awareness of this perspective and a relational form of knowing someone. Kierkegaard does not pretend to be able to give any knowledge of who you are. However, this suppression of information can again be seen to highlight the breathing space needed for us (and Kierkegaard) to be open and receptive to each other.

Somewhat perplexingly, Kierkegaard also states that it is only when you read his works for your own sake and not to “seek [Kierkegaard’s] acquaintance, but avoid[. . .] it,” that you become his reader. With this characterisation—or lack of characterisation—of you and direct call for avoidance of himself, Kierkegaard is nevertheless ambiguously establishing, not rejecting, the relationship between you and himself. By insisting on such space between himself as the first-person and the You as the second-person, Kierkegaard maintains the distinctiveness as well as the freedom of second-person, preventing the collapse of these perspectives into each other. As Simon Podmore points out, philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas have shown that “‘the other’ should not be ultimately reducible to ‘the self’: ‘the other’ retains an otherness (an *alterity*) that cannot be assimilated to ‘the same’ and must therefore remain *other*, even mysteriously so, to the self” (Podmore 2012, p. 114). Kierkegaard puts this succinctly in *Works of Love*, where he states that the Other cannot simply be the second or “*other I*”, but must be the “*first you*” (Kierkegaard [1847] 1995, p. 57). Thus, the encounter between the first and second-person in dialogue is

envisioned by Kierkegaard as a widening space that by maintaining the difference and distinctiveness of the interlocutors also supports the continued relation between them.

Turning to *Postscript* again, we find parallels to the epistemological aspects and significance of Kierkegaard's vision of the second-person perspective. The experience of being spaced apart from one's interlocutor in dialogue reflects Climacus' attempts to conceptualise existence itself. According to Climacus, existence is that which spaces us apart from ourselves for as long as we are existing and unfinished. For this reason, we cannot step outside of existence and get to the other side of it to describe it in full. Rather, conceptualising or gaining knowledge of existence involves recognising that it cannot be conceptualised or fully grasped.

"If the existing person could actually be outside himself, the truth would be something concluded for him. However, where is this point? The I-I is a mathematical point that does not exist at all; accordingly anyone can readily take up this standpoint—no one [*den Ene*] stands in the way of anyone else [*den Anden*]. . . . The fantastical I-I is not infinitude and finitude in identity, since neither the one nor the other is actual; it is a fantastical union with a cloud, an unfruitful embrace [*Omfavnelse*], and the relation of the individual I to this mirage is never stated".

(Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 197)

With the reference to the I-I, Climacus specifically takes aim at J. G. Fichte's view that the knowing subject and object of knowledge are subsumed or united into the pure I-I. The I-I is in turn an expression of the structure of self-consciousness, which is made the constitutive ground of reality and of philosophical knowledge. According to Fichte, the I-I indicates that the I by thinking itself also creates itself. In his *Vocation of Man*, Fichte thus rejects the need for a "connection" between the I and the object of knowledge, because this bond is automatically within the I itself:

"I have knowledge in myself, for I am intelligence. What I am, thereof I *know*, because I am it. Additionally, that which I know immediately simply by existing, that is *me*, because I immediately know about it. Here, no connection between subject and object is required; my own being is this connection. I am subject and object: and this subject-objectivity, thus return of knowledge into itself, is what I designate with the concept 'I'".

(Fichte [1799] 1987, p. 48)

On both a Climacean and a Kierkegaardian epistemological view this becomes deeply problematic. In his dissertation, Kierkegaard criticises the abstract nature of Fichte's I-I and describes it as a "negative infinity" and an "infinite power that still accomplishes nothing" (Kierkegaard [1841] 1989, pp. 273, 274). Fichte's speculative I-I quite literally opposes Kierkegaard's admonishment in *Works of Love* to remember the first you over the second I. For Kierkegaard, the Fichtean I-I does not gain knowledge of what is actual, partly because it lacks true relationality.

Relationality is a key category of Kierkegaard's philosophical, anthropological, and theological thought. Anti-Climacus's famous definition of the human being hinges on this category (see Kierkegaard [1849] 1980, p. 13). In *Postscript*, Climacus not only makes relationality important for knowing, as he defines all "essential knowing" as knowing where the "relation to existence is essential" (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 197). Moreover, Climacus makes relation the object of knowing: Where objective knowing means reflecting on the object of knowledge, subjective knowing means that "the individual's relation [to truth] is reflected upon" (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 199). It has been suggested that the second-person perspective enables an "epistemology of 'presence'," which opens up the possibility for "a deep exploration of relationship." (de Quincey 2000, p. 153).⁷ In contrast to a third-person perspective aimed at objective knowledge and the first-person's subjective knowledge, the second-person perspective enables an intersubjective approach

to knowledge that makes the *relationship* an ideal of knowing. Kierkegaard's and Climacus's treatment of the "You" seems to be in service of a similar point.

Climacus underlines that relation differs starkly from unity or the "abstract identity between thinking and being" that speculative philosophy seeks to implement. Relationality, as touched upon previously, depends on the differentiation of the related parties—not their unity or sublation. Similarly, Kierkegaard's use of dialogue as a way to create space is not meant to destroy the possibility of contact. Rather, it is meant to emphasise this and offer a new way to engage with and conceive of the relational contact that for Kierkegaard is a central part of the epistemic process. Thus, dialogue, and in particular the second-person perspective, illuminates a further aspect of Kierkegaard's epistemological vision: the contact and relationality inherent to knowing.

Climacus's existential knowing appears to support this, at it implies a dynamic "I-You"-relation. As he notes in the above, the Fichtean I-I means that "no one stands in the way of another". In the original Danish, Climacus here specifically writes that the "one [*Ene*]" does not stand in the way of the other or the "second [*Anden*]". This is not to say that Fichte denies the existence of a second-person perspective.⁸ What is worth noting here is how Climacus's treatment of this Fichtean category is used to form a connection between the second-person perspective and the epistemic process, at least as it relates to knowing in an existential register. For in existing and trying to gain knowledge of existence we can never step outside ourselves. We can, however, stand outside of or in the way of each other—but such a point of contact is important as it is needed both for conversation and for knowing. This seems further underlined in the final sentence of the above quote from *Postscript*, where Climacus characterises the I-I as an "unfruitful embrace". By simply embracing itself, Climacus suggests that the Fichtean ego lacks any encounter with a true second and is therefore to be deemed unfruitful. Just as putting one's arms around oneself does not seem to truly encapsulate the meaning of an embrace, Climacus insinuates that knowing purely as one without a second becomes an infertile form of knowing. Consequently, Climacus connects the idea of the second-person with the idea of an aporetic obstacle. Just like dialogical aporia, the second-person perspective is presented as an obstruction, an impasse, to the first person, for the knowing "I" can never truly or fully access this second perspective. Otherwise, we would simply be agreeing with Martensen or Fichte and reducing one to another. The second-person perspective rather confronts us with the awareness of an Other. And yet, like aporia, this perspective supports rather than destroys the epistemic process.

In his contemplation of Buber's dialogical thought, Mendes-Flohr depicts this other "as an autonomous subject irreducible to categorical perceptions and conceptions" and thus in some sense "beyond translation" (Mendes-Flohr 2007, p. 119). This, on the one side, echoes the aporia, the second-person, with which Climacus confronts the I. This aporetic encounter leads to a productive opportunity for continued engagement and further change. Mendes-Flohr puts it well elsewhere when he states that authentic dialogue not only makes a demand on us to be "open to the possibility of being challenged" by the voice of the other. However, it also "entails a risk, the 'danger', that by truly listening to the other ... one might, indeed, be changed, transformed cognitively and existentially" (Mendes-Flohr 2015, p. 3). This confrontation and true engagement with the Other then might be perceived as an obstacle—a situation where one stands in the way of an Other—yet it also offers the opportunity for real change and transformation beyond the merely epistemological. Nevertheless, the other is also always someone whom we must listen to and confirm existentially as a fellow human being (Mendes-Flohr 2007, p. 119).

However, while Mendes-Flohr's reflections highlight how the second-person is experienced aporetically, the comparison to Climacus seems to end there. It is unclear whether Climacus can be said to existentially confirm the You he addresses. He admits that the existing person, whose actual existence is exactly what makes "communication so difficult dialectically" (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 277). Nevertheless, Climacus also jokes that an imagined reader is the most pleasant of all readers precisely because he or she under-

stands the author as the author wishes to be understood (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, p. 621). Kierkegaard too affirms the inaccessibility and aporia of the second-person. However, Kierkegaard's treatment of the You, particularly in *Works of Love*, differs tonally from that of Climacus. Kierkegaard calls Climacus out for being heedless (Kierkegaard 2008, p. 264), and counters this with care and concern for the second-person.

In an oft-quoted passage from *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard explains that the highest one human being can do for another is to help them stand alone: "To stand by oneself—through another's help!" (Kierkegaard [1847] 1995, p. 275; See also Lysemose 2021). Here, an important distinction is drawn between the Socratic dialogue and the loving dialogue (see Grøn 2016, p. 600). Kierkegaard maintains with Socrates the need for distance between the I and You. He also points out that the Socratic rogue and the one who loves agree on what it means to help another human being. However, the dash [*Tankestreg*]⁸—the space—between the You and I appears differently to these figures. The "noble, yet roguish" Socratic ironist maieutically helps the other and so the dash comes to symbolise the rogue's smile expressing the beneficence of the act, but also "the self-consciousness of ingenuity" (Kierkegaard [1847] 1995, p. 277; See also Gibbs 2004). The one who loves works without reward towards his or her own self-annihilation to help the other. For this figure, the dash has a different meaning. Rather than a smile, it is "like a heavy breath, almost like a deep sigh" (Kierkegaard [1847] 1995, p. 277) as concern for the other enters into this space between the I and You.⁹ This is not to suggest that the figures of the rogue and the one who loves correspond to Climacus and Kierkegaard.¹⁰ However, the different meanings and orientations they ascribe to the dash between the I and You can to an extent illustrate the tonal differences of Kierkegaard's and Climacus's treatment of the second-person. For Climacus it is mainly the You who is envisioned aporetically, whereas for Kierkegaard this aporia also applies to the I, who must become nothing in the loving dialogue, precisely to care for and foreground the You. Opposing this self-annihilating concern for the Other, Climacus allows a humorous carelessness or ruthlessness [*hensynsløshed*], which Kierkegaard professes himself to be neither "capable of nor wish[es] for" (Kierkegaard 2008, p. 264).

We might still ask whether Kierkegaard, like Climacus, ultimately fails to make space for the second-person by neglecting the listening side of dialogue? Claudia Welz underlines that conversation depends on communicating but also on "listen[ing] silently—yet what Kierkegaard loses from sight in his analysis is exactly this aspect of receptivity" (Welz 2017, pp. 372–73). Arne Grøn too diagnoses that "the listening silence strangely falls out in Kierkegaard" (Grøn 1997, p. 248). However, it seems Kierkegaard himself indicates a recognition of this failure. Kierkegaard's texts may praise dialogue; reflect on dialogue, and draw on dialogical features. Yet, in having to resort to literary and textual devices such as dashes, pseudonyms, wordplay, written speeches addressed to his "listener," and more, Kierkegaard's works seem to inherently confess to their obvious restraints in enacting "dialogue" in writing. For a thinker who spent so much of his time walking and conversing with (and presumably listening to) the people of Copenhagen, the awareness of such textual limits must have been particularly acute.

Even if Kierkegaard does not develop what Grøn terms "the communicative significance of receptivity" (Grøn 1997, p. 249),¹¹ Kierkegaard does stress the epistemic significance of being receptive to the second-person. What the second-person perspective offers is an awareness of what it means to be in contact—in relation—with something external to us. This is exactly how Kierkegaard characterises the process of gaining knowledge. On this view, then, the second-person perspective that Kierkegaard consistently underlines can be considered a *second-order* perspective—a perspective on a perspective. This awareness of perspectivalness is itself important. Michael Pauen has pointed out that such a perspective "involves the epistemic subject's ... awareness of the relevant situational difference between the epistemic subject and the other being" (Pauen 2012, pp. 33, 42).¹² Attending to Kierkegaard's treatment of the second-person perspective in dialogue with Climacus's reflections grants two different kinds of insights into his contact

theory of knowledge. It serves an aporetic and space-making function as awareness of a perspective other than our own both frustrates and is inaccessible to us.

For Kierkegaard, the second-person perspective challenges epistemic complacency or over-confidence and encourages humility, even self-annihilation. And it does so not just by challenging or even opposing one's view, but also by emphasising the way in which a widening aporetic dialogical space does not collapse or get rid of the differences between the I and You. Secondly, this perspective encourages reflection on things external to the "I", and how and what it means for the "I" to relate to such things, underlining Kierkegaard's particular vision of knowledge as something external to us that we come into contact with. Relationality is not sameness or unity; it is not about the stable concluded relation, but it is about the constant and ongoing relating. In Christoph Schwöbel's words relationality's very structure "always presents being as being in becoming" (Schwöbel 2017, p. 337). This is how Kierkegaard seems to picture the epistemic process. Kierkegaard thus uses features of dialogue to present us with a more dynamic understanding of not just receptivity, but relationality as well both as part of the epistemic process and as an object or even ideal of knowledge.

Thereby, Kierkegaard's reflections on dialogue, like his reflections on knowing, emphasise receptivity. However, these reflections also underline the interconnection of receptivity and relationality: to receive, there must also be relation, and awareness of the second-person perspective is one way to orient us towards thinking about the meaning and shape such relation might take. Kierkegaardian dialogue—between his texts and their readers as well as between himself and his pseudonyms—serves a dual purpose. To problematise the idea of a unified, completed, and monological theory of knowledge. Additionally, to conceptualise a kind of knowing that makes aporetic space for the second-person as a contributor to knowledge that does not collapse the complexities and ambiguities of existence and the relationships between us. If we are seeking finalised, conclusive, unified knowledge, we will fail to appreciate the processual, relational, and continual nature of knowing. Kierkegaard's authorship shows us that reflecting on dialogue and the second-person perspective can shed light on these aspects of knowledge.

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Notes

¹ Joakim Garff even argues that we should view Kierkegaard's journals as a part of his pseudonymous authorship, casting doubt on whether it ever makes sense to speak of "Kierkegaard" himself as the author (see Garff 2006). Adding to the complexities of accounting for Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship, George Pattison has recently made the intriguing suggestion that scholarship has largely misconceived Kierkegaard's pseudonyms. He argues that only Constantin Constantius and Johannes Climacus get close to meeting the conditions Kierkegaard articulates for pseudonymity, whereas his later works point to a collapse of the coherence of the pseudonymous project (Pattison 2019).

² We for example find references to *Either-Or* as well as to Johannes de Silentio and *Fear and Trembling* and Constantin Constantius and *Repetition in Concept of Anxiety* (See Kierkegaard [1844] 1980, pp. 17–19). In *Postscript*, Climacus devotes an entire section to discussing other pseudonymous works, including *Either-Or*; *Fear and Trembling*; *Repetition*; *Concept of Anxiety*; *Stages on Life's Way*, *Prefaces* but also to Kierkegaard himself and his upbuilding discourses (Kierkegaard [1846] 1992, pp. 251–300). Here, Climacus remarks that the pseudonymous authors clearly have some relation to his own thesis that subjectivity is truth. If for no other reason than that they all refrain from lecturing or writing in a didactic manner. Together, all these works can be taken to be in a

- kind of Socratic dialogue. As Arne Grøn points out, Socrates is present from the beginning to the end of Kierkegaard's authorship (Grøn 2016, p. 574). In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard offers reflections on this, articulating the highest possible human-to-human relation in light of maieutic Socratic dialogue (Kierkegaard [1847] 1995, pp. 276–77; See also Rumble 1995, p. 309). As Grøn puts it, "Kierkegaard remains Socratic in his counterblow to the Socratic" (Grøn 2016, p. 598).
- 3 Kierkegaard famously describes himself as higher than Climacus, but lower than Anti-Climacus—at least in reference to religiosity (See Kierkegaard 2013, pp. 127, 133).
- 4 Helle Møller Jensen and George Pattison have adapted a number of Kierkegaard's upbuilding discourses into actual dialogue-form, imagining what the reader might say and respond to Kierkegaard, and vice versa (Jensen and Pattison 2012). Perhaps we can see this enterprise as an response to those who outrightly reject Kierkegaard's texts as truly dialogical.
- 5 The exclamation "aha" seems particularly apt in connection with breathing as an epistemic metaphor as it involves the double exhaling of breath.
- 6 Martin Buber's criticism of Kierkegaard particularly revolves around this figure of "The Single One" (see his 1936 essay "The Question to the Single One". An interesting discussion of Buber's view through an imagined response from the perspective of this single individual is offered by Gillian Rose in her "Søren Kierkegaard to Martin Buber—Reply from the 'Single One'" (Rose [1993] 2017).
- 7 In fact, Christian de Quincey even suggests that not just relationality, but love itself can be considered the ideal of knowing which takes the second-person perspective into account (de Quincey 2000, p. 153). While it is outside the scope of this paper, a further line of inquiry into Kierkegaardian dialogue and epistemology would be to consider love as a possible point of connection. Claudia Welz has importantly pointed to a "dialogue of love" in Kierkegaard's thought (Welz 2016, p. 65; see also Kierkegaard [1847] 1995, p. 315). This could prove a fruitful avenue for reflecting on the way in which Kierkegaard epistemically could be said to prioritise *philo-sophia*—the love of knowing—over absolute knowing.
- 8 As has been pointed out, Kierkegaard's treatment of Fichte seems to be largely mediated through his reading of Hegel's discussion of Fichte in his History of Philosophy lectures (see for example Kangas 2007). Fichte does include a second-person perspective which serves a central purpose in his ethics (See Fichte [1797] 2000; See also Darwell 2013).
- 9 See Gibbs (2004) for an extended discussion of the meaning of the dash or thought-line between the first and second-persons. See also Kasper Lysemose's article in this Special Issue, for a deeper engagement with the religious significance of the dash or space between the You and I. Lysemose discusses Kierkegaard's idea of God as the middle term between two human beings in *Works of Love*, and helpfully explores how the way in which we relate to this space is not just personal and dialogical, but also impersonal and monological (Lysemose 2021).
- 10 While there are certainly points of convergence between these figures and Climacus and Kierkegaard, this parallel should not be overstressed. Just as Kierkegaard places himself lower than Anti-Climacus, it is unlikely that he sees himself as the one who loves. Furthermore, with Socrates as representing the highest relation between human beings, perhaps Climacus (and Kierkegaard) both fall short of this figure of the noble rogue.
- 11 Grøn's evaluation of Kierkegaard in regard to the dialogical nature of his communication is somewhat open-ended. He for example adds that although Kierkegaard does not develop this communicative or dialogical aspect of receptivity, he does have the prerequisites to do so (Grøn 1997, p. 249).
- 12 In fact, we might extend this distinction to Kierkegaard's mode of communication itself, which too can be considered second-order—as a perspective on dialogue—rather than itself being dialogue.

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