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Moral Perfectionism and Exemplars

...[O]nly slovenly souls abandon what once made an absolute impression upon them. (CUP 590)

In the previous chapter, it was argued that the objections Climacus (often satirically) raises, ostensibly against the ‘Hegelian’ or ‘speculative philosopher’, also rebound upon ourselves. I claimed that Climacus’s satire is in the service of creating the kind of ‘higher self’ at which his project of ‘becoming subjective’ aims, by warning us against ourselves falling prey to the same confusions and evasions as the ‘Hegelian’. In this sense, the latter figure functions as a kind of negative exemplar. In this chapter, we shall investigate further the idea of exemplars, and their relationship to ‘higher selves’.

It is well known that Kierkegaard often deals with abstract concepts by presenting the reader with concrete exemplars of human lives (for example, A and Judge Vilhelm in *Either/Or*, Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, Socrates and Christ in a variety of texts). I want to consider in some detail what is at stake in doing this, by asking how exemplars function. In attempting to sketch an answer to this I discuss, in the first section of this chapter, Stanley Cavell’s view of ‘moral perfectionism’, aiming to show its connections with R. G. Collingwood’s account of the importance of expressive activity in countering what he calls the ‘corruption of consciousness’: the failure to experience one’s experience as one’s own. In the second section, I introduce a related discussion by James Conant, which develops Cavell’s position in relation to Nietzsche’s essay ‘Schopenhauer as Educator’. This is important in so far as it offers an answer to key questions concerning what it is that an exemplar discloses, and what an appropriate relationship to an exemplar might be. I then go on to suggest, in the third section,
that a consideration of moral perfectionism and expressive activity sheds important light on Climacus’s infamous discussion of ‘becoming subjective’ in the Postscript. This raises two important questions. First, is something akin to the Cavell–Conant line at work in Kierkegaard’s characters – both pseudonymous authors and those appearing as characters in various texts? (Though, if so, the situation will clearly be more complex, in so far as certain Kierkegaardian characters might be – from any given perspective – ‘lower’, rather than ‘higher’, than any given reader.) And, if so, what does this imply for what we are to make of Johannes Climacus?

Cavell and Collingwood: moral perfectionism, self-understanding and the ‘corruption of consciousness’

Let us start with Stanley Cavell. Cavell’s interest in what he calls ‘moral perfectionism’ is intimately related to his advocacy of the philosophical significance of Thoreau and Emerson, whom he presents as archetypal moral perfectionists. Yet a whole host of other figures count, for Cavell, as moral perfectionists: a list restricted to philosophers alone would include such diverse figures as Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. There is no extended discussion in Cavell of Kierkegaard as moral perfectionist, but he lists explicitly the Postscript (along with Repetition) as a perfectionist text.1 What, then, is moral perfectionism?

As a preliminary, we should note Cavell’s stress on the idea that moral perfectionism is not a competing theory of the moral life. Rather, it emphasises ‘a dimension or tradition of the moral life’ which any theory of it may wish to accommodate; a dimension that concerns ‘what used to be called the state of one’s soul’ (CHU 2), in the sense that it calls for ‘the further or higher self of each, each consecrating himself/herself to self-transformation’ (CHU 53). Thus far, we can see at least a prima facie case for viewing Kierkegaard as part of such a tradition. There can be little doubt that ‘the state of one’s soul’ and ‘self-transformation’ are important themes for Kierkegaard. Moreover, Thoreau’s position is set against a background view of his age as being spiritually destitute (‘The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation’ (I, 9)),2 a view that echoes many of Kierkegaard’s remarks on ‘the present age’. Similarly, Thoreau’s description of ‘this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial nineteenth century’3 could have been written by Climacus himself.4