TRANSFORMATION AND ANNIHILATION: EMMANUEL FALQUE AND SØREN KIERKEGAARD ON THE DIALECTIC OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

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Abstract

In his recent work *Hors phénomène*, Emmanuel Falque identifies the Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard as both a progenitor and exemplifier of his account of the way philosophy becomes more rigorously itself through an encounter with theology. However, this article challenges the affinity Falque claims to share with Kierkegaard. It argues instead that there is a fundamental philosophical discrepancy underlying their respective treatments of the encounter between philosophy and theology: the nature of the dialectic and their respective positions in it. By exploring Falque’s and Kierkegaard’s diverging uses of the metaphor of ‘crossing the Rubicon’, the article demonstrates that where Kierkegaard stresses the military sense of the metaphor, depicting the relationship between the two disciplines as that between two armies seeking the annihilation of the other, Falque precisely abstracts from this military sense, letting the expression instead become a metaphor for a mutually beneficial transformative encounter. However, when considered more profoundly, we argue that this annihilation is itself a Christian experience out of which Falque’s transformation is born. Ultimately, we conclude that Falque and Kierkegaard are both trying to conceive of the relationship between philosophy and theology according to a somewhat similar structure, namely, the quantitative intensification of one discipline by way of its qualitative differentiation from the other.

Finally I went to the craftsmen, for I was conscious of knowing practically nothing, and I knew that I would find that they had knowledge of many fine things. In this I was not mistaken; they knew things I did not know, and to that extent they were wiser than I. But, men of Athens, the good craftsmen seemed to me to have the same fault as the poets: each of them, because of his success at his craft, thought himself wise in other most important pursuits, and this error of theirs overshadowed the
wisdom they had, so I asked myself, on behalf of the oracle, whether I should prefer
to be as I am, with neither their wisdom nor their ignorance, or to have both. The
answer I gave myself and the oracle was that it was to my advantage to be as I am.

— Plato, Apology, 22d-e.

Introduction

In his Hors phénomène, Emmanuel Falque identifies Søren Kierkegaard as an author who
anticipated his own method. Indeed, referring to the metaphor he coined for his ac-
count of how philosophy can be transformed by theology, Falque immediately detects
a natural affinity between his approach and Kierkegaard’s: ‘in being one of the first to
“cross the Rubicon”,’ he writes, ‘Kierkegaard takes stock—perhaps for the first time in
the history of thought—of the “backlash” of theology against philosophy.’¹ This back-
lash, on Falque’s account, denotes how philosophy can be more rigorously itself once
confronted with theology.² As such, it expresses his so-called principle of proportionality
according to which he understands the relationship between philosophy and theology:
the more we theologise, the better we philosophise.³

Falque thus ascribes his own position vis-à-vis Kierkegaard and bemoans ‘a kind of
“secularisation” of Kierkegaard’s thought’⁴ executed by philosophers like Martin
Heidegger (in Germany) and Henri Maldiney (in France). It is not so much that such a
reading is incorrect, he suggests, but rather that it is incomplete and therefore distorts
Kierkegaard’s actual position.⁵ Nevertheless, Falque is not advocating turning him into
an exclusively theological author, just like, against the splendid isolation of philosophy,
his principle of proportionality is not meant to produce a confessional philosophy. On
the contrary, he is simply trying to draw attention to the fact that the philosopher,
whilst remaining a philosopher, can nevertheless still find something of value in theol-
ogy: ‘The philosopher does not have the goal to supplant a theological approach but to
recognize and accept that they will find nourishment in it for their own reflection on the
human being as such.’⁶ It is the investigation of the human being as such that the phi-
losopher is interested in, according to Falque, and on his account Kierkegaard therefore
illustrates perfectly how theology can serve that distinctly philosophical investigation:

² Philosophy and theology are nebulous terms and the question of their exact relation to one another may
nowadays seem trivial to some. We do not deny this. However, for the purposes of evaluating Falque’s read-
ing of Kierkegaard—which is what concerns us here—we will understand these terms, as well as the question
of their relationship, in the same way as does Falque, namely in a disciplinary sense and therefore as the ques-
tion of the distinction and mutual dependence of two scientific endeavours. How Falque understands the
discipline of philosophy as distinct from that of theology, and vice versa, is discussed in significant detail in
the first section of the present article.
³ Emmanuel Falque, Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology, trans. Reuben Shank
⁴ Falque, Hors phénomène, 369; Crossing the Rubicon, 109. For the interpretations Falque is referring to, see
predominantly: Henri Maldiney, L’art, l’éclair de l’être (Paris: Cerf, 2012); Martin Heidegger, Being and Time,
is also evident from the fact that The Sickness unto Death sometimes simply becomes a Treatise on Despair, as in
⁵ Falque, Hors phénomène, 369-70.
⁶ Falque, Crossing the Rubicon, 105-6 (translation modified).

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The “secularisation of Kierkegaard” does not move out of the religious, but only subverts it or rather extends its field of action... It is thus by respecting, and maintaining, the religiosity of Kierkegaard, and therefore his theological perspective (the Resurrection), that we come to understand his true philosophical significance: despair as such.7

On Falque’s reading of The Sickness unto Death, the fact that Kierkegaard also discusses despair theologically (i.e., the human condition in relation to God understood as the problem of sin and tied to that of the Resurrection) makes for a better philosophical account of despair as such (i.e., the human condition detached from God and without reference to the reconciliation achieved by the Resurrection). In this way, Kierkegaard would be one of the first to ‘cross the Rubicon’, according to Falque.

Yet, is Falque right to ascribe his own understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology to Kierkegaard? Is Falque’s perceived affinity with the Dane really there? This article argues that this is not in fact the case, or, at least, that it is an oversimplification of the dialectic that Kierkegaard envisions. We will show that, although Kierkegaard and Falque both seek to articulate how a confrontation with Christian theology can lead to ‘better’ philosophising, there is a fundamental philosophical discrepancy underlying their respective treatments of philosophy and theology’s encounter: the nature of the dialectic and their respective positions in it. For Falque, philosophy not only crosses over onto theology’s banks but makes it back again, in a journey that would leave philosophy transformed. By contrast, for Kierkegaard, philosophy fails to make it across the river and is instead annihilated in this confrontation. In what follows, we therefore explore the demonstrability of Falque’s claim that Kierkegaard exemplifies his use of the Rubicon-metaphor by considering the distinct ways in which they both take recourse to it when confronting the question of philosophy’s relation to Christian theology. Kierkegaard stresses the military sense of the metaphor, depicting the relationship between the two disciplines as that between two armies seeking the annihilation of the other; Falque precisely abstracts from this military sense, letting the expression instead become a metaphor for a friendly and mutually beneficial transformative encounter.8 Falque therefore appears to be wrong in ascribing his paradigm of transformation to a Kierkegaardian understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology. For in this, there is no backlash of one discipline on the other but only the annihilation of one by the other. However, when considered more profoundly, we will argue that this annihilation is itself a Christian experience out of which Falque’s transformation is born from the perspective of Christian faith.

Emmanuel Falque: The Transformation of Philosophy by Theology

What, then, is Falque’s understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology? What does he mean when, in his book on this subject entitled Crossing the

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7 Falque, Hors phénomène, 373.
8 In this regard, two things must be noted—precisely because Falque fails to do so: 1) there is always a challenge in ascribing any particular position to ‘Kierkegaard’, given the pseudonymous nature of his authorship; 2) Falque’s emphasis on the Resurrection is curious given the very limited role this notion plays in Kierkegaard’s thought. We therefore have reason to be cautious when reading Kierkegaard and assuming that the words ‘theology’ and ‘philosophy’ mean the same thing as they do in Falque.
Rubicon, he writes that ‘the more we theologise, the better we philosophise’? The book’s titular metaphor refers, of course, to Julius Caesar’s crossing of the river Rubicon into the Roman Republic and thereby instigating a civil war. He is said to have described the gravity of the situation by uttering the phrase *alea iacta est*, the die is cast: from here on out, there is no going back. When Falque speaks of crossing the Rubicon, this should therefore be understood as an act of transgression after which nothing can be the same again. When the philosopher ventures beyond the boundaries of their own field and onto the terrain of theology, they are engaged in ‘a great crossing’ with ‘high stakes’ for they will not be the same once they return but will instead have been transformed by their encounter with theology.

However, since Falque by no means conceives of the relationship between philosophy and theology in terms of the mutual hostilities of war, the choice of such a profoundly military metaphor might be confusing. It should be seen in the particular context of French intellectual life and Falque’s own position as a philosopher working at France’s foremost Catholic university. Though theology as an academic discipline was driven out of the French university system long ago, the final decades of the twentieth century nevertheless saw what Dominique Janicaud described pejoratively as a ‘theological turn’ of French philosophy. Janicaud observed that a number of contemporary French phenomenologists—including Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry, and Jean-Luc Marion (Falque’s doctoral supervisor)—had started engaging distinctly theological themes (e.g., revelation and incarnation), and claimed to be doing so in a perfectly philosophical way. This, Janicaud insisted, betrayed the strict methodological atheism required by the phenomenological method and turned philosophy into theology. Though the so-called ‘theological turn’ has received much attention elsewhere, this movement has been virtually ignored by the militantly secularist French philosophical establishment due to its theological orientation. In France, the relationship between philosophy and theology is by default understood in terms of hostility and rivalry. Consequently, Falque warns us, ‘one does not cross the Rubicon without running a risk.’

Conceiving of the relationship between the two disciplines in terms of the hostility of war is nevertheless exactly what Falque wants to avoid. Furthermore, he finds it no more desirable to collapse what remain distinct disciplines into one another. Indeed, ‘I am first and foremost a philosopher,’ he insists: ‘Rather than writing theology, I desire to write philosophy, but I will philosophize that much better if I agree also to do theology.’ For Falque, it is by venturing onto the terrain of theology that he, whilst remaining a philosopher, develops a better sense of philosophy’s distinct rigour once he returns to it: ‘Crossing the Rubicon

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9 Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 16.
10 It has indeed caused much confusion amongst scholars so far; see for example the many different and mutually contradictory interpretations of Falque’s account of the relationship between philosophy and theology contained in *Transforming the Theological Turn: Phenomenology with Emmanuel Falque*, eds. Martin Koci and Jason Alvis (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).
12 Falque himself largely shares Janicaud’s diagnosis and has produced a similar though less polemical critique of contemporary French phenomenology in his *The Loving Struggle: Phenomenological and Theological Debates*, trans. Bradley B. Onishi and Lucas McCracken (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).
13 Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 18.
14 Ibid., 25, 150.
implies crossing the river and rejoining its banks in order to better sketch its boundaries.\textsuperscript{15} Philosophy is transformed in its encounter with theology, he suggests, not in the sense that it becomes more theological (i.e., confessional), but that it becomes better philosophy (i.e., more rigorously philosophical). When Falque therefore advocates crossing the boundary between philosophy and theology, he by no means wishes to confuse these distinct disciplines: in the act of crossing a border, that border is maintained and affirmed; ‘one enters the other’s field in order to respect the boundaries.’\textsuperscript{16}

In this sense, Falque’s use of the military metaphor of ‘crossing the Rubicon’ is at times a bit forced, as it is not the battle he is interested in but rather the peace that it establishes:

only a well-conducted battle can lead sometimes to true peace. The crossing of the Rubicon follows the pattern of every intelligently led conquest. An adversary is not vanquished by crushing him. In seeking vengeance, he will not abandon his opposition. Instead, we study the adversary and, by dint of combat, come to know him. As with armies, exchanges (blows, words) take place. Our shared community is only observed after the fact; paradoxically, the battle becomes the place of a real alterity. In adventuring into others’ camps, we also discover our own country and finally cease to believe and think that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.\textsuperscript{17}

Instead of using a military metaphor, the philosopher venturing beyond their own borders can then perhaps more easily be understood as a form of tourism. A tourist certainly crosses recognized borders, but always does so with the intention of returning home shortly afterwards. Moreover, a tourist clearly stands out as such and is rarely confused with a local. This is not to disparage tourism, for it is often a transformative experience, not because the tourist stays long enough so as to become a local, but precisely because the experience of having been abroad has transformed the way they perceive their homeland upon their return. The British tourist, for example, does not become French simply by taking the Eurostar to Paris. However, having enjoyed the gastronomic delights of France whilst away from home, they may discover that they have lost (or possibly reignited) their appetite for British food upon their return. At the same time, simply setting foot in France—sadly—in no way gives the tourist mastery of French cuisine so that they might recreate it at home. Hence, the transformation that takes place is not of the Brit into a Frenchman; instead, the Brit is changed insofar as they come to see or conceive of Britain and their own Britishness in a new way, insofar as the experience of having been abroad brings into focus certain things about their homeland that were unclear or obscured beforehand. Of course, they may have brought some things back with them from France, but souvenirs have a tendency to look out of place in familiar settings.

We can think of the philosopher’s venturing onto the terrain of theology in a similar way. Unmistakably not themselves native to theology, and indeed probably unaware of much of this tribe’s sophistication, the philosopher courageous enough

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
to listen will nevertheless have their philosophical practice altered and perhaps enriched by this experience—as long as they can refrain from bringing with them ready-made theological truths that turn out to be garish once placed in a philosophical landscape, and as long as they are aware that at no point do they themselves turn into a theologian or master the distinct rigour of theology. As Falque explains, philosophy’s distinctive rigour can only be fully appreciated by exploring another discipline:

No one is “more fully a philosopher” because they stay on the threshold of the disciplines or carefully separate the one from the other in their own corpus—quite to the contrary. Questioning disciplinary boundaries also requires that we accept all subject matters. Crossing the Rubicon is actually to carry out the crossing; inspecting the banks of the river is helpful but serves only to distinguish them better.18

In short, by outlining the potential of philosophy’s transformative encounter with theology, Falque demonstrates how philosophy can make fruitful use of theology without itself becoming confessional, just like it can draw on psychoanalysis without itself becoming therapy, or on literature without itself becoming poetry: ‘Rather than forbidding the philosopher from “theologising,”’ we should, conversely, encourage them to practice everything. …The universal scope of philosophy cannot end on the threshold of theology.’19 It is precisely in this sense that we should understand Falque’s ‘principle of proportionality,’ for it is only in this sense that it is true that ‘the more we theologise, the better we philosophise.’20

What does such fruitful use consist in? The transformative impact on philosophy, the impression its encounter with theology leaves behind, Falque calls the ‘backlash of philosophy on theology.’21 This backlash is then experienced as the way in which the distinction of philosophy stands out all the more clearly in light of its encounter with theology (and vice versa). For Falque, the defining characteristic of philosophy is that it is concerned with finitude as such, without immediately understanding it as derived from an originary infinitude; or the human being as such (l’homme tout court), without understanding it as always already in relation to God: ‘In my eyes, the philosopher is not simply the one who uses philosophical tools …but the one who respects and begins with the human being as such—that is, from the horizon of the pure and simple existence of the human.’22 On his account, the Resurrection is then the event in which a transformation of that finitude is accomplished and through which the human being can no longer be understood as such (tut court), but only in relation to God: ‘the human being is converted into God in the Resurrection as humanity is incorporated into the divine.’23 Thus, at this point, the perspective is no longer philosophical, but theological: consequently, for Falque, the defining characteristic of theology is that the human condition is no longer understood on its own terms, but rather in relation to God. In this sense, Falque suggests, philosophy and theology remain distinct disciplines. Their respective approaches to the human

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18 Ibid., 23-24 (translation modified).
19 Ibid., 138 (translation modified).
20 Ibid., 147-49 (translation modified).
21 Ibid., 149-50 (translation modified).
22 Ibid., 122-23 (translation modified).
23 Ibid., 131.
being clearly differ, for one speaks about its finitude before the transformative event of the Resurrection, whilst the other speaks of it after that event has already taken place. The philosopher, Falque insists, can only ever consider the human being as such, namely as what Jean-Luc Nancy has called an ‘absolute finitude’ insofar as it is ‘absolutely detached from all infinite’ or its ‘finitude is not privation.’ As Falque puts this: ‘To start with philosophy and to remain a philosopher means, therefore, first of all to uncover the philosopher’s horizon’, namely “the human being as such” and “finitude as such,” albeit encountered and transformed by God in the figure of the God-man.

What makes Falque’s account of the relationship between philosophy and theology innovative is that rather than declaring impossible such a consideration of finitude purely on its own terms, theology can actually help philosophy accomplish its own tasks more rigorously by providing philosophy with a point of reference and contrast (i.e., the more we theologise, the better we philosophise). Theology does not present a rival account of finitude, but simply an account of its transformation by the eventual encounter with the God who came to take on that same finitude. In other words, by exploring the theologian’s account of finitude after the Resurrection, the philosopher will be better able to describe that finitude before the Resurrection (and vice versa). As a result, the two distinct disciplines can be of service to one another:

Nevertheless, the God-man [of the Incarnation] carries out the ‘tilling’ or overlaying of the human and the divine. Thus, philosophy and theology come to ‘overlay’ or ‘cover’ each other in Christology. At the same time and in the same operation, the human being is converted into God in the Resurrection as humanity is incorporated into the divine, and thus philosophy into trinitarian theology. …Therefore, it is not simply a question of the assumption or integration of philosophy into theology but more importantly a matter of the ‘transformation’ or ‘metamorphosis’ of philosophy by theology.

In short, the distinction of philosophy’s conception of finitude stands out in light of its transformation by theology, or the human being’s encounter with God (Resurrection). Meanwhile, the validity of this philosophical conception of finitude, even from the perspective of theology, is reaffirmed by the fact that theology first needs to appropriate it in order to transform it, or—to put it in other terms—God needs to assume the human condition (Incarnation).

In summary, with his principle of proportionality Falque wants to demonstrate the fecundity of theology for philosophy (i.e., the transformation of philosophy by

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24 Ibid., 124-30.
27 Falque, Crossing the Rubicon, 127 (translation modified).
29 Falque, Crossing the Rubicon, 131.
theology) by way of the contrast that one discipline provides the other (i.e., the backlash of theology on philosophy). Just like we only truly appreciate the pleasures of home when being denied them abroad, so too the philosopher only really understands the distinction of their own approach once they have ventured into the foreign land of theology. Falque therefore aims to provide a framework that facilitates a crossing of the border between both disciplines without ever confusing their distinct rigours. His understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology is therefore a disciplinary one. Despite the rich potential for cross-border traffic or interdisciplinary investigation, philosophy and theology remain distinct scientific disciplines—each with their own approach and rigour—a distinction that is institutionalised in the contemporary university and should be maintained.

_Søren Kierkegaard: The Annihilation of Philosophy by Theology_

Falque holds up Kierkegaard not merely as a pioneer but a “figurehead” of the act of crossing the Rubicon, the primordial metaphor for the transformative encounter between philosophy and theology. Yet, he immediately concedes that this claim requires further study before it can be ‘fully demonstrated.’\(^30\) One wonders, however, as to the possibility (and plausibility) of such a full demonstration. For when it comes to the relationship between philosophy and theology, Kierkegaard is a difficult and perplexing case. Jean-Yves Lacoste, for example, declares that there ‘is no definition in Kierkegaard of what constitutes either theology or philosophy.’\(^31\) Scholarship has long been marked by controversies about how to characterise not just Kierkegaard’s view of these disciplines, but also Kierkegaard’s own place within them—leading Paul Ricoeur to suggest that he may simply stand outside them as an ‘exception’.\(^32\) With Falque’s help, however, we are able to indicate at least one possible way in which Kierkegaard might have understood the relationship at issue: for, apparently unbeknownst to Falque, Kierkegaard uses the same metaphor in discussing the relationship between philosophy and theology whilst nevertheless understanding it differently—crossing the Rubicon.

\(^30\) See Falque, _Hors phénomène_, 370n, 116.


The Militarism of the Young Kierkegaard

At the end of that oft-cited journal entry from 1835, recording his youthful longing to discover ‘the truth that is truth for me … the idea for which I am willing to live and die,’ 33 Kierkegaard announces: ‘So let the die be cast—I am crossing the Rubicon! This road no doubt leads me into battle, but I will not give up.’ 34 The battle Kierkegaard is referring to, however, is unlike Falque’s intended campaign of leading philosophy through theology’s domain and back. In much of this entry, Kierkegaard critically assesses both the philosophy and theology he was witnessing first-hand whilst studying at the University of Copenhagen. He repeatedly laments the existential irrelevance of the kind of objective, scientific knowledge he perceived scholarly philosophy and theology to be in pursuit of. Instead, Kierkegaard seeks a different ideal of philosophising and theologising. Remarkably that people have forgotten that ‘the genuine philosopher is in the highest degree subjective,’ 35 this new philosophical ideal is immediately inflected theologically as the young Kierkegaard identifies the ‘inward action of the human’ with the ‘God-side of man,’ 36 and equates the ‘true knowing’ rooted in Socratic ‘not-knowing’ with God’s creation ex nihilo. 37 Kierkegaard’s crossing of the Rubicon thus signals the beginning of his personal spiritual or existential task and its demand for a different mode of thought—yet, one which already emanates from a distinctly Christian exigency.

The subsequent journal entry outlines the battle Kierkegaard is entering into. In what Jon Stewart calls a ‘kind of battle slogan,’ 38 Kierkegaard declares that ‘Philosophy and Christianity can never be united.’ 39 He goes on to highlight a ‘yawning chasm’ between Christianity and philosophy, which consists in the fact that Christianity underlines the ‘defectiveness of human cognition due to sin,’ and the human need for redemption, which can only be met by God. 40 However, philosophy, which Kierkegaard elsewhere, like Falque, defines as ‘the purely human view of the world,’ 41 attempts to account for the relationship between God and the world ‘qua human beings,’ and will therefore inevitably fail. As such, philosophy is painfully confronted with its own limits in its encounter with the theological sphere: ‘it would negate philosophy as an accounting-within-itself of the relation between God and the world, were it to conclude that it was unable to explain that relation, and then philosophy would at the peak of its perfection be accomplice to its own downfall, that is, as the evidence of its inability to live up to its own definition.’ 42 To put it somewhat more bluntly, for Kierkegaard philosophy and theology as disciplines are separated by their starting point. Theology must simply begin with the yawning chasm between the human and divine—the finite and the infinite, which is among other things expressed in

34 Ibid., 25.
36 Ibid., 21.
37 Ibid., 22.
39 Kierkegaard, Journals and Notebooks 1, 25.
40 Ibid., 26.
41 Ibid., 208.
42 Ibid., 26.
doctrines such as sin, the paradox of the incarnation and divine forgiveness.\footnote{See also Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous character Vigilius Haufniensis’ discussion of this in The Concept of Anxiety. Here he explains that dogmatics or theology must be designed in such a way that it starts with the presupposition of sin or else it can never begin. He warns that there must be clear boundaries between the various scientific disciplines as every science must ‘vigorously lay hold of its own beginning and not live in complicated relations with other sciences. If dogmatics begins by wanting to explain sinfulness … no dogmatics will come out of it, but the entire existence of dogmatics will become problematic and vague.’ The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 63.} Conversely, philosophy by its very definition as an accounting-within-itself cannot accept beginning from presuppositions that it cannot explain. Unlike for Falque, the young Kierkegaard’s crossing of the Rubicon therefore entails, not philosophy’s transformation for the better in its encounter with theology, but rather its collapse into nothingness.

Kierkegaard’s stark—one might even say ‘dialectical’—separation of the philosophical and theological spheres is first of all a response to his own experience as a student in the University of Copenhagen’s Theological Faculty. By the 1830s, Danish academic theology remained entrenched in the rationalism of the previous century.\footnote{See for example, Kierkegaard, Journals and Notebooks, Volume 1: Journals EE- KK, eds. Bruce H. Kirmmse et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 163 (translation modified as the English translation does not include ‘philosophers’). For some treatments of Kierkegaard’s critical stance towards academic theology, see: David R. Law ‘Kierkegaard and the History of Theology’, in The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard, eds. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 166-88; Elizabeth Li, ‘Kierkegaard’s Existential Conception of the Relationship between Philosophy and Christianity’, Open Theology, no. 1 (2019): 136-46.} As philosophy was moving on, theology came to be perceived as increasingly out of touch with the questions and ideas that exercised its students. A sense arose that, to rescue theology from the crisis caused by its dependence on an out-dated philosophy, it had to be resuscitated by a new philosophy. Hegelian speculative philosophy soon became viewed as this foundation for a better theology: promising clear and objective knowledge of not just human existence and the world, but of God’s own being and unity with humanity, this philosophy would bridge the divide between philosophy and theology, thereby renewing theology for the time’s spiritual and existential demands.\footnote{Kierkegaard, Journals and Notebooks, Volume 8: Journals NB21-NB25, eds. Bruce H. Kirmmse et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 115.}

Where Falque is reacting to an entrenched hostility between these disciplines, Kierkegaard’s militarism is a response to theology’s detrimental overfriendliness with the rational scientist, a physician, etc.—it was to his credit if he were also a doctor of theology. Alas, now people have nearly managed to reverse this completely.\footnote{Kierkegaard, Journals and Notebooks, Volume 1: Journals EE- KK, eds. Bruce H. Kirmmse et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 17; 29, and Hans Lassen Martensen, ‘The Present Religious Crisis,’ trans. Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook (2017), 423-38. See also, Svend Erik Stybe, ‘Filosofi’, in Det filosofiske Fakultet, bind 10: Det filosofiske Fakultet, ed. Povl Johannes Jensen (Copenhagen: Gad, 1980), 1-134, 28; Carl Henrik Koch, Dansk oplysningsfilosofi 1700-1800 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2003).}
with and willing submission to—even subsumption into—the reigning philosophies of the day. Consequently, Falque and Kierkegaard come to the same metaphor from the perspective of dramatically opposed institutional contexts. Where the militant secularism of the French university drives the former to attempt to soothe the hostilities between philosophy and theology, the latter operates within the context of a calm conviviality between the two and is therefore responding to an altogether different imperative. Indeed, Kierkegaard’s tone could not be more different from Falque’s. Taking up the military language Falque precisely wants to avoid, Kierkegaard complains that theology has been ‘dethroned’ because of its toothless subservience:

It’s pitiful looking at orthodox theology these days; it takes hold of the weapons (and thinks it is a weapon of defense instead of attack) as if someone took a cane by the tip and held it out to the attacker—so that he could be attacked with it. Somewhere Jean Paul proposes giving the town militia clubs with which to defend themselves (because they do not know how to use guns, and the enemy can simply take them away); the same with theology in our day; its only virtuosity is in suffering defeat.

Whereas the military metaphor thus serves to calm hostilities for Falque, it serves precisely to reawaken them for Kierkegaard, who insists on a more militant and better-armed theology, ready to attack by virtue of Christianity’s offensiveness to scholarly and philosophical understanding: ‘What is needed is a new theol.[ogical] military science—new moves—with help of the double-dialectic.’

With these sharpened weapons, Kierkegaard takes up the task of separating the disciplines according to a Rubicon whose waters are too dangerous ever to be crossed: ‘there is nothing to be done here other than to split things apart, to take the single individual aside, take him existentially under the ideal. This is my work.’ For in its eagerness to be like philosophy, theology has abandoned what sets it apart: by offering “straightforward categories” and rational explanations, it converts the divine into human concepts (Kant) or claims that its own perspective is the divine perspective (Hegel). Take ‘the concept “God-Man”,’ Kierkegaard suggests, ‘this, too, scholarship presents in straightforward categories: If one is to be the God-Man, then this must also be absolutely certain in straightforward fashion, says scholarship.’ Yet, this is a most naïve approach according to him: ‘No, thank you, says God, you have in fact forgotten what it is to believe—there must not indeed be any straightforward recognizability, but the possibility of offense. Scholarship really ought to understand at least this much.’

Kierkegaard’s issue, then, is that theology has subordinated itself to philosophy to the detriment, not just of scholarly theology, which must start from presuppositions that philosophy cannot accept, but of faith itself. This subordination, he suggests, results from the neglect of a real distinction between scientific or scholarly disciplines and the

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50 Ibid.
51 Kierkegaard, Journals and Notebooks 8, 46.
52 Ibid.
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religion-existential sphere. Like Falque, Kierkegaard thus seeks to uphold and sustain this difference, yet he does so in a fundamentally different way. Whereas for Falque the crossing of boundaries leads to a fortuitous transformation, only disaster awaits there for Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard perceives his task not as pacifying warring disciplines, but rather as taking on the battle of clarifying and separating the sphere of scholarly inquiry from that of theology (i.e., Christian faith). Upon declaring that ‘Philosophy and Christianity can never be united,’ Kierkegaard recalls the scholastic principle of double truth according to which ‘something can be true in philosophy that is false in theology.’

Though deemed heretical in the thirteenth century, Kierkegaard repeatedly affirms this principle, which suggests that philosophy and theology are not only oriented towards distinct spheres, but more radically that their respective ‘truths’ are directly contradictory. He illustrates his argument using the example of the Bible, which is treated differently depending on whether it is viewed as a historical human manuscript or as the word of God:

Luther makes this distinction: You have the right to argue about the Bible, but you don’t have the right to argue about the Holy Scriptures. This is the old view that one thing can be true in philosophy that isn’t true in theology. The Bible and the Holy Scriptures are the same book of course, but the perspective from which it’s viewed makes all the difference. Here, as everywhere, one must be careful with the qualitative leap and make sure there’s no direct transition (e.g., from reading and studying the Bible as an ordinary human book—to accepting it as God’s word, as Holy Scripture), but everywhere a μεταβασις εις αλλο γενος [transformation to another kind], a leap, whereby I break the chain of reasoning and define a qualitative newness, but a αλλο γενος [another kind].

Kierkegaard thus offers us a potent either-or: the Bible can either be treated as an historical manuscript that appropriately can be the subject of philosophical interpretation, critique and discussion, or it can be treated as sacred revelation, which demands religious postures of worship and faith. As Kierkegaard emphasises, there can be no transition between the former philosophical-human perspective, and the latter theological-sacred perspective—rather, a transformation must occur.

Now, here Kierkegaard does indeed seem to be anticipating Falque’s idea of a transformation of philosophy by theology. Yet, as we will see, the two conceive of the nature of this


54 Kierkegaard, Journals and Notebooks 6, 36. There is in fact an interesting ambiguity at play in Kierkegaard’s conception of philosophy in this entry, for the study of the Bible would seem more properly to belong to theology. This might reflect a similar ambiguity found in Immanuel Kant’s The Conflict of the Faculties, in which he recommends the need for specifically philosophical principles for scriptural exegesis and makes a distinction between biblical theologians and philosophical theologians. See Immanuel Kant, The Conflict of the Faculties trans. Mary J. Gregor in Religion and Rational Theology, eds. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 264-71. This demonstrates the way in which Kierkegaard groups together both philosophy and academic theology as merely human enterprises in contrast to the truly theological, that is, Christian, sphere.

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transformation in radically different ways. For Falque, the crossing of boundaries leads to philosophy’s transformation by theology and subsequent return to itself in an improved form (i.e., a better or more rigorous philosophy wherein the philosopher comes to their original—albeit transformed—perspective ‘anew’). Kierkegaard, meanwhile, understands this transformation as first of all characterised by an annihilation, since transformation means the end of something in order to bring about something qualitatively different and only in that sense ‘new’ (i.e., a qualitative transformation to ‘another kind’ rather than the quantitative transformation to a ‘more’ philosophical philosophy). This transformation involves a leap over a conceptual gap, on the other side of which there is no longer philosophy—let alone a ‘better’ philosophy—but rather something qualitatively distinct. While Kierkegaard, like Falque, thus understands the encounter between philosophy and theology to be transformative, he does not understand this transformation as a development or ‘renewal’ of what was already there, but more radically as a necessary annihilation of what was, so that a ‘qualitative newness’—something that is of an altogether different genus or kind—can emerge. Let us examine this more closely.

Transformation in Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Works

For Falque, Kierkegaard’s status as one of the first to ‘cross the Rubicon’ is exemplified by his theological treatment of despair (as sin) in *Sickness unto Death*, which facilitates a more profound appreciation of the ‘philosophical significance’ of his account of despair as such, namely as a purely philosophical account of despair that is nevertheless born out of the transformative encounter with the theology of sin. The movement Falque describes is, as he himself puts it, a journey of ‘there and back again,’ of philosophy crossing over and in its transformation by theology being returned back to itself in such a way that it is more rigorously itself. It becomes a better or ‘more distinctly philosophical’ philosophy, precisely because philosophy has now gained an awareness of its distinction as philosophy. However, this understanding of transformation is itself philosophical in nature: i.e., it is a transformation that philosophy can understand and describe since it is in no way effected by grace or faith. Indeed, in its structure, Falque’s transformation appears to be suspiciously similar to the movement of Hegel’s dialectic in which two contrasting moments are sublated into a higher unity, or a completed conceptual understanding (and self-understanding). In other words, by going through theology, philosophy gains a better conception of its own operation, a more encompassing awareness of itself within the boundaries of philosophy. In other words, we suggest that Falque’s understanding of transformation should be characterised as philosophical insofar as it is conceived as a form of sublation or renewal rather than an absolute qualitative alteration.

Kierkegaard, meanwhile, operates with what we could call a theological notion of transformation. As he writes in a later journal entry, theologically the crucial matter is ‘a qualitative transformation, a total character-transformation (just as qualitative as the change from not being to being, which is birth) in time. Everything that is

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56 Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 147.
57 Here, we differ from Joseph S. O’Leary’s view that Falque offers an inverted Hegelianism, in which philosophy is absorbed by theology. O’Leary, ‘Phenomenology and Theology: Respecting the Boundaries’, *Philosophy Today* 62, no. 1 (2018): 99-117, 101. Rather, we suggest that Falque’s treatment is focused above all on the philosophical and philosophy’s self-conception being gained through its move through theology.
merely an unfolding of what the human being originally was: is not Christian exist-
ing.’58 There must be a loss, an annihilation, of what the human being is merely by
itself (comparable to what Falque calls the human being as such). This is evident al-
ready in Concluding Unscientific Postscript, where the philosophical pseudonymous
character Johannes Climacus underlines that there can be no analogy to the meta-
morphosis of the finite human who is subjected to the highest development of be-
coming ‘qualified as spirit’. Unlike the plant or the animal, which ‘is essentially
what it becomes,’ the human ‘metamorphosis is such a qualitative change that it
cannot be explained by the little-by-little of a direct development.’59 That is, theologi-
cal transformation cannot be explained by means of any quantitative transition. In
fact, Climacus points out that it is the self itself who stands in the way of its trans-
formation. He therefore asserts that the upbuilding is ‘the annihilation in which the
individual sets himself aside in order to find God, since it is the individual himself who
is the hindrance … God is in the ground only when everything that is in the way is
cleared out, every finitude, and first and foremost the individual himself in his fini-
tude.’60 That is, the merely human self, the merely finite sphere, must be lost, anni-
hilated, for true theological transformation to take place. Thus, in Sickness unto
Death, Anti-Climacus declares that the eternal, or God, must give the self the ‘courage
to lose itself in order to win itself.’61 Or, we might say, the possibility for trans-
formation is external to the finite sphere.

Kierkegaard’s perspective, both on the nature of transformation as well as the sig-
nificance of human finitude, could therefore not be more different from Falque’s.
Indeed, they are dramatically opposed. Specifically, what distinguishes Falque’s phil-
osophical account of transformation from Kierkegaard’s theological account is the
question of whether or not the state before the event of transformation is qualita-
tively distinct from that after it, whether what was is annihilated in its ‘becoming’.62 For
Falque, philosophy fundamentally remains what it is in its transformative encounter
with theology, since it only makes philosophy more philosophical, more proper-
itself: ‘Reaching the end of the crossing does not result in forgetting everything, but
rather in weighing all that took place in the crossing, according to a truly transformed
humanity—yet without amnesia as to its ineliminable burdens.’63 Consequently, ‘in-
ssofar as the philosophical as such—that is to say, “quite simply” or without God’ is
‘converted and transformed by the theological,’ Falque understands this movement
simply ‘as an act of transition’ between two fields that are therefore not qualitatively
distinct.64 Indeed, on Falque’s account, theology and philosophy may approach their
object in different ways, but they nevertheless both consider one and the same object:
‘With respect to the object, paradoxically, philosophy and theology differ the least,’

59 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 553-54.
60 Ibid., 560-61 (our emphasis).
62 The opposition between philosophy and theology here is slightly artificial in terms of Kierkegaard and indeed belongs properly to Falque’s methodological register. In Kierkegaardian terms, we might instead speak of a Hegelian or speculative account of transformation versus a Christian account of transformation.
63 Falque, Crossing the Rubicon, 23.
64 Falque, The Metamorphosis of Finitude, 121.
for they are characterised by ‘a community of the object’ despite or thanks to the diversity of intentional gazes.65 Yet, this presupposed identity of the theological and philosophical objects is a consequence of what Falque understands as the norm of his distinctly philosophical investigation. He understands himself as a philosopher ‘before all else,’ precisely because he insists on operating within the horizon of finitude independently from any experience of the infinite, or, in other words, by considering ‘the human being as such,’66 detached from God. Meanwhile, the central norm Kierkegaard recognises for his questioning is Christian faith.

This point is similarly emphasised by George Pattison, who suggests that Kierkegaard’s emphatic and persistent upholding of God’s transcendence is an obstacle, a stumbling block, an offense to any phenomenological description of the relationship between the human and divine. For even on the side of finitude, Kierkegaard points towards a break or a halt. In addressing Kierkegaard’s authorship, Pattison explains, ‘the limitations of phenomenology do not first appear at the point at which an attempt is made to bring in divine transcendence as a basis of existence. Rather, they already kick in within the account of human existence itself.’67 While this comment targets phenomenological readings of Kierkegaard generally, it could have been written as a response to Falque specifically. When it comes to Kierkegaard, we cannot operate purely within a horizon of finitude as Falque insists, and the reason for this, Pattison explains, is Kierkegaard’s ‘intimate dialectic between sin and knowledge of God’.68 For if the human being is so infinitely and qualitatively distinct from the original ground of their being, no careful analysis of human consciousness will ever explain the human qua human. In other words, for Kierkegaard to consider the human being or finitude as such, as Falque would say, always already requires considering the human being in relation to God.

The key to Falque’s argument, which sets him apart from Kierkegaard’s understanding of Christian faith, is that this horizon of finitude is not foreign to theology, that theology is qualitatively identical to philosophy, which guarantees the transformability of one by the other. The doctrine of the Incarnation, he suggests, means that ‘we have no other experience of God than that of the human being. The departure point for all reflection, albeit theological reflection, is in this sense philosophical. Initially, we encounter the human being as such, independently of all other belief or exposition to God.’69 It is thus the Incarnation that secures the seamless transition between the theological and philosophical objects, which are not qualitatively distinct at all but rather identical as figures of human finitude: ‘ever since God became man and showed himself as a man even in his Resurrection, we have access to Him via humanity and thus also through philosophy.’70 Thus, on Falque’s account of the community of the object, theology starts from finitude as such, just like philosophy does, which it approaches from the perspective of its transformation rather than its destruction by grace. As Falque puts it: theology, too, accepts ‘that there is something to transform that is not of the order of sin,’71 i.e., would require destruction.

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65 Falque, Crossing the Rubicon, 126-27; The Metamorphosis of Finitude, 8.
66 Falque, Crossing the Rubicon, 127.
68 Ibid.
69 Falque, Crossing the Rubicon, 122.
70 Ibid., 129. See further Falque, The Metamorphosis of Finitude, 6.
71 Falque, The Metamorphosis of Finitude, 7.
Kierkegaard’s Christian faith, however, goes further than this. In *Sickness unto Death*, the Christian pseudonymous character Anti-Climacus unfolds a treatment of despair in two distinct parts: the first offers a philosophical account of despair; the second examines despair from a theological perspective by qualifying it as sin—that is, not simply starting from finitude, but from fallenness. As Michael Theunissen and Falque himself have pointed out, there has been a tendency amongst scholars—particularly in France—to prioritise the first half of the book, the philosophical account of despair, over the second half. However, Theunissen argues that the whole point of *Sickness unto Death* is to bring into focus the theological qualification of despair as sin. The second part of the book then reveals that it is the ‘purely anthropological statements of the exposition that are to be read theologically,’ not vice versa as Falque would have it. Anti-Climacus explicitly says as much when introducing the second half of the book by stating: ‘there is no room or place for a psychological delineation in this part.’ Instead he points out that this new section must ‘dialectically take a new direction’ because we are no longer dealing with the ‘merely human self’, but the ‘theological self, the self directly before God,’ which is to take ‘on a new quality and qualification’. Crucially, then, *alea iacta est*, the Rubicon is crossed, and there is no going back: we cannot return to the purely philosophical perspective once the theological perspective has been engaged.

This rupture is due to the theological qualification *before God, coram deo*, which Anti-Climacus understands as comprising the ‘crucial criterion: the absurd, the paradox, the possibility of offense,’ and thereby forms theology’s ‘weapon’ against philosophy. There is no room for such offense in Falque’s framework, precisely because it is geared towards calming the hostilities between philosophy and theology that Kierkegaard precisely seeks to amplify. For the latter, the possibility of offense consists in the fact that, where despair can be described as a general human condition, sin is that each individual person is a sinner before God and that each individual’s sin is of concern to God.

This possibility of offense is dynamically tied to a dialectic of closeness and distance, according to Anti-Climacus. On the one hand, the reason Christianity is so offensive is that it ‘wants to make man into something so extraordinary that he cannot grasp the thought.’ Thus, unlike Falque’s view that finitude is the shared object of philosophy and theology, Anti-Climacus insists that theology reaches beyond finitude, beyond the merely human, and therefore offends. As Anti-Climacus explains, ‘the natural man’, the human being as such, is more than willing to admit that sin exists, but the *before God*—the theological qualification, which is what makes sin into sin—is ‘too much for him’ because it ‘makes much too much of being human.’ On the other hand, however, the possibility of offense is constituted by what Anti-Climacus calls the ‘infinite qualitative difference’ or ‘abyss’ between God and human beings which is doubly qualified: as sin from the human side, but as forgiveness from the divine side. That is, qualitatively, in its sinful lowliness, the human being is

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73 Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 77.
74 Ibid., 79.
75 Ibid., 83.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 87.
infinitely distanced and differentiated from the divine; and God, in his infinite height
and ability to forgive this sin as a gracious act of which humanity is undeserving, is
likewise distanced and differentiated from humankind. Through the incarnation
of Christ, Christianity then brings God and the human closer together than ever before.
However, this remains an impossible act from a human perspective, for it is some-
thing ‘only God himself can do’ and ‘any human fabrication remains just a dream, a
precarious delusion.’ 78 Thus, the incarnation signals not the merging of divinity and
humanity nor the transition from one to other, but rather paradoxically demonstrates
the distance between them in how close it brings them.

The possibility of offense is therefore a double-edged sword that renders the battle
complicated and dangerous. It is not just a weapon of attack, but also a shield of de-
fence, which protects and upholds the infinite qualitative difference from both sides. As
Anti-Climacus puts it: ‘the possibility of offense ... defended and defends [Christ], con-
firms a chasmic abyss between him and the person who was closest and stood closest to
him.’79 Falque’s account, meanwhile, is—necessarily, due to its philosophical nature—
more one-sided. In emphasising the human (i.e., philosophical) significance of the
Incarnation, he neglects the offense that calls for faith.

Anti-Climacus, by contrast, unceasingly illustrates the challenge of this offense or
gap. Drawing on Roman military language befitting the Rubicon metaphor, he resorts
to the image of long and close-range combat to underline the offensiveness of sin’s
forgiveness to human comprehension and thereby the human impossibility and incom-
prehensibility of true transformation:

it is almost as if [the sinner] walked right up to God and said, ‘No, there is no for-
giveness of sins, it is impossible,’ and it looks like close combat. Yet to be able to say
this and for it to be heard, the person must become qualitatively distanced from
God, and in order to fight cominus [in close combat] he must be eminus [at a dis-
tance] ... so wondrously are the ratios of distance established ... in order to be for-
ward toward God, a person must go far away; if he comes closer, he cannot be
forward, and if he is forward, this eo ipso means that he is far away ... in order to
be able to be forward toward God, one has to go far away from him.80

As Arne Grøn points out, the individual is called upon to believe not just in sin, but
also in the opposite, namely the forgiveness of sins. However, from the philosophical
perspective, this is a paradox: faith is here faith in spite of the human’s understanding
that he or she is a sinner. 81 What we get, then, is a rejection of transition by way of the
motif of offense: the infinite qualitative difference between the human and divine is
characterised by a gap that is only made greater when the human attempts to bridge it.
Wanting to grapple with God only moves one farther from God and ultimately also
from one’s true theological self.

The difference from Falque, therefore, lies in the fact that transformation in this
Kierkegaardian sense is not a matter of renewal or, as William C. Davies puts it, ‘a
return to innocence’, but rather the appearance of a new ‘positive qualification as

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78 Ibid., 117.
79 Ibid., 128-29.
80 Ibid., 114.
81 Arne Grøn, Subjektivitet og negativitet: Kierkegaard (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1997), 361.
spirit,’\(^{82}\) and thus the establishment of an entirely new (i.e., qualitatively distinct) state. The way to God, and thereby to oneself, is through the break with or loss of one’s merely human self, something Simon Podmore describes as ‘the self-surrendering intimacy that overcomes the infinite abyss of offence that has served as a battlefield between God and humanity.’\(^{83}\) Nevertheless, the loss of self does not smoothly overcome offense as much as it intensifies and contributes to its possibility, but this is precisely what gives annihilation both its philosophical significance and theological resonance.

We must therefore take care not to make it sound as if, for Anti-Climacus, the philosophical account of despair is somehow explained or resolved by and into the theological account of sin. The theological side does not fill in the gap, but simply presupposes sin—that is, sin is a qualitative leap that cannot be explained philosophically but must be presupposed theologically. Philosophy cannot be satisfied with such a move, for it is against its nature to accept a beginning that it cannot explain. Specifically, the theological account is not a sublimation of the opposition because it does not involve renewal through the preservation of what was as its positive element (i.e., transformation), but rather signals the entrance of something qualitatively new and thus the destruction of what was already there (i.e., annihilation). Theunissen explains this eloquently:

> The positive results from it not through the renewal of the old, which has completely destroyed itself, but through the intrusion of something new. By placing the resolution of the contradiction into the new beginning made by faith with its counter-factual breaking out of the prevailing situation, Kierkegaard only deepens the divide … that already separates the end of the event of reflection from the beginning with its ground in Hegel.\(^{84}\)

Theunissen underlines that transformation involves annihilation, where what was is not simply renewed (i.e., returned to from a different perspective—as Falque would have it), but must be destroyed for something new to break through (i.e., qualitatively distinct—as Kierkegaard insists). Sin itself must be understood in this way, for as a further mark of offense Anti-Climacus emphases that even though sin is a human condition, ‘there must be a revelation from God to teach man what sin is and how deeply it is rooted.’\(^{85}\) *Sin is thus not a renewed definition of the philosophical account of despair.*

This is illustrated well by Vigilius Haufniensis in *Concept of Anxiety*, a companion piece to *Sickness unto Death*. There, Haufniensis describes how sin ‘comes into the world as the sudden, i.e., by a leap; but this leap also posits the quality.’\(^{86}\) Faced with the rupture of such a new quality, philosophy attempts to translate ‘the circle as a straight line’\(^{87}\) by offering a transitional explanation, where innocence gradually becomes sinfulness.

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84 Theunissen, *Concept of Despair*, 113.
85 Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 96.
86 Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 31
87 Ibid., 32.
Here, Haufniensis is indicating the limit and absurdity of this philosophical solution: a quantitative explanation tells us nothing about sin as a new quality. Theology—or, rather, Christian faith—does not explain sin either, but accepts its existence and the intrusion that occurs ‘with the leap, with the suddenness of the enigmatic.’ The revelation of sin is a theological intrusion—a new quality—just as the self assumes a brand-new quality and qualification when it stands directly before God according to Anti-Climacus.

Theology thus begins with the doctrine of sin rather than human finitude. Yet, sin marks the boundary of philosophy, and one which philosophy is fundamentally unable to cross, for it cannot explain or think this new, revealed quality. As such, there can be no transition from philosophy to theology, nor a return to a philosophical account once sin has been revealed. Rather, theology here takes over and makes all previous philosophical considerations not only redundant but meaningless, i.e., not worth revisiting. For to explain the existential actuality of sin in the abstract medium of thought ‘is eo ipso the same as to nullify’ it. The annihilation of philosophy is then needed to avoid the abstraction of theological reality, which, for Kierkegaard, concerns the individual’s singular and personal encounter with God.

Kierkegaard’s treatment of the relationship between philosophy and theology, whether it is expressed in terms of a dialectic between knowledge and sin or despair and sin, is marked by the presence of a gap that cannot be crossed, but rather serves as the occasion, or provocation, for a leap or a clearing in which a new quality can appear. Unlike Hegel’s speculative moment of sublation, any dialectical movement must in Kierkegaard be understood as what Ricoeur calls a broken or ‘fractured dialectic [dialec-tique rompue],’ namely one where the philosophical and theological are continually spaced further apart rather than coinciding, thereby ensuring that the ‘gulf of qualitative difference between God and man may be maintained as it is in the paradox and faith, so that God and man do not … merge in some way, philosophice, poetice, etc., into one’.

Kierkegaard would therefore have to disagree with Falque’s statement that ‘only in uniting philosophy and theology can we see that we are consciously crossing the ford at the same time from philosopher to theologian and reciprocally from theologian to philosopher. The whole movement is held and maintained in the unity of the same being and according to a mutually fecund investigation.’ For Kierkegaard, there is no such unity in being. Falque’s use of the metaphor of crossing the Rubicon would be misleading within a Kierkegaardian framework insofar as it connotes a transition from one realm to the other: where philosophy ends, theology begins—
Kierkegaard is, in Falque’s words, a thinker of the ‘threshold’. This brings us back to Kierkegaard’s early student journal. If philosophy accepts that the gap between God and human beings cannot be explained or accounted for, this would cause philosophy to bring about its own downfall, to welcome its own annihilation by theology. In other words, this makes it impossible for philosophy to ‘serve as a transition to Christianity, for it would necessarily have to abide by this negative conclusion.’

We therefore appear to have refuted Falque’s reading of and self-identification with Kierkegaard on the issue of the relationship between philosophy and theology. For whereas the former proposes a quantitative model of transition (facilitated by the incarnation), the latter instead operates with a qualitative model of nullification (necessitated by sin).

Reconciling Falque and Kierkegaard? Annihilation as Transformation

Yet, it is perhaps too easy to end on this refutation, presenting Falque and Kierkegaard to be as diametrically opposed as Kierkegaard did philosophy and theology. After all, if we abandon the pseudonymous characters’ rhetoric of rupture and instead follow through on the logic of Kierkegaard’s entire authorship (a dangerous and impossible exercise if ever there was one), we may yet achieve a (pseudo)-‘resolution’ of the dialectical opposition between philosophy and theology, albeit only insofar as we here understand ‘resolution’ in the very limited sense of philosophy gaining a more sophisticated self-understanding through its opposition to theology. For this opposition tells us something about philosophy itself, namely its qualitative distinction from theology, the awareness of which should—surely—result in ‘better’ philosophy, namely a quantitatively ‘more’ philosophical philosophy. Thus, just as Falque posits that philosophy is more rigorously philosophical after encountering theology, we might also consider this to be the case for Kierkegaard. In properly experiencing its distance from the theological realm, as the pseudonymous characters illustrate, philosophy comes to know its limitation—or, for Kierkegaard perhaps better, its own ‘nullity’, which in turn is both its peak and its downfall. However, to offer a more nuanced comparison of Falque and Kierkegaard’s possible overlap, further clarification is required. Ultimately, the relationship at issue is a dialectic, the entire logic of which need not be evident from either end: the truth is in the whole. As Antony Aumann has pointed out: ‘because transformations involve a shift in our epistemic standpoint, we do not know what we are getting ourselves into prior to making them.’

According to Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous characters, what happens in a theological transformation appears from a merely human or philosophical perspective as annihilation. We see this in a journal entry from 1849, where Kierkegaard explains that it is perfectly in order for a person to reflect on how God’s ‘idea of what is best for me is perhaps so elevated that it would be like annihilation for me—he is spirit, infinite spirit, and I am a poor human being, a beastly creation with all these many merely human necessities.’

Similarly, in Postscript, Climacus discusses how the Greek philosophers saw suicide as the solution to the limits of knowing or gaining a full picture of human life, but nevertheless insists that what is upbuilding can come

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96 Kierkegaard, Journals and Notebooks 1, 25.
98 Kierkegaard, Journals and Notebooks 6, 136.
into view through the negative, through this ‘self-annihilation’. 99 Consider, moreover, the following passage from one of Kierkegaard’s 1844 upbuilding discourses:

when life at God’s direction casts a person out to be strengthened in this annihilation that knows no delusion, permits no evasion, occasions no self-deception, as if he would be capable of more under other circumstances, since when he struggles with himself, circumstances cannot determine the result. This is the annihilation of a person, and the annihilation is his truth... To comprehend this annihilation is the highest thing of which a human being is capable; to brood over this understanding, because it is a God-given good entrusted to him as the secret of truth, is the highest and the most difficult thing of which a human being is capable ... and yet he is incapable even of this ... man is a helpless creature, because all other understanding that makes him understand that he can help himself is but a misunderstanding. 100

Far from being a meagre insight, Kierkegaard in his own name, like his philosophical pseudonymous character Climacus, states that annihilation is the very highest thing the human being can understand philosophically—it is in fact so high that it, paradoxically, cannot be understood.

Returning to Sickness unto Death, Anti-Climacus makes a parallel point, albeit this time from the theological perspective: it is both insolence and thoughtlessness ‘to want to comprehend that which does not want to be comprehended,’ meaning that one must therefore be able to admit when one is ‘neither able nor obliged to comprehend’—a task that, he insists, requires ‘not a little self-denial’. 101 However, such self-denial thus equally forms a philosophically higher—or, dare we say, better—insight than the thoughtlessness of trying to understand something that refuses to be understood. In other words, philosophy’s qualitative distinction from theology, which became evident from the Christian perspective that required its annihilation, now results likewise in a quantitatively more philosophical philosophy. Anti-Climacus therefore declares that what is needed is a ‘little Socratic ignorance with regard to Christianity,’ namely:

never forget that Socrates’ ignorance was a kind of fear and worship of God ... it was out of veneration for God that he was ignorant, that as far as it was possible for a pagan he was on guard duty as a judge on the frontier between God and man, keeping watch so that the deep gulf of qualitative difference between them was maintained. 102

Socratic philosophy’s value therefore lies in its ability to maintain and guard the difference between philosophy and theology. This infinite qualitative distinction between God and human beings constitutes a cornerstone of Kierkegaard’s theological thought, i.e., his understanding of Christian faith. That Anti-Climacus calls upon Socratic-philosophical ignorance to protect this distinction is therefore remarkable. However, the reason Socratic ignorance can guard this distinction lies in its profound

99 Kierkegaard, Postscript, 560.
101 Kierkegaard, Sickness unto Death, 98.
dissimilarity, its distance from, the theological sphere. Socratic ignorance guards the distinction precisely because it does not attempt or profess to explain it, which is both the philosophically highest thing one can understand and a philosophical failure: the most rigorous, most elevated, or 'best' philosopher, the one the most like Socrates, knows first of all that they know nothing—in particular that they know nothing about what infinitely transcends their field of view, namely God.103

Anti-Climacus illustrates this dynamic using the example of sin: although the Socratic definition of sin as ignorance demonstrates a failure at arriving at the truly religious and revealed category of sin, Anti-Climacus does not dismiss the Socratic definition but intends to 'use this Socratic definition to bring out [Christianity] in its sharpness ... as always with any other definition that in the most rigorous sense is not rigorously Christian ... its emptiness shall become apparent.'104 It is precisely the nothingness of the philosophical definition that brings out its difference or distance from the theological sphere, making it all the more philosophical. Regardless of any analogy or parallel, the Christian concept of sin is intensified to such a degree that it does not complete the philosophical approximation of sin—for this would imply continuity or transition as Falque would call it—but rather makes the philosophical sphere’s nullity apparent and more sharply outlines the gap between the spheres. In this way, philosophy’s annihilation precisely constitutes its transformation, for it turns it into a philosophy that is more rigorously itself (quantitatively) precisely to the extent that it has been reduced to nought from the point of view of theology (qualitatively). As Kierkegaard puts it: ‘The task is not to comprehend Xnty, but to comprehend that one cannot comprehend it. This is faith’s holy cause, and therefore reflection is sanctified by being used in this manner.’105

Ultimately, we may conclude that Falque and Kierkegaard are both trying to conceive of the relationship between philosophy and theology in the same way, namely, quantitative intensification of one discipline by way of its qualitative differentiation from the other. In other words, the transformation of philosophy by theology in terms of philosophy (i.e., its becoming ‘better’ philosophy—quantitatively) presupposes its annihilation by theology in terms of theology (i.e., its inability ever to become itself theology—qualitatively). The reason, we suggest, that their rhetoric, including their respective use of the metaphor of crossing the Rubicon, differs to such a great extent is simply that they are conceiving of this dialectical relationship from different sides of the opposition, or from different banks of the river: one, the invader eager to explore new lands, from the philosophical side (concerned with the quantitative intensification of philosophy); the other, trying to face down the invader’s threat, from the theological side (concerned with the qualitative autonomy of theology). However, both perspectives are necessary to conceive of the whole, i.e., of the relation between the disciplines. Far from the transformation in which it returns to itself, philosophy would be annihilated—it would drown in the Rubicon—if it were to neglect its distinction from theology. Kierkegaard can perhaps be said to be the first to cross the Rubicon, as Falque suggested, but precisely (and only) from the opposite bank. Falque’s principle of proportionality (the more we theologise, the better we philosophise) then possibly has an antecedent in one

103 See Plato, Apology, 22d.
104 Kierkegaard, Sickness unto Death, 88 (translation modified).
of the theses summarising Kierkegaard’s doctoral dissertation: ‘The similarity between Christ and Socrates consists essentially in their dissimilarity.’ After all, what places (Socratic) philosophy in a productive or fecund relation to (Christian) theology, is the irreconcilable distinction between the two disciplines: the fact that they both know that they do not know anything about what lies beyond their respective boundaries and achieve themselves most fully in and as this ignorance.