

## Kierkegaard's Use of Genre in the Struggle with German Philosophy

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Søren Kierkegaard is a thinker who has been difficult to pin down with respect to the nature of his academic project. Claimed with equal zeal by philosophers, theologians and literary scholars, his authorship seems to defy any clear-cut, unambiguous characterization. A part of this confusion clearly stems from the highly unconventional nature of many of his pseudonymous works. With respect to their genre they appear to be an unidentifiable hybrid with elements from many distinct literary types. While he has his pseudonyms treat philosophical topics and criticize philosophical positions, these works can hardly be considered philosophical tracts in the traditional sense. Similarly, while some of his works, such as *Either/Or* and *Repetition*, tell a kind of a story, it is difficult to regard them straightforwardly as novels or some other form of narrative fiction as some commentators have been tempted to do. Finally, most all of his pseudonymous works are dominated by discussions of key religious topics, but yet, unlike his various edifying discourses, they do not seem to fall into any readily identifiable genre of religious writing. In short, Kierkegaard's use of genre is quite innovative and confusing. Some of the confusion is the result of a failure to recognize the reasons for his way of writing.

As is well known, Kierkegaard was, at least for a period, in a polemical relation to German speculative philosophy. This represented the standard paradigm for philosophical research at the time. It also represented a fixed form of scholarly writing that was more or less standard in both Denmark and the German-speaking states during his time. Kierkegaard was thus confronted with the problem of how to combat what he conceived as the misunderstandings of this philosophy. He realized that he would be undermining himself if he were to write a philosophical treatise along the lines dictated by the German philosophical tradition. Since the content of his arguments was also intimately connected to the form, he needed to find a new kind of literary genre by means of which he could articulate his criticisms. In the course of his pseudonymous authorship, he can be seen as constantly experimenting with new literary forms and rhetorical tools in order to issue his criticisms of German philosophy.

It should be noted that as a reaction to the popularity of Hegel's philosophy in Germany and Prussia there arose a number of works that were playfully satirical of his thought.<sup>1</sup> These included the humorous writings of Otto Friedrich Gruppe (1804-76), one of Hegel's students in Berlin, from 1831. He penned a comedy entitled, *Die Winde oder ganz absolute Konstruktion der neueren Weltgeschichte durch Oberons Horn gedichtet von Absolutulus von Hegelingen*.<sup>2</sup> This work takes aim at an easy target, namely, the technical and idiosyncratic language that Hegel's philosophy is known for. Gruppe also goes on the offensive again against obfuscating jargon, this time in the form of a fictional correspondence, *Antäus. Ein Briefwechsel über speculative Philosophie in ihrem Conflict mit Wissenschaft und Sprache*.<sup>3</sup> Another of Hegel's students, Theodor Mundt (1808-61), published the humorous *Kampf eines Hegelianers mit den Grazien* in 1833, which portrays Professor Fürsich's encounter with the Graces.<sup>4</sup> Similar works include Karl Ferdinand Gutzkow's (1811-78), *Nero*,<sup>5</sup> Heinrich Leo's (1799-1878) *Die Hegelingen*,<sup>6</sup> Karl Rosenkranz's (1805-79) *Das Centrum der Speculation*,<sup>7</sup> and Friedrich Ludwig Lindner's (1772-1845) *Der von Hegel'scher Philosophie durchdrungene Schuster-Geselle oder der absolute Stiefel*.<sup>8</sup> The existence of these works is clear evidence that there were a number of writers who believed that Hegelianism was best combated with humorous genres of writing and not with the conventional philosophical treatise.

<sup>1</sup> See O. Pöggeler, *Hegel in Berlin*, Berlin: Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz 1981, 264-271. Three of these works have been reprinted in H. Höfener (ed.), *Hegel-Spiele*, Frankfurt a.M. 1977.

<sup>2</sup> [Otto Gruppe], *Die Winde oder ganz absolute Konstruktion der neueren Weltgeschichte durch Oberons Horn gedichtet von Absolutulus von Hegelingen*, Leipzig: W. Nauck 1831. (Reprinted in H. Höfener (ed.), *Hegel-Spiele*, cf. fn. 1, 71-200.)

<sup>3</sup> O.F. Gruppe, *Antäus. Ein Briefwechsel über speculative Philosophie in ihrem Conflict mit Wissenschaft und Sprache*, Berlin 1831.

<sup>4</sup> Th. Mundt, *Kampf eines Hegelianers mit den Grazien. Eine philosophische Humoreske*, in his *Kritische Wälder. Blätter zur Beurtheilung der Literatur, Kunst und Wissenschaft unserer Zeit*, Leipzig 1833, 33-58.

<sup>5</sup> K. Gutzkow, *Nero*, Stuttgart and Tübingen 1835.

<sup>6</sup> H. Leo, *Die Hegelingen. Actenstücke und Belege zu der s.g. Denunciation der ewigen Wahrheit*, Halle 1838.

<sup>7</sup> K. Rosenkranz, *Das Centrum der Speculation*, Königsberg: Gebrüder Bornträger 1840. (Reprinted in H. Höfener (ed.), *Hegel-Spiele*, cf. fn. 1, 223-334.)

<sup>8</sup> F.L. Lindner, *Der von Hegel'scher Philosophie durchdrungene Schuster-Geselle oder der absolute Stiefel*, Stuttgart 1844. (Reprinted in H. Höfener (ed.), *Hegel-Spiele*, cf. fn. 1, 7-51.) In English as *The Absolute Boot: or, The Journeyman Cobbler Steeped in Hegel's Philosophy*, trans. by L.S. Stepelevich, Syracuse 2008.

It is tempting to think that Kierkegaard's two main satirical texts about the Hegelians – *The Conflict Between the Old and the New Soap-Cellar* and *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est* – were inspired by these works. But there is no evidence that he read or knew of them. Further, it is not clear if they enjoyed a wide circulation even in the German-speaking states. However, it can be inferred that Kierkegaard and the aforementioned authors at least to some degree followed the same line of thinking in their choice of satirical genres in their treatment of Hegel's thought. Yet it should be noted that these two early works of Kierkegaard represent perhaps his least innovative use of genre since they follow already established literary forms, the former being a student comedy and the latter a novel. Thus at this initial phase Kierkegaard was satisfied to fall back on well-known genres, but he soon began to experiment with new ones, and it is here that his true originality, with respect to this issue, lies.

Here I will, in the first section, present briefly an account of the standard form of philosophical writing from the German tradition. Then I will explore Kierkegaard's disagreement with the philosophical principles and content that lie behind this. Finally, I will investigate his attempts to criticize this form of writing and to develop a new kind of genre as an alternative to it. It should be noted that there is already a large body of secondary literature dedicated to Kierkegaard's rhetoric or language, but to the best of my knowledge there is no study to date that gives any detailed analysis of the development of his writing as a contrastive genre to German idealism. It is often repeated in the secondary literature that Kierkegaard tried to undermine or deconstruct German philosophy by ironically making use of some specific rhetorical or stylistic tools.<sup>9</sup> This is usually noted with a brief reference to Kierkegaard's titles, such as *Philosophical Fragments*, which underscores the fragmentary character of this work in contrast to systematic thinking. Similarly, scholars often allude to the title, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, to illustrate Kierkegaard's playful and humorous rejection of German thought. This title states directly that the work is «unscientific» in contrast to the Germans' insistence on strict scientific or scholarly (*wissenschaftliche*) studies in philosophy. The unsystematic nature of the work seems to be further indicated by the fact that it is designated as a «postscript,» although this work is several hundred pages longer than the book to which it is supposed to be a postscript, namely, the *Philosophical Fragments*. It is claimed that this clearly gives evidence of an irreverent disre-

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Roger Poole's well-known *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, Charlottesville and London 1993.

gard for true systematic thinking. However, usually these kinds of remarks fail to do justice to either Kierkegaard's position or that of the German philosophers since no account is ever given of what exactly systematic or scientific philosophy amounts to. At best these are accompanied by a smug caricature of the tedious German mind that insists on order and conformity. But these views are blind to the actual philosophical import of systematic thinking that is at issue.

Often the implication is that Kierkegaard's goal is to write in a way that is utterly confused, disorganized, self-contradictory and fragmentary in order to bring home his criticism. On this view, Kierkegaard is simply a literary anarchist carrying out acts of terrorism against all forms of structure and order. While this may seem to explain the presence of the occasional cryptic passage, it is problematic to take this as a general rule for understanding all of Kierkegaard's authorship. Moreover, this seems to contradict his own direct and straightforward statements about the development of his authorship in his work *On My Activity as an Author*, since there he clearly indicates that he indeed had a plan and, as it were, a system in his writing. For example, he states that he strategically intended the pseudonymous works to correspond to specific edifying discourses that he wrote at the same time and to treat the same subject matter in a different way. This notion of a parallel authorship clearly indicates some kind of general systematic plan and indeed a quite extensive one.<sup>10</sup> In order to understand Kierkegaard's criticism and his use of alternative literary genres correctly, one must first understand the nature of systematic thought in German idealism that he was objecting to.

## I. Writing in German Idealism

Many readers are familiar with Kierkegaard's frequent words of abuse against what he refers to as «the system,» and most take his pejorative use of this term to refer immediately to Hegel.<sup>11</sup> But what exactly this means often remains rather vague. Systematic philosophy was the standard form of philosophical enquiry at the time and was

<sup>10</sup> See N.J. Cappelorn, «The Retrospective Understanding of Søren Kierkegaard's Total Production,» in: Kierkegaard. Resources and Results, ed. by A. McKinnon, Montreal 1982, 18–38.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, J. Himmelstrup's «Terminologisk Register» in Kierkegaard's Samlede Værker, 2nd ed., ed. by A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg and H.O. Lange, vols. 1–15, Copenhagen 1920–36, vol. 15, 711ff.

by no means restricted to Hegel's thought. That philosophy had to be conceived as a system in order to be genuinely scientific and legitimate was a fixed point of dogma, agreed upon by Kant,<sup>12</sup> Fichte,<sup>13</sup> Schelling<sup>14</sup> and Hegel.

This understanding of philosophy grew out of the need to give an exhaustive explanation of the phenomena under investigation. The founder of German idealism, Kant, explains that his goal in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is to create a transcendental philosophy that deduces the necessary conditions for human perception and understanding. In his polemic with the metaphysical thinking of his predecessors, Kant claims that the study cannot begin uncritically with an investigation of the nature of metaphysical objects. Instead, it is first necessary to explore the nature of the human cognitive faculty in order to see how it constitutes objective thinking at all. Kant then sets to work in a highly systematic manner (in the «Transcendental Aesthetic») by demonstrating what the necessary conditions are for perception or sensible intuition. Once these conditions are established, this then leads him to an account of the necessary conditions for the faculty of the understanding (in the «Analytic of Concepts»). He then is obliged to explain how the faculty of sensible intuition and faculty of the understanding work together (in the «Analytic of Principles» or «Schematism»). While this is, of course, only a small part of the story that is found in Kant's rich epistemology, it should be enough to make clear why he believes that a systematic approach to the issue is absolutely imperative. The subject matter itself dictates the order and the structure of the analyses. Kant must start from the most simple human faculty and move to the most complex.

One can regard Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* almost as a Cartesian project in the sense that, like Descartes, he wishes to criticize his predecessors for unknowingly or uncritically accepting certain prejudices about the nature of the world. He then tries, also like Descartes, to bracket these prejudices or uncritical assumptions and to start from the ground up to see if he can deduce the truth of the matter based on his own principles. In Kant's case this means determining systematically the necessary conditions for the individual faculties of the human mind. This requires a systematic approach

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by N. Kemp Smith, New York 1929, 14, Axx. Ibid., 653, A832/B860. Ibid., Bxxxvii–xxxviii. Ibid., 33, A840/B869.

<sup>13</sup> J.G. Fichte, «First Introduction to the Science of Knowledge,» in: *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. by Heath and J. Lachs, Cambridge 1982, 22.

<sup>14</sup> F. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. by Heath, Charlottesville 1978, 1, 15.

given the fact that he must begin from nothing. If he were to begin anywhere else, he would risk making himself guilty of precisely that for which he charged his predecessors, namely, of assuming certain things uncritically and thus without demonstration. Given this, Kant must proceed with one cognitive faculty at a time, until he has exhausted all of the faculties of the human mind. Only then will it be possible to determine exactly what the mind can and cannot know. Only in this way can he ascertain the true limits of reason.

Given that the human mind represents a system of interlacing faculties, Kant must give an exhaustive account of them all in order to determine how the whole works. This can be seen in analogy with many other fields that have the study of organic systems as their object. Thus in anatomy it is necessary to understand the workings of the individual organs in order to understand the workings of the entire organism. Given that certain organs and organ systems are related to and necessarily depend on others, these must be studied and understood not in isolation but as a part of the larger whole, which they comprise. As is said, the whole is greater than the sum total of its parts. So also the astronomer exploring a planetary system must examine not just the individual entities that constitute it, that is, the star, the planets, and their moons, but must also see how these relate to and mutually interact with one another. A full understanding of such a system requires that one knows what effect the distance, the mass, the speed and direction of the movement and the gravity of the one body has on the others. Thus, this conception of systematic thinking seems straightforward and even uncontroversial in the realm of science today.

For Kant and the other German idealists, this understanding of system, for obvious reasons, led to a somewhat rigid and disciplined form of writing. To give a systematic account of the individual faculties of the human mind required that one treat them seriatim and that one did not skip around in the analysis. This is the reason that the works of the German philosophers from this period are often divided into elaborate sections and subsections with numbered paragraphs. The goal of this kind of organization is not to impress or needlessly confuse the reader but rather to make the systematic relations as clear as possible. From the perspective of the reader today this can look somewhat tedious, pretentious or even pedantic, but this kind of organizational scheme and its accompanying form of writing are not gratuitous; indeed, as just noted, there is a serious and well-considered philosophical point that dictates it.

Hegel continued in the tradition of Kant, and, like his predecessor, he too insisted that philosophy must be executed in a systematic manner if it is to have any value.<sup>15</sup> In his first main work, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel echoes the claims of his predecessors when he states: «The true shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of such truth.»<sup>16</sup> In the same context, he adds: «knowledge is only actual, and can only be expounded, as Science or as *system*.»<sup>17</sup> However, Hegel added his own special twist to the notion of systematic thinking based on his own understanding of speculative philosophy.

According to Hegel's metaphysics, the categories that constitute both the human mind and the external world are not to be conceived as isolated, individual entities. Instead, they jointly constitute an elaborate network that is necessarily interconnected. In the *Science of Logic*, he attempts to demonstrate these necessary relations in a step-by-step manner. He wishes to show that there is no hidden thing-in-itself or unknown, transcendent sphere that is forever separated from the human mind; in order to do so he must demonstrate that everything that is needed for knowing is entirely immanent and thus available to thinking and cognition. This is the goal of the theory of categories that he develops in that work.

Hegel's guiding intuition is that individual categories are necessarily related to one another as opposites (*Gegensätze*). When we take, for example, the most basic category that the mind can think, namely, pure being, we believe that we have an atomic entity that can stand on its own independently of any other thought or object. However, a closer examination shows that, in fact, this category is necessarily related to its opposite – nothing. It would be impossible to think the notion of being without the opposite concept of nothing. These concepts mutually imply one another, limiting and conditioning each other reciprocally. They form the necessary mirror image of each other. Hegel often uses somewhat paradoxical language to describe this relation by saying, for example, that the concept of being is the concept of nothing. By this he means merely that the concept

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, *The Encyclopaedia Logic. Part One of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. by T.F. Gerats, W.A. Suchting, H.S. Harris. Indianapolis 1991 (hereafter EL), § 14; *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vols. 1-26, ed. by H. Glockner, Stuttgart 1927-40 (hereafter Jub.), vol. 8, 60. *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller, Oxford 1977 (hereafter PhS), 11; Jub., vol. 2, 24. See EL, § 16; Jub., vol. 8, 61-63. PhS, 3; Jub., vol. 2, 14. PhS, 13; Jub., vol. 2, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, PhS, 3; Jub., vol. 2, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Hegel, PhS, 13; Jub., vol. 2, 27.

of nothing is already implicitly implied or contained in the concept of being.

Once one recognizes that concepts of this kind are not separate and independent but rather form a single organic entity, one realizes that in fact they jointly constitute a single, higher concept, in this case, becoming. This is Hegel's famous doctrine of mediation. All concepts are mediated by their opposites and thus develop into higher, more complex concepts. Thus, concepts such as up and down, right and left, north and south, all necessarily contain a higher joint concept, that is, vertical, horizontal and longitudinal direction. Hegel's ambitious goal in the *Science of Logic* is to trace all of these concepts and their mutual relations in an exhaustive fashion. He does so by systematically identifying the individual stages of thought by which one first begins with an individual category that is initially taken to be an autonomous, individual concept; then this leads to the second stage where the necessary opposite of this concept is discovered and juxtaposed to it; finally, at the third stage the mind realizes that these two concepts form a single unitary concept at a higher level. Hegel defines speculative philosophy specifically as the dissolution of opposites. For example, in the *Science of Logic*, one reads: «It is in this dialectic as it is here understood, that is, in the grasping of opposites in their unity or of the positive in the negative, that speculative thought consists.»<sup>18</sup>

The result of this methodology is a movement in the concepts of logic or metaphysics, which is the frequent target of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms. Hegel at times portrays this categorical development with metaphors that compare the movement of thought with the development and growth of organic life.<sup>19</sup> As a plant grows it passes through different stages from the seed, to the stock, to the flower and the fruit; yet each of these quite different parts nonetheless necessarily belongs to the single organism of the plant. So also with logic, while

<sup>18</sup> Hegel's *Science of Logic*, trans. by A.V. Miller, London 1989, 56; Jub., vol. 4, 54.

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, PhS, 2; Jub., vol. 2, 12: «The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole.» Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree, New York 1944, 18; Jub., vol. 11, 45: «And as the germ bears in itself the whole nature of the tree, and the taste and form of its fruits, so do the first traces of Spirit virtually contain the whole of that history.»



individual categories run their course in relation to other categories, they all necessarily constitute a part of a single organic system.

Another frequent metaphor used to capture the nature of the philosophical system is that of a circle. In the *Encyclopaedia*, he writes:

«Each of the parts of philosophy is a philosophical whole, a circle that closes upon itself; but in each of them the philosophical Idea is in a particular determinacy or element. Every single circle also breaks through the restriction of its element as well, precisely because it is inwardly the totality, and it grounds a further sphere. The whole presents itself therefore as a circle of circles, each of which is a necessary moment, so that the system of its particular elements constitutes the whole Idea – which equally appears in each single one of them.»<sup>20</sup>

Hegel indicates here that the procedure to be followed is one that repeats itself at different levels. Specifically, the movement of categories by means of the dialectic of opposites is one that appears in the different spheres. Thus although the specific content is different with regard to the individual categories, the logic is the same since it is necessary. There is thus a systematic structure at both the micro- and the macrolevel.

Moreover, the system constitutes a circle since the first and the last categorical determinations correspond to one another. Hegel explains this in connection with the difficult issue of the beginning of philosophy:

«Within the Science this standpoint, which in this first act appears as *immediate*, must make itself into the *result*, and (what is more) into its last result, in which it reaches its beginning again and returns into itself. In this way, philosophy shows itself as a circle that goes back into itself.»<sup>21</sup>

Since the first and the last categories constitute a unity, the system is immanent and self-enclosed. In principle, one could begin anywhere and the necessary logic of the categories would lead one through the entire system until one returned to the point where one started.

It should be noted that the critical target of this conception of philosophy as systematic in Hegel's special sense is the view of things that regards individual concepts and categories as absolute, isolated entities. Thus instead of seeing the necessary organic interrelations of the categories, this view holds firmly to the one or the other side

<sup>20</sup> EL, § 15; Jub., vol. 8, 61.

<sup>21</sup> EL, § 17; Jub., vol. 8, 63f.

of the dichotomy. Such views cannot see that they maintain a one-sided position by failing to recognize that their particular view is necessarily related to and conditioned by its opposite. Seemingly in critical anticipation of Kierkegaard, Hegel refers to all forms of dualistic thinking as a kind of dogmatic either-or. In the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, for example, he writes the following somewhat polemical passage:

«But in the narrower sense dogmatism consists in adhering to one-sided determinations of the understanding whilst excluding their opposites. This is just the strict «either-or,» according to which (for instance) the world is *either* finite *or* infinite, but *not both*. On the contrary, what is genuine and speculative is precisely what does not have any such one-sided determination in it and is therefore not exhausted by it; on the contrary, being a totality, it contains the determinations that dogmatism holds to be fixed and true in a state of separation from one another united within itself.»<sup>22</sup>

Hegel is thus critical of all forms of one-sided thinking that he regards as being caught in a blind dualism. These conceptions fail to grasp the true speculative unity of the concepts and the universe and thereby result in distorted views about specific issues. Hegel's conception of speculative philosophy is thus that the goal should be to grasp the whole and to understand the individual elements in their necessary relations to the other parts in the whole. Any understanding of an individual element on its own invariably leads to misunderstandings and confusions.

While Hegel's notion of the dialectical development of opposites represents his own contribution to systematic and speculative thinking, the result, with respect to philosophical writing, is much the same. Given that the truth consists in these necessary relations, the exposition of this is restricted to exploring this in a step-by-step necessary sequence. While Hegel occasionally attempts to illustrate the nature of the categories with examples drawn from everyday life, the general exposition must follow the predetermined systematic form that his methodology dictates. But this is not an unimaginative narrow-mindedness or an obtuse insistence of system for its own sake; instead, it is grounded in a well-considered and carefully argued view of the nature of the philosophical enterprise as such.

<sup>22</sup> Hegel, EL, § 32, Addition; Jub., vol. 8, 106. With this example Hegel is of course making reference to the «First Antimony» in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, op. cit., 399-402, A426/B454-A433/B461.

Philosophy must be written in a systematic way that traces the necessary relations of the concepts. This does not necessarily mean that it should invariably be written in numbered paragraphs in the way that Kierkegaard seems at times to want to mock.<sup>23</sup> But it does mean that the form of writing must be stringent and systematic.

In any case, from this account it should be clear why Kant, Hegel and the German idealists were so insistent on conceiving philosophy as a system and why this resulted in the somewhat tedious form of writing that they are known for. This constitutes the backdrop to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works since he was reacting to this philosophical paradigm both in its original form in the German context and in a derivative form in the works primarily of the Danish Hegelians, who sought to imitate it in their own language.

## II. Kierkegaard's Objection with Respect to Content

The understanding of systematic philosophy that lies behind the form of writing sketched above has important implications for the concept of religion and religious belief. Hegel's claim is that religion is one form of knowing along with many others. Since it is also a kind of thinking, religion follows the same rules of thought as everything else. Given this, it can be seen on a continuous spectrum of different scholarly fields, each with their own objects of investigation. Thus, it is also subject to the necessary dialectic of opposites that governs other fields. In a certain sense Kierkegaard has no objection to this since he can certainly allow for the scholarly investigation of certain questions related to religion.

The key point for him is, however, that none of these scholarly investigations can in any way be relevant for one's personal relation to Christianity and one's personal faith. With the distinction

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton 1983 (hereafter FT), 8; *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vols. 1-28, K1-K28, ed. by N.J. Cappelørn/J. Garff/J. Knudsen/J. Kondrup/A. McKinnon, Copenhagen 1997 (hereafter SKS), vol. 4, 103f. *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton 1988 (hereafter SLW), 291; SKS, vol. 6, 271. In fact, only two of Hegel's works were written with numbered paragraphs in this way: the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* and the *Philosophy of Right*. The reason for this was that these works were conceived as textbooks that he used in his lectures, and for didactical reasons it was useful to organize the material in this way so that he could simply refer the students to the individual paragraph numbers when he was assigning the readings and as he was working through the material.

between the subjective and the objective approach to Christianity in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*,<sup>24</sup> he makes it clear that one's personal disposition towards Christianity can in no way depend on any «objective» or external facts or scholarly results. The objective approach concerns what can be known about Christianity with regard to, for example, its history or sacred writings. This can certainly be examined with scholarly tools. However, the key issue is the subjective approach, which concerns one's own personal relation to Christianity and the message it conveys. This, by contrast, can never be the object of scholarly analysis. Instead, the question of the faith of the individual has to do with one's own inwardness, but this sphere is incommensurable and nondiscursive. It cannot be taught, learned or communicated directly.

This is clearly the reason that he claims in his early journals, «*Philosophy and Christianity can never be united.*»<sup>25</sup> In contrast to Hegel's claim that different religions and Christianity specifically can be incorporated into a philosophical system, the young Kierkegaard stubbornly insists that they must be kept separate since they are fundamentally different in kind. Hegel's attempt to understand Christianity as a form of knowing that is subordinate to philosophy, in Kierkegaard's eyes, misunderstands the inward nature of Christian faith. It is impossible to compare philosophical knowing with Christianity in a way that a meaningful analysis can be given and a hierarchy between them established. The reason for this is that Christian faith exists only inwardly in the heart of each individual believer. This can never be examined and compared with philosophical knowing.

Thus, an important part of Kierkegaard's undertaking as an author concerns defining and delimiting the sphere of the religious experience. He wishes to carve out a special area for it that is invulnerable to any encroachment from the side of reason or science. Religious faith or the immediate lived experience of the individual are irreducible and autonomous; this is precisely what Hegel denies with his understanding of speculative philosophy. Thus, with the slogan «either/or» Kierkegaard is constantly keen to set up oppositions by means of which he wishes to maintain as absolute key dualisms, which Hegel would regard as forms of dogmatism.

<sup>24</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, vols. 1–2, trans. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton 1992, vol. 1 (hereafter CUP1), 17; SKS, vol. 7, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard's *Journals and Notebooks*, vols. 1–11, ed. by N.J. Cappelørn, et al., Princeton and Oxford 2007, vol. 1, 25; SKS 17, 30, AA:13.

A cardinal point of dogma for Hegel is that the truth is one. Since it is one, everything is related, and since everything is related, philosophy must have a systematic character if it is to understand its subject matter correctly. Kierkegaard clearly wishes to contest this view. The truth is not one; instead, there is an objective truth and a subjective truth, and these two represent utterly incommensurable spheres. Kierkegaard's loudest polemics are aimed against those who purportedly confuse these two spheres. His claim is that Christianity, when seen from the side of objective truth, must remain forever transcendent and thus unknowable. As he has his pseudonym indicate in the *Postscript*, no historical, philological or philosophical research can ever determine the truth or falsity of Christianity or give the individual guidance with respect to the personal decision to believe or not. This is the point of many of his most famous doctrines such as the absolute paradox of the incarnation.

On his view, it is thus pretentious to claim to know this truth. For example, in *The Sickness unto Death* Kierkegaard has his pseudonym Anti-Climacus write the following:

«I consider it an outright ethical task, perhaps requiring not a little self-denial in these very speculative times, when all «the others» are busy comprehending it, to admit that one is neither able nor obliged to comprehend it. Precisely this is no doubt what our age, what Christendom needs: a little Socratic ignorance with respect to Christianity.»<sup>26</sup>

Modern speculative philosophy with its pretentious claims to know everything stands in stark contrast to the self-knowledge of Socrates, who claims neither to know nor to teach. Socratic ignorance was a form of piety and reverence before the divine. Kierkegaard has his pseudonymous author enjoin us to follow the Socratic example, which he takes to be in line with the correct Christian disposition, which accepts one's own finitude and sinfulness:

«Christianity teaches that everything essentially Christian depends solely upon faith; therefore it wants to be precisely a Socratic, God-fearing ignorance, which by means of ignorance guards faith against speculation, keeping watch so 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,

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<sup>26</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton 1980 (hereafter SUD), 99; SKS, vol. 11, 211.

even more dreadfully than ever in paganism, do not merge in some way, *philosophice, poetice*, etc., into one – in the system.»<sup>27</sup>

Any system of philosophy, which claims to have incorporated and understood Christianity represents a form of academic vanity that should be replaced by a deep-felt religious humility. This recalls the praise of Lessing, who said that when confronted with the choice, he would choose the never-ending struggle for the truth instead of the absolute truth itself.<sup>28</sup> Hegel's immanent philosophical system leaves no room for a transcendent God, who is in sole possession of the truth. There is no space for a divine perspective that radically surpasses the human.

Given that the objective truth of Christianity can never be known by human beings, what is left is the subjective truth. This is, however, something profoundly individual and private. It cannot be communicated to others or meaningfully discussed in positive terms. For this reason it would be absurd for Kierkegaard to attempt to present his views about this in a manner that is consistent with systematic philosophy. To do so would undermine his own doctrine. He needs a way to sketch his view of subjective truth or the inwardness of religious belief that is wholly incommensurable with philosophy or discursive reasoning in general. This can only be done by attempting to capture specific illustrative scenes, moods or experiences of individuals, with the hope that the readers will be able to identify with these episodic accounts and then transfer them *mutatis mutandis* to their own lives. His view of truth as subjective naturally leads him to seek alternative forms of presentation.

This raises key questions about Kierkegaard's vocation as a scholar in general and not least of all his relation to philosophy. The question of whether or not Kierkegaard was a philosopher has been a very keenly contested and ideologically stamped one in the research literature.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, the question invariably comes down to what one understands by «philosophy,» and this is of course often a matter of personal taste given that there are today so many different philosophical traditions and that the field has such a heterogeneous

<sup>27</sup> SUD, 99; SKS, vol. 11, 211.

<sup>28</sup> CUP1, 106; SKS, vol. 7, 103.

<sup>29</sup> For some interesting reflections on this issue, see A. Hannay, «Why Should Anyone Call Kierkegaard a Philosopher?», in: *Kierkegaard Revisited*, ed. by N.J. Cappelorn and J. Stewart, Berlin and New York 1997 (Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series, vol. 1), 238–253. A. Hannay, «Kierkegaard and What We Mean by «Philosophy»,» *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2000, 1–22. See also W. Barrett, *Irrational Man*, Garden City, New York 1962, 151.

character. On the one hand, there can be no doubt that Kierkegaard has his pseudonyms discuss any number of philosophical issues, albeit in his own somewhat idiosyncratic manner, and that those pseudonyms occasionally issue criticisms of a philosophical nature. On the other, however, he seems deeply dissatisfied with philosophy as such. Indeed, he seems to refuse to be drawn into a philosophical form of discussion since he thinks that this would be precisely to miss the point that he wants to make about Christianity. He often leaves the philosopher wanting since one seeks in vain for detailed, carefully reasoned arguments to support his often quite radical claims.

Given this, it seems that his primary goal is of a religious nature, namely, to make his reader attentive to the nature of Christianity as something inward and individual. This would then, he presumably hopes, enjoin the readers in the privacy of their own minds to review their own relation to Christianity, that is, to bring into focus the subjective approach. His goal can thus be seen as indirectly bringing about a religious reform in the individual reader. But Kierkegaard as an author can only do this *indirectly* since the actual reform itself can only be done by the individual believers themselves. That this is a significant part of his goal as an author seems to be supported by the edifying part of his authorship, which, as has been often noted, seems more or less barren of philosophical discussions. But it is clear that this goal with the authorship is not a philosophical enterprise *per se*. But this is of course not to say that it might not overlap here and there with specific philosophical questions such as the limits of reason or human knowing.

Given the distinction between the subjective and the objective approach and between faith and knowing, Kierkegaard is keen to emphasize that it is inappropriate and misleading to treat certain questions of religion in an objective manner. Given that the objective treatment is presented by a certain manner of writing, it is natural for Kierkegaard then to include this as a part of his criticism. Thus, the content of his views about the nature of religious faith is intimately connected to his criticism of the form of philosophical writing found in the German thinkers.

### III. Kierkegaard's Attempt to Distance Himself from Systematic Philosophy

Like many readers today, Kierkegaard felt alienated with the kind of writing that he found among the idealists. This tedious form of presentation seemed to him to fail to adequately reflect his own keen interest in the lived experience of the individual. It seemed entirely unsuited for expressing the trials and inward reflections of the religious life as he experienced it. Thus, his protest was not just against the concept of religion that he found in the German idealists but also against their general way of approaching the set of issues that we can designate as relevant for the existential life of the individual or the inwardness of the Christian believer. He was thus challenged to come up with an alternative mode of writing that would simultaneously expose this shortcoming in the work of his predecessors and more satisfactorily describe the key human issues concerning actuality and existence.

One of the most obvious and straightforward ways that Kierkegaard does this in his pseudonymous works is to have his pseudonymous authors and personae explicitly distance themselves from philosophy and what they conceive as the philosophical enterprise. With this, reference is clearly made to the dominant German philosophy of the day. In *Either/Or*, that is, at the very beginning of his pseudonymous authorship, Kierkegaard has Judge Wilhelm write to the aesthete: «As you know, I have never passed myself off as a philosopher.»<sup>30</sup> Only a page later he seems to repeat this by stating: «I am a married man and far from being a philosophic brain.»<sup>31</sup> This is not superfluous since in fact this statement ushers in a long discussion of the philosophical concept of mediation, which was a highly topical issue at the time. Thus, its placement at the beginning of this discussion is significant. It is as if Kierkegaard wishes to apologize for having the Judge dip into an issue that was of significance philosophically for thinkers of the day.

This is but one tip that Kierkegaard has explicitly conceived *Either/Or* not to be a philosophical text in the usual sense. By putting together a work as an apparently random collection of different kinds of writings from the aesthete and a series of letters from the Judge, he carefully avoids the standard philosophical form of writing. In the works of the aesthete it is difficult to discern any form of order or

<sup>30</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, trans. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton 1987 (hereafter EO2), 170; SKS, vol. 3, 166.

<sup>31</sup> EO2, 171; SKS, vol. 3, 167.



logic at all. Indeed, the «Diapsalmata,» with which the work proper begins, seem to be a string of entirely random ideas and insights – the very opposite of a systematic text. Likewise, the rambling letters by the Judge have a tone and quality that is entirely distinct from a philosophical discourse. It has often been noted in the literature that the Judge seems to represent the voice of common sense bourgeois life at the time and is not a spokesman for any traditional philosophical doctrine as such. Kierkegaard thus intentionally avoids portraying him as being philosophically savvy. Moreover, the story that the pseudonymous editor, Victor Eremita tells about the discovery of the manuscripts clearly undermines any temptation to consider the work to be systematically conceived.

One finds the same approach in another of Kierkegaard's famous pseudonymous books, namely, *Fear and Trembling*. In the Preface to that work Kierkegaard has his pseudonym Johannes de silentio write: «The present author is by no means a philosopher.»<sup>32</sup> Again, this is not a superfluous remark. At the beginning of the Preface he quotes Descartes at length in Latin and discusses the philosophical question of knowledge and the role of doubt. On the face of it, the reader could well have the impression from these first few pages that the work is a book on philosophy or, more precisely, epistemology. Precisely to avoid this mistaken impression, Kierkegaard has his pseudonym explicitly deny that he is a philosopher.

Indeed, after having stated this clearly, Johannes de silentio repeats it, this time stating implicitly in what the difference consists:

«Even if someone were able to transpose the whole content of faith into conceptual form, it does not follow that he has comprehended faith, comprehended how he entered into it or how it entered into him. The present author is by no means a philosopher.»<sup>33</sup>

Kierkegaard has Johannes de silentio identify the question of faith as the key point. Since Hegel and the German philosophers try to grasp Christian faith as a concept, they miss the point with regard to the faith of the individual. Kierkegaard, of course, has an entirely different conception of faith that cannot be grasped, analyzed or presented in this manner. Thus, he is obliged to present this in a form that is unmistakably different from the standard form of philosophizing at the time. Johannes de silentio is not a philosopher in the sense that he is not making any attempt to explicate or dem-

<sup>32</sup> FT, 7; SKS, vol. 4, 103.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

onstrate faith as a concept. He refers to himself as «a supplementary clerk, who neither writes the system nor gives *promises* of the system, who neither exhausts himself on the system nor binds himself to the system.»<sup>34</sup> He further anticipates the criticisms of the work by philosophers who will reproach it precisely for not being organized in numbered paragraphs and for not being systematic. Thus, right at the outset of the work Kierkegaard has his pseudonym declare quite explicitly that his enterprise is not philosophical (in the sense in which this was understood at the time) and that this is reflected in the form of writing that the book displays.

The pseudonymous work *Philosophical Fragments* at first glance presents a problem since the title itself seems to imply that it is a philosophical endeavor of some kind. However, by juxtaposing the adjective «philosophical» with the noun «fragments» Kierkegaard has in effect created an oxymoron, when seen from the perspective of the age. It would presumably have immediately struck contemporary philosophers as an oddity. How can a work claiming to contain philosophical truth be fragmentary and not systematic? In order to set this question straight right at the start, Kierkegaard has his pseudonym Johannes Climacus begin the work by stating, «What is offered here is only a pamphlet...without any claim to being a part of the scientific-scholarly endeavor.»<sup>35</sup> Since *Philosophical Fragments* in fact mentions famous philosophers from the tradition and treats certain philosophical issues, Kierkegaard again wishes to avoid any confusion of his work with the standard form of philosophical treatises of the day. He has his pseudonym ironically denigrate his own work by describing it repeatedly as a mere «pamphlet» (*Piece*). He returns to this motif at the end of the work by contrasting his genre with the standard philosophical genre: «to write a pamphlet is frivolity – but to promise the system, that is seriousness.»<sup>36</sup> He ends the work by again contrasting the nature of Christianity, as something that is related to the individual, with philosophy:

«Christianity is the only historical phenomenon that...has wanted to be the single individual's point of departure for his eternal consciousness, has wanted to interest him otherwise than merely historically, has wanted to base his happiness on his relation to

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> PF, 5; SKS, vol. 4, 215.

<sup>36</sup> *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton 1985 (hereafter PF), 109; SKS, vol. 4, 305.

something historical. No philosophy (for it is only for thought)...  
has ever had this idea.»<sup>37</sup>

He thus explicitly distinguishes his understanding of Christianity from the philosophical endeavor. The juxtaposition of these passages clearly indicates the necessary relation of content and form that informs Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings.

Kierkegaard's satirical work *Prefaces* is a wonderful polemic primarily against Johan Ludvig Heiberg, Denmark's leading Hegelian philosopher at the time. This work is rife with criticisms of the philosophical enterprise and philosophical writing. The humorous story of the origin of the work, which is told by the pseudonymous author Nicolaus Notabene, clearly forbids any association with serious philosophy. Notabene explains that his wife has forbidden him from writing books, but since he still very much wants to be an author he decides to get around the prohibition by confining himself to writing not books but only prefaces. Thus the work consists of a series of prefaces to books that remain unwritten. With this alone Nicolaus Notabene distances himself from the standard philosophical writing of the day. Instead of elaborating a system, he writes a preface and stops. In the eyes of the German philosophers such a work could have no philosophical value whatsoever. Although it is hardly necessary, Nicolaus Notabene distances himself from philosophy explicitly, when he says, «*ἡ ἐπιπορευὴ* has kept me from passing myself off as a philosopher.»<sup>38</sup> By this he refers to the ancient skeptical doctrine of the suspension of judgment.

*Stages on Life's Way* can in many ways be considered the companion piece to *Either/Or*. Right away it announces itself as an unphilosophical and unscholarly work due to the fact that it is a collection of scattered texts from different authors, assembled not by a scholar but by a bookbinder. As was the case with *Either/Or*, the very genre of this work seems to forbid it from being regarded as a philosophical treatise. Moreover, the same sort of caveat that we have seen in Kierkegaard's other literary personae is found in the contribution to the anthology made by «a married man.» At the outset of his «reflections of marriage,» he declares, «I am far from being learned and make no claims to that; it would be embarrassing if I were foolish enough to assume anything like that. I am not a dialectician, not a philosopher.»<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless he still feels that he can defend his position with regard to marriage even against learned

<sup>37</sup> PF, 109; SKS, vol. 4, 305.

<sup>38</sup> Prefaces, trans. by T. W. Nichol, Princeton 1997 (hereafter P), 49; SKS, vol. 4, 510.

<sup>39</sup> SLW, 92; SKS, vol. 6, 90.

men. The implication is clearly that he has some practical insight into the matter that is not increased by philosophy or knowledge of books. Along the same lines Frater Taciturnus, the author of the piece «Guilty/Not Guilty,» critically contrasts his own life of action with the practice of philosophical writing:

«And by this kind of talk, or rather, by a life that justifies talking this way, I would think – provided that one person can benefit another at all – I would think that I have benefited my esteemed contemporaries more than by writing a paragraph in the system.»<sup>40</sup>

Kierkegaard realizes that his readers will recognize here a discussion of a current philosophical problem. He is thus aware of the risk of being associated with contemporary philosophers, and thus he feels the need to have his author state clearly that his discussion and criticism should not be regarded as philosophical in this sense.

In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, arguably Kierkegaard's most philosophical work, he again has his pseudonym Johannes Climacus explicitly contrast his own work with systematic philosophy. At the beginning he explains the relation of this new work to the *Philosophical Fragments* and provides some insight into the enigmatic motto of the former work:

«Undisturbed and in accordance with the motto (Better well hanged than ill wed), the hanged, indeed, the well-hanged, author has remained hanging. No one – not even in sport or jest – has asked him for whom he did hang. But that was as desired; better well hanged than by a hapless marriage to be brought into systematic in-law relationship with the whole world. Relying on the nature of the pamphlet, I was hoping this would happen, but in view of the bustling ferment of the age, in view of the incessant forebodings of prophecy and vision and speculative thought, I feared to see my wish frustrated by some mistake.»<sup>41</sup>

The idea seems clearly that he wrote a «pamphlet» in order to distinguish the work from contemporary philosophy, which had a distinctly different form of writing. The marriage that he feared was that with speculative or systematic philosophy; he wanted at any cost to avoid this association. It is better to be «hanged» in the sense that it is better to suffer the criticisms of negative reviews and the public outrage for the views expressed in the work than to be associated

<sup>40</sup> SLW, 291; SKS, vol. 6, 271.

<sup>41</sup> CUP1, 5; SKS, vol. 7, 9.

with systematic thought. His didactical hope is that «the nature of the pamphlet» will steer people away from any associations of this kind and will be sufficient indication that the work is cut from an entirely different cloth.

Later in the book, in the context of a critical discussion of the issue of the purported presuppositionless beginning of Hegel's logic with the category of pure being, Climacus writes,

«What has been said here about a beginning in logic...is very plain and simple. I am almost embarrassed to say it or embarrassed to have to say it, embarrassed because of my situation – that a poor pamphlet writer, who would rather be worshipping on his knees before the system, should be constrained to say such a thing.»<sup>42</sup>

In this way Kierkegaard constantly and consistently distinguishes the works of his pseudonyms from those of the philosophers. Indeed, when he mentions the latter, the term almost always has a pejorative ring to it. He refers to «the priests of philosophy,»<sup>43</sup> «the speculators,»<sup>44</sup> «systematic triflers,»<sup>45</sup> «systematic entrepreneurs,»<sup>46</sup> «enterprising abstracter[s]»<sup>47</sup> and «gobbler[s] of paragraphs.»<sup>48</sup> Simply by using the term, «the philosophers,» he is designating a group that he clearly does not want to be associated with. He thus distinguishes his works from those of his contemporaries, and an important part of this distinction has to do with the kind of writing that he is engaged in.

#### IV. Philosophy and Life

Kierkegaard also makes use of many other methods to create an alternative genre to then contemporary philosophy and to distinguish his works from it. As has been seen, his thought can be grasped not so much as an attempt to create a philosophical theory but as something intimately connected with concrete practice. For this reason he frequently makes use of the concept of «appropriation.» The goal

<sup>42</sup> CUP1, 116; SKS, vol. 7, 112f.

<sup>43</sup> P, 50; SKS, vol. 4, 510.

<sup>44</sup> CUP1, 120; SKS, vol. 7, 116.

<sup>45</sup> CUP1, 123; SKS, vol. 7, 118.

<sup>46</sup> CUP1, 123; SKS, vol. 7, 118.

<sup>47</sup> FT, 8; SKS, vol. 4, 103.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

is not to come up with a consistent and defensible theory that explains certain traditional problems of metaphysics or dogmatics but rather to appropriate the Christian message in the life of the individual. The believer must interpret the Christian message and realize or enact it in concrete actions in his or her own life. As one early commentator noted, for Kierkegaard, «it was not a matter of giving a solution to an academic problem but of a *task of life*.»<sup>49</sup> While this comment was made specifically in reference to *The Concept of Irony*, it could well apply to Kierkegaard's entire authorship. Writing was a way of making this task for life clearer, but writing was only part of the job. Regular reflection on one's own relation to Christianity and the constant attempt to act on the result of those reflections in the real world was the other part.

In his works *Johannes Climacus* or *De omnibus dubitandum est* and *Repetition*, one finds attempts to, as it were, act out philosophical ideas in terms of life actions, which are described in a narrative form. In *De Omnibus* Kierkegaard portrays a naïve student at the University of Copenhagen who attends the lectures of the Hegelian philosophers. They repeatedly declare with Descartes that one must begin by doubting everything. Instead of realizing that this is merely an academic exercise, Johannes takes this literally and attempts to apply it in his own life. But this clearly proves impossible. The plot of the unfinished narrative is intended to show that the attempt to actually live one's life in accordance with this philosophical cliché is in fact impossible and even destructive. Kierkegaard explains how the story is supposed to run:

«Johannes does what we are told to do – he actually doubts everything – he suffers through all the pain of doing that, becomes cunning, almost acquires a bad conscience. When he has gone as far in that direction as he can go and wants to come back, he cannot do so. He perceives that in order to hold on to this extreme position of doubting everything, he has engaged all his mental and spiritual powers. If he abandons this extreme position, he may very well arrive at something, but in doing that he would have also abandoned his doubt about everything. Now he despairs, his life is wasted, his youth is spent in these deliberations. Life has not acquired any meaning for him, and all this is the fault of philosophy.»<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> H.F. Helweg, «Hegelianismen i Danmark,» Dansk Kirketidende, vol. 10, no. 51, December 16, 1855, 830.

<sup>50</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*, trans. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton 1985, Supplement, 234–235; Pap. IV B 16.

Jon Stewart

This work can thus be taken as a kind of literary refutation of the philosophical position. While it may seem to be a respectable thesis in the classroom, it is refuted by the fact that it has no actual application in real life. Reference is made to this in the *Postscript*, where we read:

«What is lunacy? When an assistant professor, every time his coat-tail reminds him to say something, says *de omnibus dubitandum est* and briskly writes away on a system in which there is sufficient internal evidence in every other sentence that the man has never doubted anything – he is not considered lunatic.»<sup>51</sup>

The absurdity is that the pretentious scholar is not even able to successfully carry out the recommended universal skepticism in his own scholarly writings. If it is not even possible there, how could this be done elsewhere.

So also in *Repetition* the pseudonymous author Constantin Constantius attempts to demonstrate the philosophical concept of repetition by taking a trip to Berlin. Since he has been in Berlin before, by repeating his trip he hopes to determine if the philosophical concept of repetition is a real one. The work begins as follows:

«When the Eleatics denied motion, Diogenes, as everyone knows, came forward as an opponent. He literally did come forward, because he did not say a word but merely paced back and forth a few times, thereby assuming that he had sufficiently refuted them. When I was occupied for some time, at least on occasion, with the question of repetition – whether or not it is possible, what importance it has, whether something gains or loses in being repeated – I suddenly had the thought: You can, after all, take a trip to Berlin; you have been there before, and now you can prove to yourself whether a repetition is possible and what importance it has.»<sup>52</sup>

This in a sense represents the plot of the work. However, he discovers that in fact a repetition is not possible since so many things have changed vis-à-vis his first visit, and even the things that have not changed he experiences as different since *he* has changed. In short no repetition is possible. Once again the refutation is not carried out with reasoned counterarguments but with actions in the world. In the form of a story Kierkegaard attempts to refute a philosophical concept. The emphasis on action makes perfect sense when one

<sup>51</sup> CUP1, 195; SKS, vol. 7, 179.

<sup>52</sup> R, 131; SKS vol. 4, 9.

considers that one of the main inspirations for the work was doubtless Kierkegaard's own second journey to Berlin in May 1843, where he began the writing of the book.

In *Prefaces*, Kierkegaard has his author state that he has been dominated by doubt with respect to the ambitious claims that his philosophical contemporaries were making:

«I once believed that I had ascertained that things were not entirely right with some of my esteemed contemporaries. In other words, when I, despite every effort, was unable to ascend to the dizzying thought of doubting everything, I decided, in order nevertheless to doubt something, to concentrate my soul on the more human task of doubting whether all the philosophizers understood what they said and what was said. This doubt is overcome not in the system, but in life.»<sup>53</sup>

This is clearly a polemic with the oft-repeated claims of his contemporary Hans Lassen Martensen that philosophy must begin with doubt. Martensen argued, like Descartes, that philosophy must call everything into doubt in order to start free from prejudice with only the most basic propositions that can be demonstrated by rational proof. Notabene's claim is that this is merely an empty intellectual exercise since in life it is impossible to doubt everything. He thus hints at an alternative to the philosophical enterprise. While philosophy sets for itself the task of overcoming doubt by means of a body of carefully constructed systematic thought, Notabene believes that this problem and thus this solution can simply be rendered superfluous if one is attentive to the actual lived experience of human life. There is no need to construct a philosophical system in order to escape the problem of skepticism. It is always already avoided as soon as one leaves the study or the classroom and engages in the world. Again the focus shifts from the academic context to a practical one that is designated here vaguely with the term «life.» The criticism concerns at least in part what Kierkegaard regards as the pretension of philosophy to give an exhaustive explanation of everything by means of a system, but in order to do so it creates pseudoproblems and fails to address the real ones.

Given that Kierkegaard explicitly avoided using the accepted philosophical genre and consistently rejected the label of «philosopher» for his literary voices, it is absurd to charge him with being a bad philosopher as was the case in much of the earlier literature. While

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<sup>53</sup> P, 49; SKS, vol. 4, 510.



Jon Stewart

Kierkegaard research has enjoyed a great boom in recent years with a wealth of interdisciplinary studies, this was not always the case. In the heyday of analytic philosophy he was frequently dismissed as being irrelevant for philosophy. One commentator writes, for example,

«[Kierkegaard's] writings are for the most part undistinguished so far as their philosophical content is concerned. Extensive reading is necessary to find a single philosophical thought that can be referred to as such.»<sup>54</sup>

Such a view seems to miss the point of Kierkegaard's often indirect polemic with philosophy. Since he refuses to do philosophy in a way that the commentator can recognize, his writings are simply written off as not being of any philosophical value. The failure comes from an inability to see Kierkegaard in the general context of nineteenth-century philosophy, which constituted the background against which he was reacting.

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<sup>54</sup> M. Farber, *Phenomenology and Existence. Toward a Philosophy within Nature*, New York/Evanston/London 1967, 27.