
Distinguishing Models of Kierkegaard's Indirect Communication: Toward a Clearer View of a Multivalent Discourse Technique

Kevin Storer

Theological Studies, Evangelical Theological Seminary, Hosur, India

Email address:

kevin.storer@acaindia.org

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Abstract: Kierkegaard is well-known for his development of an authorial strategy called indirect communication, a maieutic communicative approach intended to enable the subjectivity of the reader in ethical and religious upbuilding. Unfortunately, Kierkegaard at times makes statements that seem contradictory in his own discussions about indirect discourse. This article will suggest that the reason for these seemingly contradictory claims is that Kierkegaard actually develops four distinct models of indirect communication at different places in his authorship. These four models will be called: 1) the "Preservation of Subjectivity" model (which claims that indirect communication is necessary to respect the free subjectivity of the reader); 2) the "Incognito God" model (which claims that God can only communicate to human beings indirectly, and therefore that Christ's own self-communication was necessarily indirect); 3) the "Deception into Truth" model (which claims that deception is necessary to unlearn an error); and 4) the "Inadequacy of Language" model (which claims that existence cannot be thought or communicated directly). This paper will argue that while no individual model is entirely successful on its own logic in establishing the necessity of indirect communication, the models do show the usefulness of indirect communication when they are employed in an *ad hoc* manner. Consequently, as communicators identify the unique strategic aims of each model, they will be better equipped both to read Kierkegaard's authorship more coherently and to employ indirect communication more effectively for the benefit of their own learners.

Keywords: Communication, Subjectivity, Religious Language, Paradox, Freewill

1. Introduction

Kierkegaard's project of indirect communication is one of the most original features of his work, and it has provided a lasting contribution to literary and philosophical discussions. Unfortunately, Kierkegaard's own discussions of direct and indirect communication at times appear to provide conflicting assertions and mutually exclusive conclusions. For example, Kierkegaard suggests that all truth about existence requires *indirect communication* so that the freedom and subjectivity of the individual is respected (consider Climacus's claim that "direct communication is a fraud toward God") [1], yet he also suggests that sermons (which clearly communicate truth about existence) must be preached using *direct communication* because the truth of Christianity comes from outside and must be declared with authority [2]. Or consider Kierkegaard's

claim that religious communication (communication which presents the paradoxical truth of Christian revelation) is always *direct communication* [3], alongside his claim that Christ's self-revelation must be a form of *indirect communication* because the content of religious truth is paradoxical [4]. Naturally, such apparent contradictions in Kierkegaard's thought have led to difficulties in interpretation.

The goal of this paper is to show that one reason Kierkegaard's various discussions on indirect communication at times lead to seemingly contradictory conclusions is that Kierkegaard has really developed four different models of indirect communication, and the arguments he uses to establish one model are not always entirely compatible with arguments he uses to establish other models. The paper will show that Kierkegaard develops the following four models of

indirect communication: 1) the “Preservation of Subjectivity” model which suggests that indirect communication is necessary to respect the free subjectivity of the reader; 2) the “Incognito God” model which suggests that God can only communicate to human beings indirectly, and therefore that Christ’s own self-communication was necessarily indirect; 3) the “Deception into Truth” model which suggests that deception is necessary to unlearn an error, and 4) the “Inadequacy of Language” model which suggests that existence cannot be thought or communicated directly. The paper will show that each of these models can be found in the *Postscript* (although most are developed more fully elsewhere), that each model is defended by an “indispensability thesis” (a statement by Kierkegaard that indirect communication is *indispensable* for the reasons given in that model) [5], and yet that each model stands in considerable tension with the other models as it is developed on its own logic. While it is quite doubtful that Kierkegaard ever thought that he had developed four different models, the paper suggests that distinguishing between these models will enable greater conceptual clarity about what Kierkegaard’s indirect communication is intended to accomplish, and will enable readers to reconcile seemingly conflicting claims in Kierkegaard’s authorship.

In order to visualize the relationship between these four models of indirect communication, we might think of them as together forming a Venn diagram. While considerable overlap exists among the models, the logical center of each model does not overlap with the others, as the argument of each model is not fully compatible with the other three models when each is pressed to its own logical conclusions. Consequently, by concentrating only on the areas of overlap on the Venn diagram (by treating indirect communication as a unified strategy), it is difficult to see how each model develops in a distinctive manner, and Kierkegaard’s arguments often appear in contradiction to each other. On the other hand, the more each model is developed on its own logic, the less compatible each model becomes with the other models. By focusing on the distinctiveness of each model rather than on the areas of overlap between them, it will be possible to understand better Kierkegaard’s own understanding of indirect communication.

2. The “Preservation of Subjectivity” Model

This model suggests that because the application of truth about existence to one’s own life requires the full freedom of the learner, indirect communication must be used to create sufficient distance between the teacher and the learner so that the learner can appropriate truth freely. In the *Postscript* and in the unpublished “Lectures on Communication,” Climacus and Kierkegaard (respectively) argue that “essential truth” must be communicated indirectly in order to make room for free appropriation by the learner [1]. Climacus states that “the secret of communication specifically hinges on setting the

other free, and for that very reason he must not communicate himself directly; indeed, it is even irreligious to do so” [1]. This distancing between the author and reader becomes a significant theme in the *Postscript*, since, as Climacus puts it, “there is no direct relation between the teacher and the learner, because inwardness is truth, and inwardness in the two is precisely the path away from each other” [1]. Jolita Pons summarizes Kierkegaard’s position in this model by claiming that with regard to “subjective truth [truth about existence], only indirect communication is possible, because only indirect communication respects the individual sufficiently to let him reach the truth himself,” and because “the only way of comprehension is the way of appropriation [i.e. “to make truth your own (proper to you), to internalize it, to convert it into a reality within yourself”] [6]. Clearly, on this model, distancing is seen as the precondition for freedom.

This argument for the “Preservation of Subjectivity” operates with *indispensability theses* presented by both Climacus and Kierkegaard. Climacus claims that because “[e]verything subjective...evades the direct form of expression”, therefore “every direct communication with regard to truth as inwardness is a misunderstanding” [1]. Later Kierkegaard claims in *Works of Love* that because “in the world of spirit” the “greatest beneficence” one can do for another is “in love to help someone...become himself, free, independent...,” therefore, “If the beneficence is not done in this way [i.e. indirectly], it is very far from being the greatest beneficence” [7]. In both these statements, all communication of truth about inwardness must be indirect. Because indirect communication is indispensable to the preservation of freedom in the other, it would seem that any direct communication of the truth of existence would encroach upon the freedom of the learner, thereby hindering the truth from becoming present in the lived existence of the learner.

The difficulty in this model arises with regard to the communication of religious truth, since for Kierkegaard believes that “in the Christian understanding of things, the truth does not reside in the subject (as Socrates understood things) but is a revelation that must be proclaimed” [8]. The truth of Christianity must be proclaimed *directly*, since it is not innate knowledge which can be drawn out through the freedom of the distanced subject. In his unpublished “Lectures on Communication” (henceforth “Lectures”), Kierkegaard further clarifies that,

The difference between upbringing in the ethical and upbringing in the ethical-religious is simply this—that the ethical is the universally human itself, but religious (Christian) upbringing must first of all communicate a knowledge. Ethically man as such knows about the ethical, but man as such does not know about the religious in the Christian sense. Here there must be the communication of a little knowledge first of all—but then the same relationship as in the ethical enters in. The instruction, the communication, must not be as of a knowledge, but upbringing, practicing, art-instruction [3].

Here we notice several things. First, religious truth fits rather awkwardly into this model: “a little knowledge first of

all” must be stated, only to give way to the real task of indirect communication. In the *Postscript*, Climacus admits that in the communication of Christianity “direct communication” will “always have its validity temporarily” because revelation comes from outside, yet Climacus emphasizes that such transfer of knowledge is only a brief, introductory moment, since, “As soon as truth...can be assumed to be known by everyone, appropriation and inwardness must be worked for...only in an indirect form” [1]. While direct communication must present knowledge, Kierkegaard insists that religious communication remains *essentially* indirect communication, since existence communication is less a *telling what* than a *showing how*. Second, direct communication and authority are closely linked on this model. Kierkegaard states that in the communication of religious truth, the “communicator has authority with respect to the communication of knowledge, which here comes first” [3]. Now because both are viewed as heteronomous impositions upon ethical development, Kierkegaard cautiously suggests that in religious communication knowledge and authority are needed only “a little” and only “first of all” to get the process started so that “the same relationship as in the ethical” can begin. On this model, the communication of religious truth must be “direct” communication (because it comes from outside), yet because indirect communication is seen as a necessary technique to safeguard the *freedom* of the learner, direct communication will always be viewed as a potential imposition on freedom until it is turned into indirect communication to restore the freedom of the recipient.

Implications: On this model, the direct communication of revealed religious truth must always be viewed as a *preliminary* content of knowledge which must be rendered indirect in order to restore maximum freedom to the learner. Based on this logic, we might make two observations. First, when Kierkegaard attempts to develop the logical conclusions of this model, it becomes clear that direct communication must occur *alongside* indirect communication in religious communication. To achieve the fullest truth about existence (which, for Kierkegaard, exists in the religious sphere), it is impossible that all communication remain indirect. Second, the claim that religious truth (revelation) is a heteronomous imposition on the individual sits uncomfortably with Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the necessity of receiving revelation to develop true inwardness. Jolita Pons concludes, somewhat awkwardly, that with regard to Scripture which holds “inherent authority,” Kierkegaard’s “task” must be “to suspend the authority” of Scripture in order to preserve “dialogue” [6]. In essence, Pons is saying that Kierkegaard must necessarily *re-present* Scripture as indirect discourse in order to salvage the freedom of the reader. While Pons’s claim may correctly describe some of Kierkegaard’s communication in his early pseudonymous works, we will see that many of Kierkegaard’s own claims about Scripture stand in significant tension with Pons’s conclusion, and other models of indirect communication may be needed to account adequately for the place of religious communication in the journey toward inwardness. Since the communication of religious truth will

be the primary focus of Kierkegaard’s authorship, and since on this model direct communication will always present a potentially heteronomous imposition on the subjectivity of the listener, the model creates a continual difficulty for Kierkegaard’s authorship. This difficulty is eased as Kierkegaard develops other models of indirect communication.

3. The Incognito God Model

Naturally flowing out of the argument for preservation of subjectivity, Climacus develops in the *Postscript* a further reason for the necessity of indirect communication in religious language: God must communicate indirectly to human beings in order to preserve their subjectivity and freewill, and therefore God’s self-revelation must always take an indirect form. Climacus argues that a “spiritual relationship with God in truth, that is, inwardness, is first conditioned by the actual breakthrough of inward deepening that corresponds to the divine cunning that God has nothing remarkable, nothing at all remarkable, about him” so that “one does not suspect that he is there, although his invisibility is in turn his omnipresence” [1]. For freewill to operate, cognitive distance between creature and Creator must be preserved, and therefore God’s self-revelation must always take a veiled form.

In the *Postscript* the argument appears primarily as an extension of the “Preservation of Subjectivity” model, showing that God must relate indirectly to human beings to respect their freedom. Yet as Kierkegaard thinks through the implications of the Incarnation (God’s decisive self-communication to human beings), his argument about the necessary indirectness of God’s self-communication begins to take a more distinct form. In *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, develops the argument that Christ (the fullness of God’s self-communication) must have himself been a form of indirect communication. Anti-Climacus states the relationship between direct and indirect communication in Christ in the following way:

If someone says directly: I am God; the Father and I are one, this is direct communication. But if the person who says it, the communicator, is this individual human being, an individual human being just like all others, then this communication is not quite entirely direct, because it is not entirely direct that an individual human being should be God—whereas what he says is entirely direct. Because of the communicator the communication contains a contradiction, it becomes an indirect communication; it confronts you with a choice: whether you will believe him or not [9].

Here the relationship between direct and indirect communication is explained in a new way: Jesus speaks directly (“I am God”), yet this communication is rendered indirect because he is a man. On this account, the revelation of God in Christ had to occur *incognito* (i.e. indirect communication), since the alternative (i.e. direct communication) would be that Christ effectively *causes*

himself to be recognized as God by everyone. Direct communication in that sense would eliminate what Kierkegaard calls appropriation knowledge, in which persons are able to recognize truth as they develop a love for truth (i.e. persons come to recognize Jesus as God as they develop love for God). Thus Anti-Climacus calls Jesus a “sign of contradiction,” which must necessarily operate as a form of indirect communication [9]. This form of the incognito God argument comes with an *indispensability thesis*, as Anti-Climacus claims, “And now when the teacher [Christ], who is inseparable from and more essential than the teaching, is a paradox, then all direct communication is impossible” [9]. God’s self-revelation in Christ simply cannot be direct communication, or human freedom would vanish.

At this point, the logic of the model requires us to make an important interpretive decision about how far the model should extend. On the one hand, perhaps Kierkegaard intends the model to be limited exclusively to the case of Christ (since Christ, being God, must uniquely veil his direct communication so as to preserve human freedom). Or, on the other hand, perhaps Kierkegaard intends the model also to be extended to apostolic speech (since apostles are commissioned to communicate the paradoxical content of revelation without any possibility for external verification of their message). And, if this model extends to apostolic speech, perhaps Kierkegaard intends it to extend to any proclamation of the paradoxical truth of Christianity (such as sermons), so that any direct communication of paradoxical truth must be considered to be indirect communication because there is no external verification possible for the one proclaiming this truth. Evidence exists to support all three positions.

At times Kierkegaard seems to indicate that this argument applies *only to Christ*, since Christ alone was the incognito God whose direct and undisguised revelation of his status as God would destroy human freedom. Kierkegaard emphasizes that, “Only the God-Man is sheer indirect communication from first to last” [4]. Kierkegaard even notes that, “As the God-man he is qualitatively different from any man, and therefore he must deny direct communication; he must *require* faith and require that he become the *object of faith*” [9]. On such an account, only the *self-revelation* of the Absolute Paradox *must* be indirect communication, whereas every other individual’s communication (even apostolic communication), *might* be considered direct communication.

However, Kierkegaard at other times seems to indicate that this kind of indirectness also attends apostolic proclamation of paradoxical revelation. In *The Book on Adler*, Kierkegaard seems to indicate that any claim to revelation (i.e. that given by an apostle) would inherently be classified as a form of indirect communication precisely *because the claim cannot be validated through a particular criterion of reason*. The “authority” of the apostle is that he is “absolutely teleologically positioned paradoxically,” and this means that the “apostle has no other evidence than his own statement,” and therefore the apostle’s “speech...will be brief: ‘I am called by God...and I make you eternally responsible’” [3]. Kierkegaard insists that, “The doctrine communicated to him

is not a task...to cogitate about,” and the apostle has only “to proclaim the doctrine and to use authority” [3]. Here it seems that direct communication is imperative (perhaps the distinctive mark of the apostle), but, just as in the case of Christ, the message is rendered indirect by its paradoxical nature. This view is defended by George Pattison, who writes,

[A] postolic communication operates simultaneously at two different levels. At one level it involves the direct assertion of a fact—‘My message comes from God’—but, at the same time, this assertion itself is curiously indirect in the sense that the apostle is unable to offer any supporting evidence...to prove that what he says is true.... There is nothing in the message to *compel* the response of faith—and the response of—offense is equally plausible, for the truth-value of the message cannot be secured within any system of human understanding or calculation [10].

On Pattison’s account, then, both Christ and apostles necessarily communicate indirectly because they testify to a subject matter which cannot be verified through human criteria. The implications are important, because if indirectness is found in the very paradoxical nature of the claim, then we might say that any discussion of paradoxical religion (Christianity) must occur as indirect communication precisely because the content of Christian faith is not verifiable by external criteria.

Perhaps, then, the indirectness of paradox ought to extend to all persons who proclaim Christian truth. This view is taken by Michael Strawser, who claims that, “when Anti-Climacus repeatedly declares ‘that direct communication is an impossibility for the God-human,’ the corollary—that direct communication is impossible for the followers of the God-human—must follow if the contradiction, the paradox, and the offense are to be maintained” [11]. On this account, all “believers” must speak directly, yet the paradoxical subject-matter of the Incarnation (and all claims to revelation) would render communication indirect because no criteria of verification could be applied to it. In his later writings we see that Kierkegaard is himself trying to decide just how far this model extends, as he seeks the category of “bearing witness” as being between direct and indirect communication that will apply to believers. Kierkegaard notes that, “‘Bearing witness’ is the form of communication that most truly finds the midpoint between direct and indirect communication. Bearing witness is direct communication, but it does not make those among whom one lives into *the sole authority*. For when the witness’s ‘*communication*’ turns to those now living, the ‘*witness*’ turns to God and takes him as the sole authority” [8]. Here Kierkegaard is trying to distinguish between apostolic proclamation of paradoxical truth and the Christian witness to paradoxical truth, yet both appear to have the quality of direct/indirect, as neither can be verified in any way other than by the faithfulness of the believer’s life.

Implications: Whether Kierkegaard intends this model to apply only to Christ, to extend to apostolic speech, or even to extend to all proclamation of paradoxical Christian truth, we can see that this model has become significantly different from the “Preservation of Subjectivity” model. Direct

communication is still a requirement for religious language, yet the absence of possibility for external verification renders that direct communication *automatically* indirect. Direct communication, therefore, simply *becomes* indirect communication because of the intellectual “contradiction” that its paradoxical (Christological) content presents. While on the “Preservation of Subjectivity” model all religious communication is *direct* because it speaks of paradox, on the “Incognito God” model all religious communication is *indirect* for the same reason.

Here we can make several observations. First, what was called “direct” in the first model, and therefore was seen as an imposition on the hearer’s freedom, is called “indirect” in this model, since its verification can only occur as an act of the hearer’s freedom. This gives Kierkegaard a way to show more clearly how religious communication can function in the development of inwardness. Second, Kierkegaard still struggles with this model’s logical coherence. On the one hand, while Anti-Climacus declares boldly that “Christ cannot give a direct communication” [9], Kierkegaard recognizes that even if Christ is *essentially* indirect communication, Christ cannot be *only* indirect communication, or no one could believe in him. Kierkegaard notes, “Christ’s whole life here on earth would indeed have become a game if he had been so incognito that he had gone through life totally unnoticed—and yet he truly was incognito” [13]. The incognito God cannot be *too* incognito, or revelation would not occur. Kierkegaard eventually seems to settle on the resurrection as the moment of Christ’s direct communication as he writes, “Christ thus remained an indirect communication to the end; for...the fact that he was incognito in the form of a servant makes all his direct communication nonetheless indirect. But then his life does have a phase that is otherwise denied; the resurrection, the ascension—this is really the first direct communication” [4]. However they are balanced in Christ’s self-revelation, we must conclude that direct and indirect communication must exist together if indirect communication is to work at all on this model.

4. The Argument from Deception into Truth

Also flowing out of the “Preservation of Subjectivity” argument, Kierkegaard develops the argument that error is *most effectively* uncovered through the use of deception (indirect discourse), which opens the individual to personal reception of the truth (which will subsequently be delivered by direct discourse). Already in the *Postscript*, the argument from deception begins to move toward its specific form. Climacus argues that, “Because everyone knows the Christian truth, it has gradually become such a triviality that a primitive impression of it is acquired only with difficulty. When this is the case, the art of being able to *communicate* eventually becomes the art of being able to *take away* or to trick something away from someone” [1]. In Christendom (where persons believe themselves to be Christians even though they

are not), the communicator of truth must “bring [the reader] to a halt...in order to take something away from him” [1]. Here deception is a literary approach which intentionally leads readers toward a flawed premise, in order to help them come to understand that their own assumptions are flawed. This model is intensified in *The Point of View*, as Kierkegaard claims that the goal of indirect communication is “to *deceive into the truth*” [13]. Kierkegaard clarifies that his readers should not “be deceived by the word *deception*. One can deceive a person...into what is true. Yes, in only this way can a deluded person actually be brought into what is true—by deceiving him” [13]. Kierkegaard further explains that deception “means that one does not begin *directly* with what one wishes to communicate but begins by taking the other’s delusion at face value” [13]. This form of indirect communication must be performed because in Christendom, persons live under “an enormous underlying confusion...a dreadful illusion” and therefore must be deceived out of their error in order to be guided toward the truth [13]. The argument from deception operates with an *indispensability thesis* as Kierkegaard claims that “an illusion can never be removed directly...it must be done indirectly” [13].

Implications: First, as the argument develops, it becomes clear that Kierkegaard is providing a tactical approach to correct the specific ethical problem of *willful ignorance* [5]. The problem which must be overcome is not really a problem of knowledge as much as it is an unwillingness to appropriate knowledge, and deception is used to make people aware of *willful* misunderstanding. Consequently, while deception may be considered *useful* in many cases, it cannot be considered absolutely *necessary* for the preservation of subjectivity [14]. In fact, Kierkegaard seems to admit that deception should be used only a last resort, suggesting that “there is a great difference” between “one who is ignorant...like the empty vessel that must be filled or like the blank sheet of paper that must be written upon,” and “one who is under a delusion that must first be taken away” [13]. We might presume, based on this logic, that direct communication would be quite sufficient in situations in which the recipient is able to receive truth directly [5]. The “Deception into Truth” model, then, should be seen as one of a number of *ad hoc* communicative methods which could be selected to prepare readers to receive direct communication of religious truth.

Second, it is important to notice that the deception must inevitably fail, since an effective deception (one which portrays error as legitimate), would be a further contribution to the error. This form of indirect communication must be viewed always as “a kind of relative deception that aims not at success (in a straightforward sense), but rather at its own downfall” [6]. It would be much worse to present a deception and allow it to succeed than not to present a deception at all, since this would confirm the erring individual in the supposed truth of his/her error. Here it becomes quite clear that “deception” does not stand alone, but “must sooner or later end in direct communication” [13].

Third, we can see how different this model has become from the previous two models. In the “Preservation of

Subjectivity” model, direct communication of Christian truth must be given as preliminary knowledge, yet must then give way to indirect communication (communication of skill) in order to allow for subjectivity. However, in the “Deception into Truth” model, indirect communication is a deception which must fail and then give way to direct communication. In the “Incognito God” model, direct communication, quite simply, *is* or *becomes* indirect communication by virtue of its paradoxical content. However, in the “Deception into Truth” model, indirect communication (the deception) and direct communication (the truth content) are kept as distinct as possible; the first enabling the effective use of the second. We now have two different arguments [models] which, while arising from the “Preservation of Subjectivity” model, now are clearly differentiated from it.

5. The Argument from Inadequacy of Language

A final argument for indirect communication is also related closely to the “Preservation of Subjectivity” model, yet it also should be considered as a separate argument because its focus is primarily on the *inadequacy of language* to describe existence rather than on *freedom for appropriation* by the subject. The key feature of this model is the claim that because existence occurs outside the bounds of thought, only indirect communication is capable of expressing the process of becoming. As Jolita Pons puts it, “[T] here is always a residue of the unexpressed, the gap between language and reality,” and therefore direct communication would create a “distort [ion] of the content of truth” [6]. Climacus argues that indirect communication seeks to illumine this discontinuity or “negative” aspect of existence so that the existing individual remains conscious of it, since the only “deliverance” from the negative is to “become continually aware of it” [1]. The goal of indirect communication, on this account, is to “keep...open the wound of negativity” to prevent the “positive” person from receiving “cozy joy” by being “deceived” by the over-simplification of life, and any “genuine subjective existing thinker” must form a “communication [which] corresponds to this” [1].

The argument from inadequacy of language originates from Climacus’s desire to show that abstract Hegelian thought is not capable of providing adequate description for inward “becoming.” Climacus’s philosophical complaint is that Hegel’s system is unable to overcome the limits on human reason that Kant has shown [1]. Where Kant believed that morality and religion transcend the limits of reason, Climacus thinks that Hegel has incorporated religious faith into his system by reducing it to reason, and that Hegel has not attempted to incorporate morality into his system at all [15]. Climacus believes that “pure thinking” never “explain [s] its relation to the ethical and to ethically existing individuality,” since it cannot approach this aspect of existence [1]. Climacus sides with the Kantian limits of reason over Hegel’s “method” by stating that, “The only *an sich* [thing in itself] that cannot

be thought is existing, with which thinking has nothing at all to do” [1]. Instead, Climacus explains that an existing person “thinks momentarily; he thinks before and he thinks afterward. His thinking cannot attain absolute continuity.” and this break in continuity shows that “existence” is “something that cannot be thought” [1]. Because truth about existence eludes reflection, and because an individual can never reach a sufficient “conclusion” [*Slutning*] (through an act of the mind), the individual must make a “resolution” [*Beslutning*] (through an act of the will) [16]. Because it is “certainty” that acts as a “deception,” indirect communication aims at re-introducing the uncertainty of existence, since this absence of certainty creates and stirs human pathos to lead to fuller existence [1]. As Peter Fenves puts it, the real “‘illusion’ of communication” occurs “whenever communication sets out to deny its ‘negativity,’” thereby rendering such communication into no more than “positive and objective ‘prattle’” [17]. This argument from inadequacy of language operates with an *indispensability thesis*, as Climacus argues, “In connection with negative thoughts...an illusive form is the only adequate one, because direct communication implies the dependability of continuity, whereas the illusiveness of existence, when I grasp it, isolates me. Whoever is aware of this...he will avoid direct utterance” [1]. Consequently, one who speaks “in direct utterance...says something untrue, because in direct utterance the illusiveness is left out, and consequently the form of communication interferes” [1].

Implications: On this model, indirect communication is the refusal to engage in the over-simplification of existence, but instead to articulate truth using a language more cautious, and therefore more fitted to the task of existence. As Mark C. Taylor puts it, “Kierkegaard explores the possibility that the unthinkable can be *written*...Having recognized the impossibility of writing *about* the impossibility of thought, Kierkegaard develops a style of indirect communication, which has as its aim the communication of the incommunicable” [18]. Here we might make several conclusions. First, on this model (rather ironically), indirect communication begins to look very much like a chastened form of direct communication, since its goal is to provide ever clearer descriptions about existence which yet recognize their own limitations and inadequacies. As Stephen Shakespeare puts it, although “[t] he tendency to systematize, to explain...threatens to rob theology of all that is decisively Christian,” nonetheless a “writer must risk the trespass of breaking silence, to enter into the opacity of the linguistic world” [19]. Put another way, the sheer ‘fact’ that we cannot think through existence does not mean that we should not try; it simply means we must work not to say too much, and too confidently, as did Hegel. Consequently, as Kierkegaard seeks to develop this chastened form of language, he will provide a much more *adequate* description of existence than Hegel had been able to provide.

Second, It is significant that the “Inadequacy of Language” model becomes less central in Kierkegaard’s later writings, as the other three models of indirect communication take greater importance. This decline in use seems to occur because this

model functions more of a philosophical response to Hegel which moves to the background as Kierkegaard presses further into the relationship between indirect communication and Christian faith. We might say that the “inadequacy of language” model provides the basic epistemological presupposition (“existence can’t be thought”) which leads to the development of the other three models. Nonetheless, the other models, as they are developed, become clearly different: rather than focusing on the relative inadequacy and indeterminacy of language, the “Preservation of Subjectivity” model focuses on the distancing of teacher from learner so that the individual becomes free in making ethical decisions; the “Incognito God” model focuses on instances where direct speech about revealed religious truth is rendered indirect by the lack of a criterion for verification; and the “Deception into Truth” model focuses on instances where indirect communication can be used to prepare the reader for the jolt of direct communication. Consequently, while the “Inadequacy of Language” model provides the necessary conceptual grounding for the other models, it proves to be less useful as a communicative strategy in Kierkegaard’s later rhetorical strategies.

6. Conclusion

Having observed the conceptual differences between each of the four models, we can see that while they all share a family resemblance as “indirect communication,” they each develop differently on their own logic. If we again imagine these models on a Venn diagram, we see that the conceptual center of each model does not overlap with (and at times stands in significant tension with) the conceptual centers of the other models. Each model advances from its own (very legitimate) philosophical inference: Kierkegaard seems quite correct that 1) subjectivity is best preserved by a maieutic presentation of truth about existence (the “Preservation of Subjectivity” model); 2) God can only reveal Godself to human beings in an indirect (i. e. mediated) way (the “Incognito God” model); 3) deception is *often* a successful way to lead an individual to recognize error and become open to the truth (the “Deception into Truth” model); and 4) language about existence is never complete enough to articulate the depth of existence (the “Inadequacy of Language” model). Yet when all four models are together classified under the heading of “indirect communication,” and when each of Kierkegaard’s indispensability theses are taken at face value (i. e. that indirect communication *in this specific way* is the *only* way that truth about existence can be communicated), the very term “indirect communication” is stretched almost to the point of confusion. The more we focus on the inherent logic of each individual model, the less conceptual overlap we find it sharing with the others. By distinguishing between these models we are helped in understanding Kierkegaard’s indirect communication in several ways.

First, we can see that all of the models depend upon a *combination* of direct and indirect communication, at least with regard to religious discourse [20]. It seems clear that in

any writing which aims at maieutic guidance toward the practice of human existence, direct and indirect communication must occur together, and should be juxtaposed strategically by the author to achieve maximum effectiveness for his/her audience. In the “Preservation of Subjectivity” model Kierkegaard admits that religious language requires direct communication (even if just “a little” and “only at first”); in the “Incognito God” model Kierkegaard admits that even Christ must have used (or himself *was*) direct communication (even if only in his resurrection) or he would never have been recognized; in the “Deception into Truth” model Kierkegaard depends on direct communication to be given after the deception of indirect communication leads the reader to recognize his/her error; and the “Inadequacy of Language” model seems to depend upon the a stable use of direct communication in its attempt to problematize language. Recognizing that direct and indirect communication must be used together helps us to see that Kierkegaard intends his indirect communication to serve as a series of *ad hoc* communicative strategies, employed in various situations insofar as they are deemed useful for leading that specific audience into deeper truth about existence. The recognition that Kierkegaard has developed different (and perhaps noncompatible) models does not call into question the legitimacy of indirect communication; rather, it helps communicators specify more clearly what they intend indirect communication to accomplish. Communicators may ask in each situation whether the goal of communication is 1) to free an individual to think for him/herself?; 2) to embrace a paradoxical claim of faith without external verification?; 3) to come to recognize an error and thereby become open to receiving correction?; or 4) to think more carefully about the complexities of existence? It is here that distinguishing Kierkegaard’s four models prove extremely useful, as they allow his readers to sort out with greater clarity the ways in which communicators may utilize a combination of direct and indirect statements to achieve maieutic persuasion toward the truth.

Second, distinguishing between these models allows us to reconcile a number of seemingly incompatible claims made by Kierkegaard about direct and indirect communication in his own writings. In his journals Kierkegaard claims, “All of my edifying discourses are of course in the form of direct communication” [8]. This seems “direct” enough, yet Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus had already claimed in the *Postscript* that Kierkegaard’s *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses* were intended as indirect communication, functioning “indirectly a polemic against speculative thought” [1]. Why this difference?

While it is possible that Climacus is himself leading us into a deception, I think the simplest answer is that Kierkegaard and Climacus are classifying indirect communication through different models. Kierkegaard, in his journals, classifies his discourses as direct communication because he is thinking in terms of the “Deception into Truth” model. On this account, the pseudonymous works provide indirect communication, and the discourses provide direct communication: the

discourses are “direct” because they provide answers to the questions posed by the pseudonymous works [1]. The pseudonymous writings are intended to establish rapport with esthetic readers and draw them in so that the religious can be proclaimed *directly* at the appropriate time. On Kierkegaard's account, the discourses are all direct communication precisely because they do not attempt to trick anyone: they quite overtly advertise their religious content from the beginning, and they are “written” (signed) by Kierkegaard rather than one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms [21].

Yet Climacus, in the *Postscript*, classifies these same discourses as indirect communication because is thinking in terms of the “Subjectivity into Truth” model. We remember from the “Lectures on Communication” that a sharp divide is made between “ethical” and “Christian” truth, with the latter needing to be stated directly since it comes from revelation [22]. For Climacus, these discourses are intended to “leave” an individual “wanting something that he consequently must seek elsewhere,” and this creation of desire must be done indirectly in order “to compel the stubborn person to disarm, to mitigate, to elucidate, in short, to cross over into the upbuilding” [1]. Consequently, Climacus is saying that the maieutic style of these discourse is intended to draw readers toward an openness to reconsider Christian truth (which must then be given *directly*).

Other seeming contradictions in Kierkegaard's discussions of indirect communication can be sorted through in this way. For example, to return to the question posed in the introduction: *Should the proclamation of Christian truth (truth about Christ, or truth of revelation, i. e. paradoxical truth) be classified as direct or indirect communication?* Kierkegaard says both. Yet by distinguishing Kierkegaard's models, we can now see that Christian truth is *direct* on the “Preservation of Subjectivity” model since Christian truth comes from outside and so must be declared to someone, and on the “Deception into Truth” model since it is the truth which is pronounced directly after the reader has been “deceived” into recognizing his/her error. Yet Christian truth is *indirect* on the “Incognito God” model since Christ's proclamation “I am God” is veiled by the contradiction of his being a man, and since claims of revelation are not verifiable by any criterion of evidence. It is interesting to see that some of the most basic issues of Kierkegaard's authorship, such as the nature of Christian truth and the classification of his own writings (the very issues which lead him to speculate about indirect communication in the first place), will be categorized differently depending on the model from which we evaluate them. And this shows once again the importance of distinguishing these models in order to more coherently read Kierkegaard's writings.

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