

Kierkegaard as a Hegelian

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One of the most interesting of the many faces of Kierkegaard is Kierkegaard as Hegelian. The very notion might strike many people as an oxymoron. Given Kierkegaard's bitter polemics against Hegel and Hegelianism, it might seem absurd to think that Kierkegaard himself had a Hegelian side at all. The thesis that Kierkegaard has nothing in common with Hegel was made famous by Niels Thulstrup in his influential work, *Kierkegaards Forhold til Hegel og til den spekulative Idealisme indtil 1846*, published in 1967¹ with German and English translations following shortly thereafter². Thulstrup puts forth his main thesis thus: «Hegel and Kierkegaard have in the main nothing in common as thinkers, neither as regards object, purpose, or method, nor as regards what each considered to be indisputable principles.»³ Thulstrup's claim about the radical discontinuity between Hegel and Kierkegaard has been taken up uncritically by a number of scholars of nineteenth century European philosophy. As a result, many commentators see it as a foregone conclusion that Kierkegaard rejected everything that had even the slightest look of Hegelianism about it. There are, however, a number of reasons to believe that Thulstrup's view of the matter is oversimplified. When we examine Kierkegaard's works carefully, we can see that his relation to Hegel was in fact considerably more differentiated than Thulstrup would have us believe.

I.

In *The Concept of Irony*, we can discern a marked Hegelian influence which Kierkegaard himself acknowledges. In that work, he repeatedly praises Hegel and his analyses of Socrates and Greek culture. In addition to the actual content of *The Concept of Irony*, there are many good reasons external to the text

1. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
2. I.e., THULSTRUP, N. (1980). *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*. Trans. Stengren, G.L. Princeton: Princeton University Press. German translation: *Kierkegaards Verhältnis zu Hegel und zum spekulativen Idealismus 1835-1846*. Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kolhammer, 1972.
3. THULSTRUP, N. (1980). p.12.

itself to believe that Kierkegaard was strongly under Hegel's influence at the time of its composition. Above all, his own later assessments of the work consistently refer to the fact that it was too Hegelian. In the *Papirer* from the year 1850, almost ten years after the dissertation, there is a revealing passage where Kierkegaard writes,

Influenced as I was by Hegel and whatever was modern, without the maturity really to comprehend greatness, I could not resist pointing out somewhere in my dissertation⁴ that it was a defect on the part of Socrates to disregard the whole and only consider individuals numerically. What a Hegelian fool I was! It is precisely this that powerfully demonstrates what a great ethicist Socrates was⁵.

Although it is evident that Kierkegaard was critical of Hegel when writing this entry in 1850, nonetheless he says rather clearly that at the time of his dissertation he was under Hegel's sway, indeed, so much so that he mistakenly criticized Socrates along Hegelian lines. The self-critical expression «a Hegelian fool» leaves little ambiguity in this regard.

In a similar passage from 1854, Kierkegaard expresses regret at having promulgated in his dissertation an aspect of Hegel's doctrine of the state. He writes: «That the state in a Christian sense is supposed to be what Hegel taught —namely that it has moral significance, that true virtue can appear only in the state (something I also childishly babbled after him in my dissertation), that the goal of the state is to improve men— is obviously nonsense.» (*Pap.* X12 A108, 114/*JP*, 4238) Here Kierkegaard admits by way of self-criticism to having parroted Hegel's claim that virtue is to be found in the state. As in the passage above, it is clear that Kierkegaard no longer believes this to be true and regrets having claimed it previously, but this entry leaves no room for doubt that, at least according to his own interpretation of his intellectual development, he accepted uncritically some aspects of Hegel's philosophy at the time of his dissertation and was not merely ironically pretending to do so.

Finally, there is in the *Papirer* from 1845 a relevant entry, which was originally a part of a draft of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. There Kierkegaard under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus criticizes himself as being under the sway of Hegel in *The Concept of Irony*: «In his dissertation, Magister Kierkegaard was alert enough to discern the Socratic but is considered not to

4. CI p. 234; BI p. 310. (CI = *The Concept of Irony; Schelling Lecture Notes* Trans. Hong, H.V. and Hong, E.H. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. KWII. BI = *Om Begrebet Ironi. (SVI XIII)*)
5. JP IV, 4281; *Pap.* X-3, A477. (translation slightly modified.) (JP = *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. Ed. and trans. Hong, H.V. and Hong, E.H. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1975. Cited by entry number. *Pap.* = *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, 16 volumes. Eds. Heiberg, P.A., Kuhr, V. and Torsting, E. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1909-1948; supplemented by Thulstrup, N. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-1978. Cited by volume number and entry number.)

have understood it, probably because, with the help of Hegelian philosophy, he has become super-clever and objective and positive, or has not had the courage to acknowledge the negation.» (*Pap.* VIB 34, 24/*JP*, 5796) By saying that he used «the help of Hegelian philosophy» and by designating himself as «objective» and «positive», Kierkegaard at this later date seems once again to think that his interpretation of Socrates in the dissertation was too Hegelian in character. He indicates that this allegiance to Hegel at that time led him to misunderstand important aspects of the figure of Socrates.

All of these passages indicate that Kierkegaard at a later date judged himself to have been strongly influenced by Hegel while he was writing *The Concept of Irony* and that he later repudiated these aspects of Hegelianism. They make it clear that he sees the Hegelian influence as only a passing phase which he later rejected. The tone of self-criticism and regret provides clear evidence that Kierkegaard was truly influenced by Hegel and was not merely pretending to be a Hegelian. If he had intentionally wanted to parody Hegelian philosophy by playing the role of a Hegelian, then there would be no need for regret or self-critique at a later period.

II.

Some scholars have noted the similarities between *Either/Or* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* or some of Hegel's other works⁶. In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard makes use of the Hegelian methodology of opposing contrasting concepts and analyzing each of them for internal consistency. These concepts are related to one another, and indeed one passes into the other as soon as contradictions are revealed. In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard juxtaposes the concepts of the aesthetic and the ethical. Thus, based on these similarities, one might say that the basic structure of *Either/Or* is in a sense Hegelian.

In the «Insignificant Introduction» to the second chapter of Part One, «The Immediate Erotic Stages», the esthete discusses different criteria for judging the truly great work of art. (*SVII*, 31-43/*KWIII*, 47-59) This discussion shows clear signs of Hegelian influence. Here the esthete examines in order three possible criteria for determining the great work of art; the first places the emphasis on the subject matter which is considered the essential element. At the second stage a case is made for the formative activity of the individual artist as the essential thing. Finally, what Kierkegaard calls «the idea» of the work of art is introduced as the third criterion. Here the measuring rod is the degree of abstraction of the idea of the work of art, with representation of the most abstract idea being the greatest work. The criteria are examined and rejected as being one-sided until an adequate view is reached, just as in the *Phenomenology* individual Notions are examined and rejected as partial or incomplete before absolute knowing is reached.

6. TAYLOR, M.C. (1980) *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 228-262.

Later on in the same chapter, the esthete traces three stages of what might be called «the dialectic of desire.» (*SVI I*, 56-68/*KW III*, 74-87) The movement once again clearly has the form of Hegel's dialectic. Unlike the previous movement, these stages are actually broken down under individual headings and are referred to explicitly as «stages». Each stage portrays a distinct aspect of the concept of desire, and each is represented by a different literary or dramatic *persona*. The esthete describes the stages in a fashion similar to the way in which Hegel describes the stations of consciousness in the *Phenomenology*:

When I use the term «stage» as I did and continue to do, it must not be taken to mean that each stage exists independently, the one outside the other [...] the specific stages are more a disclosure of a predicate in such a way that all the predicates plunge down in the richness of the last stage, since this is the stage proper. The other stages have no independent existence; by themselves they are only for representation, and from that we also see their fortuitousness in relation to the last stage. (*SVI I*, 74/*KW III*, 56)

As in Hegel's dialectic, aspects of previous Notions are preserved and contained in later ones, and the final stage brings together the previous stages within itself.

As some commentators have noted, Judge Wilhelm seems to employ Hegelian methodology in his discussion of love and marriage in the first chapter of Part Two, «The Esthetic Validity of Marriage.» (*SVI II*, 16-30f./*KW IV*, 17-32f.) Some see in this section Hegel's doctrine of mediation in Judge Wilhelm's argument that the immediate impulse of love must be mediated and transformed into the institution and ethical union of marriage⁷. Here in this chapter, a three-step dialectical movement like the ones in Part One is discernible. Judge Wilhelm refers to this as «love's dialectic.» (*SVI II*, 17/*KW IV*, 18). This movement illustrates yet another well-known aspect of Hegel's dialectical methodology, namely, that of immediacy and mediation. Just like Hegel in the *Phenomenology*, Kierkegaard begins with immediate knowledge and progresses to more sophisticated notions of truth.

III.

One of the best-known parts of *The Sickness unto Death* is Kierkegaard's analysis of the different stages of despair in the subsection B, «Despair as Defined by Consciousness». This discussion has particular affinities with the Hegelian dialectic. It is here that we find a genuine phenomenological analysis along Hegelian lines. Here the dialectic is determined by the degree of conscious-

7. Cf. HØFFDING, H. (1892). *Søren Kierkegaard som Filosof*. Copenhagen and Kristiania: Gyldendalske Boghandel, p. 92ff. See also his «Søren Kierkegaard» in his *Danske Filosofer*. (1909). Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, p. 158.

ness. The different stages represent increasingly higher levels of consciousness of despair. Given that consciousness is the key, this analysis can be seen as Kierkegaard's phenomenology. Like Hegel's dialectic, this analysis also moves by virtue of opposite terms: first being ignorant of being despair and then being conscious of being despair, then in despair first not to will to be oneself and then to will to be oneself, and finally first despair over the earthly and then despair of the eternal. Here there seems to be a determinate linear progression, and the order of the stages cannot be changed or revised without harming the developmental movement of thought. This dialectical movement has several similarities with the dialectic of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

In his explanation of what it means to exist before God, Kierkegaard implicitly draws on Hegel's notion of recognition that plays the key role in the famous dialectic of the lord and the bondsman in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As is well known, Hegel attempts to demonstrate that in order to be a human subject, intersubjective recognition from an equal is required. The irony of the position of the master is that he cannot achieve the status of personhood since the recognition of a slave is not valid. Kierkegaard refers to this notion of recognition when he discusses what it means to exist before God:

A cattleman who (if this were possible) is a self directly before his cattle is a very low self, and, similarly, a master who is a self directly before his slaves is actually no self—for in both cases a criterion is lacking. The child who previously has had only his parents as a criterion becomes a self as an adult by getting the state as a criterion, but what an infinite accent falls on the self by having God as the criterion! (*SVI XI*, 191/*KW XIX*, 79)

The allusion to the master and his slaves seems in this context to be a clear reference to Hegel's account of lordship and bondage. The notion of recognition is the key to interpreting what Kierkegaard means by the levels of consciousness before God. Given that one's own consciousness is determined by the intersubjective recognition of the other, it follows that the status of the other is the determining factor in one's own level of consciousness. If the other is a slave or a cow as in Kierkegaard's example, then there is a low level of consciousness. If the other is God, then one's consciousness is accordingly high; moreover, there will be variations of this heightened consciousness in accordance with one's conception of God. Kierkegaard writes, «Despair is intensified in relation to the consciousness of the self, but the self is intensified in relation to the criterion for the self, infinitely when God is the criterion. In fact, the greater the conception of God, the more self there is; the more self, the greater the conception of God.» (*SVI XI*, 192/*KW XIX*, 80)

This last period of Kierkegaard's authorship is provocative since, although he puts aside the direct polemics against Hegel and Hegelianism that he had

so long engaged in, he in his own analysis nonetheless makes use of some aspects of Hegel's thought more overtly than ever. Throughout his career Kierkegaard avails himself of a dialectical methodology akin to Hegel's and even prides himself on being a dialectician. Thus, at every stage of Kierkegaard's literary career, there were points of overlap between his thought and that of Hegel. All of this gives evidence for a complicated and differentiated relation to Hegel to which Thulstrup's analysis can hardly do justice.