

THE SHADOW OF HEGEL

in Kierkegaard's Notion of Subjectivity

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The philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard is fundamentally the philosophy of the individual. Born to an affluent family in Copenhagen in 1813, Kierkegaard was greatly influenced in his intellectual development by the prevailing notions of the Danish Golden Age, an age featuring new creativity in the arts and sciences, including painting, architecture, and chemistry. Kierkegaard witnessed nihilism growing in spite of these achievements, however. Poets and literary critics such as Ludwig Tieck and August Wilhelm Schlegel used (or misused, according to Kierkegaard) the philosophy of Johann Gottlieb Fichte to justify their ironic and solipsistic relativism. The centrality of the subject in Fichte's philosophy was attractive to the German Romantics, who looked for philosophical justification for their nihilistic and relativistic rejection of the objective world¹. In an age where long-held traditions and beliefs were slipping away, Kierkegaard worked to revitalize the concepts of truth, faith, and subjectivity.

Kierkegaard's canon defies easy categorization. He has been characterized as an existentialist and essentialist, a progressive and a reactionary, a proponent of German Idealism and one of its harshest critics. The question of Hegelian thought in Kierkegaard's work, then, is one of enduring interest for scholars. Kierkegaard was the first in a long tradition of critics to reject Hegel's absolute idealism as a philosophy of identity that effectively

¹ Jon Stewart, "The Crisis of the Danish Golden Age as the Problem of Nihilism," in *The Crisis of the Danish Golden Age and Its Modern Resonance*, eds. Nathaniel Kramer and Jon Stewart, New edition (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2020), 125-127.

“swallows” the individual². The beginning of *Sickness Unto Death*, in which Kierkegaard posits that the “self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation,” has been interpreted as parodying Hegel’s obtuse writing style. Other parts of Kierkegaard’s authorship appear more explicitly anti-Hegelian: in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus (Kierkegaard’s pseudonym) boldly asserts “[dialectical] mediation is a mirage.”³ In spite of this pervasive anti-Hegelianism, Kierkegaard owes much of his philosophical foundations to the German idealist. What Kierkegaard called his “Socratic task”—the task that structured disparate works across the authorship—is fundamentally Hegelian. Not only is it Hegel’s Socrates that Kierkegaard uses as his model for subjectivity, it is Hegel’s absolute knowing subject that Kierkegaard uses to situate this notion of subjectivity as the *telos* of his philosophical project.

In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel interprets Socrates as the world-historical inventor of subjectivity. Socrates, Hegel maintains, was the first to ground the subject—as opposed to external social mores and laws—as the site of the discovery of the ethical. Hegel identifies Socrates’s *daimonion* as central to the invention of subjectivity. In the *Apology*, Socrates justifies his actions by explaining that when he is about to make a mistake, he is warned by this *daimonion*: an entirely negative force that is neither completely internal nor completely external, but is nonetheless personal⁴. With this concept, Socrates “posited the Individual as capable of final moral decision, in contraposition to Country and to Customary Morality.”⁵ The Socratic concept of *maieutics*, or “the art of midwifery,” further demonstrates the subjectivity of Socrates’s method. Socrates fashioned himself as a “midwife of ideas,” who, rather than promoting any specific positive doctrine, helped his pupils reach their own conclusions through their individual, internal reason⁶.

The Athenians of the time, however, derived their ethics from outside of themselves rather than from inward reflection; to receive guidance they looked not to their own subjective reason, but to tradition, law, and the gods. Hegel identified “public religion” as the basis for the Athenian State; Athenians are bound together by their shared reverence for this objective source of ethics. It is up to the broad sphere of tradition, religion, law, etc.—*Sittlichkeit* or “ethical life”—to decide how an individual should behave. *Sittlichkeit* is built upon “Objective Spirit,” the objective patterns of social interactions and cultural institutions. When seeking direction, the ancient Athenians would ask the Oracle of Delphi for the right course of action⁷. There was no notion that ethics could be discovered through individual introspection.

The invention of subjectivity, then, signified a denial of the entirety of Athenian society.

2 Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash: The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (MIT Press, 2018), 1.

3 Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Alastair Hannay, 1st edition (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 166.

4 Plato, *Apology in Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G. M. A. Grube, Second Edition, 2 (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 31c-d.

5 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Frederick C. Beiser, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 1: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, trans. E. S. Haldane (Lincoln: Nebraska, 1995), 346.

6 Plato, *Theaetetus*, ed. Bernard Williams and Myles Burnyeat, trans. M. J. Levett, UK ed. edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992), 27.

7 Georg W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. S. W. Dyde (Mineola, N.Y.; Newton Abbot: Dover Publications, 2005) § 145 and G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 358.

For this reason, Hegel diagnoses Socrates's pedagogy as purely negative. In calling Socrates a "negative" figure, Hegel is not saying he has a pessimistic disposition; rather, Socrates rejects the validity of the world as it currently is, but does not provide a positive (*ie.*, substantive) replacement. Socrates's *daimonion*, for instance, functions entirely negatively. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates explains that it is a "voice" which "turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything."⁸ The *daimonion* "turns away" from the false, but does not directly posit the true. The concept of *aporia* further illustrates the centrality of negation in Socrates's subjectivity. In the "aporetic" dialogues, which include the *Meno*, *Euthyphro*, and *Gorgias*, Socrates challenges his interlocutors to explain their positions on truth, justice, or other philosophical concepts. Through questioning, Socrates reveals how the notions of his interlocutors are ill-conceived and contradictory. Socrates does not, however, offer a replacement for these mistaken judgments; rather, the dialogues end in *aporia*; having demonstrated the contradiction, Socrates provides no positive replacement for the flawed concepts.

Hegel asserts that Aristophanes's play *Clouds* offers a true account of Socrates because it demonstrates the radicality of this negative method. It seems strange that Hegel has a favorable judgement of Aristophanes's work; indeed, the play viciously lampoons Socrates's thought as not only buffoonish, but dangerous. It is precisely the degree to which Aristophanes condemns Socrates that he demonstrates "the truth of Socrates." Hegel maintains that Aristophanes understood Socratic philosophy as negative and that his play elucidated the Athenian's reaction to Socrates⁹. In *Clouds*, Socrates tells Strepsiades: "If one idea comes to nothing, let it go, retrace your steps, then give those thoughts another good shake."¹⁰ The word "shake" emphasizes the disarray caused by Socrates's method; when Strepsiades reaches *aporia*—when "one idea comes to nothing"—he must reject all his premises and try again. Socrates's negativity was, to use Kierkegaard's terminology, "absolute infinite negativity." This sort of negativity does not negate "this or that particular phenomenon" but the entire social whole, the entire world of the object¹¹. Aristophanes shows that this negativity was so overwhelming that it necessitated Socrates's death—because it could no longer be integrated into ethical life.

Aristophanes understood, Hegel contends, how this radical negativity endangered the totality of Athenian life. Standing in opposition to the numerous commentators before him, Hegel asserts that the Athenians acted correctly in convicting Socrates¹². Hegel criticized the historian Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann for arguing that Socrates's treatment was "revolting to humanity." Hegel rejects this interpretation of Socrates's trial because it downplays the radical nature of Socrates's philosophy; Hegel believes that, based on the ethic of their time, Athenians were "bound to react against [Socrates] according to their law."

8 Plato, *Apology*, 31c-d.

9 Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 347.

10 Aristophanes, *Clouds*, ed. John Cloughton and Judith Affleck, Cambridge Translatio edition (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), lines 743-6.

11 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Ebook edition (Princeton, N.J. Great Britain: Princeton University Press, 2000), 261.

12 Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 350.

¹³Aristophanes's account is invaluable because it illuminates why Socrates deserved execution under Athenian law: his subjectivity entailed a complete negation of objective situation.

Kierkegaard is openly indebted to Hegel's treatment of Socrates as a negative figure. His doctoral thesis, *The Concept of Irony*, is in constant critical dialogue with Hegel's account of Socrates. In his discussion of the titular concept, Kierkegaard identifies irony as a qualification of subjectivity, and it is in this ironic rejection of the objective that the subject is *negatively* free¹⁴. Kierkegaard's explicit definition of irony elucidates the Hegelian connection between negativity and subjectivity:

[W]e have irony as the infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not. The irony establishes nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it. It is a divine madness that rages like a Tamerlane and does not leave one stone upon another.

The world-historical invention of subjectivity, then, required irony's complete negation of the ethical order. In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard explains why "Socrates can very well be called the founder of morality in the sense Hegel thinks of it, and that his position still could have been irony. The good as task, when the good is understood as the infinitely negative, corresponds to the moral, that is, the negatively free subject," clearly echoing the sentiment expressed in Hegel's *Lectures*.¹⁵ The moral is "infinitely negative:" it contains no positivity within it. Hegel asserts that Socrates's negative method could not amount to any sort of speculative¹⁶ philosophy, but remained "ein individuelles Thun," an "individual doing."¹⁷ Just as Hegel did, Kierkegaard saw Socrates as stopping short before speculative, positive, thought, because Socrates did not negate his negativity. Socrates did not reach a sublation, or a dialectical mediation, of the positive and the negative—of objectivity and subjectivity. Negativity, for Socrates, was infinite and absolute.

In reconstructing Hegel's argument, Kierkegaard pays special attention to the anti-speculative character of Socrates's method. For Kierkegaard, the fact that Socrates made no attempt to transcend the opposition between subject and object is "the mark of truth." Kierkegaard, then, largely accepts Hegel's treatment of Socrates, with one key modification: for Hegel, in remaining in negativity, Socrates had erred, but for Kierkegaard, it was that very impasse that Socrates achieved—his *aporia*—that was to be emulated. For Kierkegaard, it is precisely this negativity which allowed for Socrates to interrogate the truth. Though they may differ in their evaluation of him, the Socrates of *The Concept of Irony* is, at its core, the Socrates of Hegel.

¹³ Ibid., 362.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, 29.

¹⁵ Ibid., 235.

¹⁶ That is, providing an account of the Absolute.

¹⁷ Ibid., 227.

Kierkegaard would later reject the blatant Hegelianism of *The Concept of Irony*. Indeed, the philosopher characterizes the work as a misgiving, riddled with Hegelian concepts he would only later discuss dismissively in the works Kierkegaard saw as comprising his “authorship.”¹⁸ In spite of his apparent rejection of Hegel, the Hegelian notion of Socrates that Kierkegaard advanced in *The Concept of Irony* grounds his broader formulations of subjectivity, truth, and faith. After treating the ancient Greek philosopher at length in *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard continues to use Hegel’s Socrates as a model, especially in the structure of his work *Either/Or*.

Kierkegaard divides his work *Either/Or* into two parts, ostensibly written by two different authors. The first part of the work is attributed to an anonymous esthete called A., who, embodying contemporary subjectivity, notes that when he became an adult he found “that the rich delight of love was to acquire a well-to-do girl, that the blessedness of friendship was to help each other in financial difficulties, [...] that piety was to go to communion once a year.”¹⁹ A. advances an ironic detachment from traditional conceptions of love, friendship, industriousness, and even faith. It is negativity that engenders this denial of the universal ethic of the day: “I have, I believe, the courage to fight against everything; but I do not have the courage to acknowledge anything.”²⁰ Kierkegaard is clearly sympathetic to this account of contemporary life, especially its account of the superficiality of modern faith, which echoes Kierkegaard’s critique of the bourgeois lifestyle of the clergy in the last issue of *The Moment*.²¹

The author of the second half of *Either/Or*, the fictitious Judge William, rigorously defends the ethic of the day by explaining the virtues of bourgeois society and morality. He defends the virtue of marital love as divine, in direct opposition to A.’s unequivocal, “[m]arry or do not marry you will regret it either way.”²² William continues his defense of the universal ethic in opposition to the Esthete when he lauds Objective spirit as “a social, a civic self,” and emphasizes the importance of ethical responsibility as it relates to civic duty.²³ Just as Kierkegaard is sympathetic to the Esthete’s point of view, he equally accepts that of Judge William; many of Judge Williams’ arguments mimic those that Kierkegaard gives against the German Romantics in the *Concept of Irony*.²⁴

The dualistic structure of the work reflects Hegel’s Socratic lesson: Judge William acts as the *Sittlichkeit*—in this case 19th century bourgeois ethics—which A. rejects. Kierkegaard does not favor one view over the other; rather, the two viewpoints must exist in contradiction despite the impossibility of their mediation. As evidenced by Kierkegaard’s other writing, both positions offer valuable critiques, in Kierkegaard’s mind, and to privilege one over the other would be foolish. Even though both positions provide insight, however, mediation

18 Lore Hühn, “Irony and Dialectic: On a Critique of Romanticism in Kierkegaard and Hegel’s Philosophy,” *MLN* 128, no. 5 (2013): 1063.

19 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Later Printing edition (Princeton, N.J. Great Britain: Princeton University Press, 2000), 42–43.

20 *Ibid.*, 39.

21 Søren Kierkegaard, “My Task” in *The Moment*, 10 in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Later Printing edition (Princeton, N.J. Great Britain: Princeton University Press, 2000), 347.

22 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, 43, 7.1

23 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, 82.

24 See the chapter “Irony after Fichte” in *The Concept of Irony*.

of the two is impossible. Kierkegaard stresses that truth appears not when an opposition is mediated, but when that opposition is first confronted. Indeed, the title “Either/Or” refers to a passage in Hegel’s *Science of Logic* where he stresses the importance of sublating a dichotomy (an “either-or”) through dialectical mediation. Kierkegaard, however, did not wish to go beyond the dichotomy, and suggested that truth results not from sublating or mediating contradiction, but from confronting it. In this manner, Kierkegaard follows Socrates’s emphasis on negativity, specifically *aporia*. There is no mediation between the two viewpoints; rather, they remain in irresolvable contradiction. A.’s position—in spite of its value—cannot be integrated into the bourgeois universal because of its inherently subjective dimension. The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* describes *Either/Or* as “a polemic against truth as knowledge.”²⁵ That is, the work stresses that the subjective rejection of objective Spirit offers an equally valuable form of truth as objective knowledge does.

Privileged among the authorship as a work to which Kierkegaard attached his real name (albeit only as the editor), the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of Kierkegaard’s notion of subjectivity and truth. Much of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* uses Hegel’s language of dialectics against itself. Even the title of the work may be targeting the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, intended by Hegel to be the beginning of a “science of experience.”²⁶ It seems strange, then, to assert a fundamental Hegelianism in the *Postscript*. The relation between subjectivity and truth—that subjectivity *is* truth, and truth subjectivity—is derived from the Hegelian Socrates formulated in the *Concept of Irony*.

Central to the task of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is explaining the connection between truth and subjectivity. Climacus asserts that a certain type of truth can only be achieved through subjectivity, and that subjectivity can only achieve that type of truth. This truth is the truth of our most important personal ethical commitments, including, above all, faith. The author posits that, “reflection of inwardness is the subjective thinker’s double reflection. In thinking, he thinks the universal, but as existing in this thinking, as assimilating this in his inwardness, he becomes more and more subjectively isolated.”²⁷ The individual considers the universal ethic (“thinks the universal”) but through her consideration of it becomes alienated from it. Her self-discovery requires an anti-objective form of inquiry. This description reflects Hegel’s notion of Socrates as not focused on particular objects, but on the universal. Just as Socrates is said to “know nothing” because he lacked the knowledge of particular objective pursuits, the “subjective thinker” is not focused on knowledge of particulars. In his double-reflection, that is, his reflection on his own reflection (“subjectivity to the second power”), the subjective thinker becomes separated from the ‘objective Spirit.’

Climacus’s assertion that subjectivity cannot be expressed through direct communication further illustrates the *aporia* of subjectivity. The subjective truth, Climacus contends, cannot

²⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Alastair Hannay, 1st edition (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 211.

²⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard and Michael Baur (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 6.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 62.

be integrated into objectivity through direct language—it must be expressed through indirect means, including art and poetry.

Just as there was no mediation between Socrates's subjectivity, and the objectivity of Athenian *Sittlichkeit*, to directly express double reflection is "precisely a contradiction."²⁸ Climacus relates this explicitly to Socrates's method: "Everything subjective, which due to its dialectical inwardness eludes a direct form of expression, is an essential secret."²⁹ This assertion of not only the subjective as a realm of truth, but of the impossibility of mediation between subjective and objective truth, helps Climacus ground his argument on the importance of subjectivity in "becoming a Christian."

After his assertion of the truth in subjectivity, Climacus explains the steps towards "becoming a Christian" through an assertion of the paradox of subjectivity: Hegel's Socrates is essential to this pursuit. To become a Christian, the author contends, one must first pass through the stage of "Religiousness A." The subject of Religiousness A is not concerned with what is "out there," but with "inwardness," with subjectivity.³⁰ Climacus explicitly identifies Socrates—as opposed to the speculative Plato—as the paradigm of Religiousness A. The paradox of Socrates—that the individual becomes unintelligible to the external—is the paradox of Religiousness A. Climacus's Socrates is Hegel's Socrates: his negativity and subjectivity are preconditions for religious experience. To be open to Religiousness B—Christianity—one must have complete faith in what lies beyond the objective.

One of Kierkegaard's most extended discussions of faith and morality centers on his concepts of the 'knight of infinite resignation' and the 'knight of infinite faith' in *Fear and Trembling*. The work, written by Kierkegaard under the name Johannes de Silentio, closely examines the Biblical story of the binding of Isaac to discover the relation between ethics and faith. More specifically, the work aims to explain the "paradox of faith:" namely, how the individual can be higher than the universal. The work's discussion of the individual—as exemplified in the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith—uses Hegel's Socrates as a model for the gulf between subjectivity and objectivity.

Kierkegaard's interpretation of Abraham as a 'knight of faith' for man to aspire to is deeply indebted to Hegel's discussion of Socrates. Though a step beyond the 'knight of infinite resignation', the knight of faith shares the former's "movement of resignation."³¹ Both knights are resigned from their objective situation: they not only maintain their subjective commitments, but also accept the gap between these commitments and the external world. Johannes notes Abraham's silence after receiving his directive from God to sacrifice his only son Isaac: "He said nothing to Sarah, nothing to Eleazar. After all, who could have understood him? Hadn't the test by its very nature extracted an oath of silence from him?"³²

28 *Ibid.*, 63

29 *Ibid.*, 67.

30 *Ibid.*, 466.

31 C. Stephn Evans in the Introduction to Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge University Press, 2006), xiv.

32 Søren Kierkegaard and Johannes de Silentio, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay, Reprint edition (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England : New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Penguin Classics, 1986), 55.

Abraham's silence emphasizes the infinite subjectivity of his position: his highest duty to God cannot even begin to be explained to the external world. His silence is an acceptance of the impassable void between the subject and the object. From this discussion of Abraham, Kierkegaard develops his famous "teleological suspension of the ethical." In order to act upon his supreme ethical commitment—his commitment to God—Abraham must rebuke the particular, the historical actuality. Abraham's infinite spiritual (moral) commitment is irreconcilable with the objective Spirit because it is a completely subjective negation.

Kierkegaard contends that Abraham would deserve the punishment society would give him. This assessment seems contradictory given Kierkegaard's praise of Abraham as acting in a supremely ethical manner. From an objective perspective, however, Kierkegaard maintains, Abraham has indeed done wrong: he intended to murder his son. According to the universal ethic, Abraham has broken one of the most sacred duties: that of a father to his son. Abraham himself recognizes the unethical nature of his divine directive and prays that God forgive him.³³ Kierkegaard is not diminishing the duty of a father towards his son, nor is he advocating for a relativist rejection of universal ethics. Johannes emphasizes that Abraham's commitment to his son—and his commitment to Objective spirit more broadly—while of utmost importance, cannot be reconciled with his equally important subjective commitment to his faith. He is faced with, in the most Socratic sense, an "either-or": Abraham is at *aporia*.

Kierkegaard's treatment of Socrates as an ironic and negative figure evokes his formulation of the 'knight of infinite resignation.' Johannes imagines a situation in which a knight has fallen in love with a princess but his circumstances prevent him from ever acting upon such love. The knight is simultaneously resigned to this objective situation, but does not give up on his subjective commitment—that is, his love—even though it can never be realized. Johannes describes the knight of infinite resignation as an archetype to aspire towards, a person who, "does not give up the love, not for all the world's glory."³⁴ Just as Socrates rejected objective totality in favor of subjective truth, the knight of infinite resignation rejects the ethic of the day in favor of his own subjectivity.

The knight's love for the princess is a denial of the objective situation. Even though he knows that such a love cannot materialize in this world he "does not give up on this love," thus denying historical actuality. In this manner, Kierkegaard connects subjectivity to the eternal. The love for the princess—that purely subjective love—becomes an "expression of an eternal love," an expression of the Absolute.³⁵ This movement of resignation is a qualification for true inwardness. Johannes asserts, "[f]or only in infinite resignation do I become transparent to myself in my eternal validity, and only then can there be talk of laying hold of existence by virtue of faith." Only in this infinite resignation can the individual come to understand herself and her relation to the Absolute, or God. Subjectivity or "inwardness," then, is an intrinsic part of knowing the Absolute. Kierkegaard forms his conception of the highest forms of subjectivity—the knight of infinite resignation and of faith—around the Hegelian absolute knowing Subject-Substance to place the individual at the center of his philosophy.

³³ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay, 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

The Absolute is necessary for true subjectivity and true subjectivity is necessary for the approaching Absolute.

In this explicit connection between subjectivity and the experience of the Absolute, Kierkegaard reveals another latent Hegelian form underlining his authorship. Kierkegaard uses the Hegelian “absolute knowing”—and its resemblance to the irony and subjectivity of Socrates—to situate the individual as the center of his philosophy. More specifically, the Hegelian notion of the ‘absolute knowing’ subject as the *emptied subject*, as illustrated by Slavoj Žižek and Catherine Malabou (among other contemporary commentators) elucidates Kierkegaard’s understanding of infinite subjective commitment. The “emptied” or “abrogated” subject of absolute knowing reflects Kierkegaard’s negative subject, as exemplified by both Socrates and Abraham.

Hegel’s Absolute is not simply “the unity of all things” which transcends existence. It is in his critique of such a notion in Schelling’s philosophy that Hegel gives his famous description of “the night in which all cows are black.”³⁶ Such a cancellation of all difference, Hegel maintains, amounts to an idea bereft of meaning. The Absolute does not transcend existence but *is* existence as a “whole” understood as a dynamic system in which each element relates to all the others.³⁷ The Absolute, then, gives “grounding” to all being: it is the fundamental, irreducible reality upon which any concept can be built.

The Absolute is not only substance, as it was for Spinoza, but subject as well. For Hegel, the presence of a subject necessitates the presence of an object (since consciousness is always consciousness of something). The fact that in the Absolute the subject and object become unified raises the question of what the object of the Absolute is. Hegel, following Aristotle, asserts that the Absolute’s object is itself. The Absolute is pure thought that, encompassing everything or “the whole,” thinks on itself. When philosophers discuss the ‘absolute knowing’ subject-substance, they refer to unmediated knowledge of “the whole.”³⁸ In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel aims to demonstrate that all different forms of human consciousness have attempted to give an account of reality as a whole, through art, religion, and now Hegel’s speculative philosophy³⁹. Hegel reveals that it is the *telos*—the end goal—of Spirit (roughly, a collective human consciousness) to achieve absolute knowing.

Because Hegel’s method follows a circular trajectory, the beginning of his philosophy—the irreducible “grounding”—illuminates its end—the Absolute. Breaking from Descartes, Hegel does not interpret the subject’s existence as self-evident. What must be, Hegel believed, was only being itself. By definition, *being* is: existence exists. To be presuppositionless, philosophy must begin with “indeterminate being,” or being about which nothing other than its existence can be asserted. Hegel’s logic begins

³⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 12.

³⁷ Glenn Alexander Magee, *The Hegel Dictionary*, 1st edition (Continuum, 2010), 20

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

³⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 409.

with this “pure being” as its concept and works, dialectically, to develop all others.⁴⁰ It is this same “indeterminate being” that is the content and form of absolute knowing.⁴¹ In absolute knowing, the separation between subject and object is overcome in order to comprehend the whole; the object for absolute knowing is no finite thing, but the Absolute itself. For Hegel, absolute knowing is its own subject; that is, it is thought catalyzed by itself (as opposed to how we usually think about thought, as originated from a subject separate from that thought). Absolute knowing is knowledge of absolute knowing itself.⁴²

At the most basic level, Žižek’s interpretation of the dialectic resembles Kierkegaard’s notion of the origin of subjectivity. Žižek asserts that “the fundamental operation of *Aufhebung* is reduction: the sublated thing survives, but in an abridged edition, as it were, torn out of its life-world context, stripped down to its essential features, all the movement and wealth of its life reduced to a fixed mark.”⁴³ Socrates, too, could be described as “torn out of [his] life-world context” in his denial of Athenian society’s ethics. Moreover, Socrates’s method involved locating the essential core of concepts such as truth and justice, not merely particular instances of it. This congruity between Socrates and the dialectic follows, of course, given that the “labour of the negative” is the process by which the dialectic functions, and it is this same negativity that Socrates embodies. The connection between the Hegelian subject of ‘absolute knowing’ and Kierkegaardian “inwardness” runs deeper, however.

Žižek undermines the traditional interpretation of Hegel’s “absolute knowing” or “Absolute knowledge,” and advances an interpretation of the concept as a sort of “void.” Žižek identifies the common criticism of Hegel as a system builder whose dialectics are “bloated” by their integration of the entirety of reality. Žižek asserts that this interpretation does not fully account for the precise mechanism of dialectics. The philosopher argues that sublation (the process by which dialectics occurs) does not stop once the totality is integrated into the System; that whole itself is negated as well in “sublation’s sublation.” To avoid the spurious infinity of an unending sublation, the process of sublation must come to an end with its counter-move: to release the entirety of the content, leaving the Absolute-knowing subject-substance *emptied*. Žižek cites the end of the *Science of Logic*, where “reaching the full circle of the absolute Idea, the Idea, in its resolve/decision, ‘freely releases itself’ into Nature, lets Nature go, leaves it off, discards it, pushes it away from itself, and thus liberates it.”⁴⁴ Malabou, noting the synonymy between the verbs *aufheben* (‘to sublimate’), *befreien* (‘to liberate’), and *ablegen* (‘to discard’), argues that this “abrogation” or “emptying” is not only subsequent to the sublation of totality, but is its immanent conclusion.⁴⁵ This argument reflects the aforementioned “circularity” of Hegel’s logic: the indeterminate being—both at the beginning and the end—is “neither more nor less than nothing.”

40 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni, Reprint edition (Cambridge University Press, 2015), §130-132.

41 Magee, 45.

42 *Ibid.*, 27.

43 Slavoj Žižek, “Hegel and the Object, Or, the Idea’s Constipation,” *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 14, no. 0 (September 13, 2006): 21–26, <https://doi.org/10.26262/gramma.v14i0.6510>, 1.

44 Žižek, “Hegel and the Object,” 1, 22.

45 Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic* (Psychology Press, 2005), 156.

⁴⁶Kierkegaard's subjective thinkers—Socrates and Abraham among them—parallel the abrogated subjects of absolute knowing. The philosopher agrees with Hegel's analysis that Socrates was not engaging in mere rhetorical irony when he claimed to "know nothing."⁴⁷ The statement was not a mere rhetorical ploy to expose his interlocutors ill-conceived notions. While his irony did have this function, Kierkegaard contends, it is also essential to note that Socrates genuinely did know nothing in the sense that he had no positive knowledge of the object. In his quest to discover the truth of subjectivity, Socrates became ignorant of particulars; indeed, his aforementioned negativity must be ignorant of any possibility of positivity. As a subject, Socrates has been "emptied" from the knowledge instilled by the objective realm. Unlike the "unwise men," however, Socrates *knows* that he knows nothing. He has a sense of what he is lacking, what he has emptied himself of, just like Hegel's abrogated subject. Just as the labor of the negative does not bring the positive back to its starting point, but to somewhere new, the emptied subject is not synonymous with the subject that had never been "filled."

This abrogation is a passive process. Žižek asks, "[i]s the subject of what Hegel calls 'absolute Knowledge' not also a thoroughly *emptied* subject, a subject reduced to the role of pure observer (or, rather, registrar) of the self-movement of the content itself?" Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* answers in the affirmative: "The Idea's absolute freedom consists in [the fact] that it resolves to freely let go out of itself the moment of its particularity."⁴⁸ "Particularity" in this sense corresponds to Kierkegaard's conception of "this or that thing"—the facts and ethics of the universal, the objective. Kierkegaard stresses the opposition between this and the individual's absolute commitment, his duty to God. The subjective thinker, it can be said, "lets go" of the moment of its particularity in its denial of historical actuality. This further illuminates the structure of Kierkegaard's Absolute and its relation to subjectivity.

Passivity characterizes Kierkegaard's subjective thinkers; it is through this passivity that they open themselves up to experience the Absolute. In Kierkegaard's "infinite resignation," the subject accepts his complete inability to actualize or even anticipate the infinite. Abraham's directive comes from God; he is merely a passive receiver of and actualization of His will. Moreover, the order goes against all of Abraham's intuition: he would never have been justified to predict or actualize such a directive through consideration of his place in Objective spirit. Similarly, Socrates's *daimonion* spoke out to Socrates as a voice, preventing him from making mistakes: Socrates as a subject is passive, then, subject to this force that is simultaneously personal but not his self-consciousness. He does not "ask" his *daimonion*; it presents itself autonomously.⁴⁹ Thus, Kierkegaard's subjective thinker is passive in that she accepts the absolutely ethical must come to her from *without*; that is, from God, excluding her personal intervention. In order to receive the Absolute, the subject must "empty" herself; she must completely negate her historical actuality. This connection illustrates Socrates's

⁴⁶ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, §132.

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, 169.

⁴⁸ Slavoj Žižek, Preface to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Second Edition (London: Verso, 2009), xii, xvi.

⁴⁹ Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 347.

function as a knight of infinite resignation. Unlike Abraham, however, Socrates has no faith, and therefore is not able to reaffirm finitude through his acceptance of the absurd. However, his connection to subjective truth through negativity is the same. By taking philosophical negativity to its absolute, Socrates rejects the universal and asserts the infinity of subjectivity. As a figure of philosophical discussion, then, he reflects the Substance-Subject of absolute knowing: he is the *telos* of subjective inquiry.

This passivity seems strange, given Kierkegaard's assertion of the courage required to deny the universal and embrace subjectivity and the Absolute through the teleological suspension of the ethical.⁵⁰ Hegel understands the seemingly paradoxical nature of this passivity, however; Žižek writes, "this utter passivity simultaneously involves the greatest activity: it takes the most strenuous effort for the subject to 'erase itself' in its particular content, as the agent intervening in the object, and to expose itself as a neutral medium."⁵¹ For both Kierkegaard and Hegel becoming passive, paradoxically, requires the utmost activity. To be passively open to God, Abraham needed the courage to actively reject his most fundamental objective duties.

In spite of the similarity in their concepts of the Absolute, Kierkegaard and Hegel differed in their beliefs on how knowledge of the Absolute is attained. Hegel believed that absolute knowing is achieved through time through dialectics culminating in an Absolute Spirit—speculative philosophy—which could rationally explain totality through the mediation of the subjective and the objective. Kierkegaard, conversely, stresses the paradoxical potential of the individual to "open herself up" to an incomprehensible experience of the Absolute. Put otherwise, Hegel's Absolute is a "process" of the unification of subjectivity and objectivity, while Kierkegaard's is a one-sided "moment" requiring only subjectivity.

This distinction culminates in the thinkers' respective assessments of the concept of "appropriation." Kierkegaard uses "appropriation" to refer to a certain type of subjective understanding; while objective truths—historical and scientific facts, for instance—could be taught, the individual must relate subjective truths to her own experience. An individual appropriates a subjective truth when she bases her understanding of herself as subjectivity upon it. The truth of Christianity requires appropriation. Kierkegaard was unconcerned with dogmatics—the "content" of Christianity—that could be learned. The importance of Christianity was in the individual's subjective experience of it, *ie.* the individual's appropriation of it. For Hegel, conversely, "A true cognition is thus not only the notional "appropriation" of its object: the process of appropriation goes on only as long as cognition remains incomplete."⁵² Appropriation is incomplete because Hegel's dialectics centers on the reconciliation of the subject and the object; thus, the subject should be able to be expressed objectively, and vice versa.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Walsh, 41.

⁵¹ Žižek, "Hegel and the Object," 24.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 23.

At the same time, the phenomenological information that Mailer conveys is while Hegel's dialectic focuses on the system, placing the subject as a constitutive element therein, Kierkegaard's dialectic is the reverse: he centers the individual. Put crudely in Hegelian terms, Kierkegaard's "Absolute Spirit"—Spirit which has become conscious of itself—would not be a speculative philosophy in which subject and object are unified, but an individual "leap" on the part of the subject. This is the same dichotomy that appears in Kierkegaard's original extended discussion of Hegel, *The Concept of Irony*. While Kierkegaard borrows Hegel's Socrates, he identifies Socrates's great strength where Hegel finds his flaw: his unflinching negativity and resulting rejection of speculative philosophy. In spite of the difference in his evaluation of the ancient Greek, Kierkegaard's Socrates is Hegel's Socrates. It is this Hegelian Socrates—and Hegelian absolute knowing—that situates Kierkegaard's notion of the individual as the center of his philosophy. According to Kierkegaard, it is only through subjectivity—the complete negation of the objective world, as first posited by Socrates—that an individual can examine and affirm her most important commitments: the commitment to the Absolute.

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