

# Hegel's Historical Methodology in *The Concept of Irony*

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## *Abstract*

Kierkegaard's remarks in the Introduction to *The Concept of Irony* have proven to be difficult to understand. There he gives a somewhat odd general methodological consideration of the relation between philosophy and history in order to explain his own procedure in exploring irony in different historical contexts. This paper claims that his elusive comments here make sense when read against the background of Hegel's famous introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. While Kierkegaard is known for his passionate criticism of the abstraction of speculative philosophy, here, by contrast, he seems to affirm his appreciation for speculative philosophy's ability to avoid abstraction and capture the truth of actuality. Thus, in his methodological considerations at the outset of the work, he seems to say that he will attempt a kind of Hegelian philosophy of history as he traces the historical mutations of the concept of irony.

Kierkegaard's remarks in the short Introduction to *The Concept of Irony* have proven to be difficult to understand. There he gives a somewhat odd general methodological consideration of the relation between philosophy and history in order to explain his own procedure in exploring irony in different historical contexts. In this paper I wish to claim that his elusive comments here make sense when read against the background of Hegel's famous introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. Specifically, I wish to show that what Kierkegaard says in his Introduction will, in fact, strike many readers as profoundly counterintuitive. While he is known for his passionate criticism of the abstraction of speculative philosophy, here, by contrast, he seems to affirm his appreciation for speculative philosophy's ability to avoid abstraction and capture the truth of actuality. Thus, in his methodological considerations at the outset of the work, he seems to say that he will attempt a kind of Hegelian philosophy of history as he traces the historical mutations of the concept of irony. In order to appreciate his reflections on this subject, we will first need to look at Hegel's typology of different forms of historiography at the beginning of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. It is in contrast to the

other, traditional forms of history writing that he presents his concept of speculative philosophy of history, which is important for Kierkegaard.

Hegel gave five lecture courses on the topic of the philosophy of history in Berlin between Winter Semester 1822–23 and Winter Semester 1830–31. After his death student lecture notes were collated and published by one of his students, the jurist and political philosopher Eduard Gans. This text appeared in 1837 as a part of the first collected edition of Hegel's writings<sup>1</sup> and was reprinted in a second edition by Karl Hegel in 1840.<sup>2</sup> This can be said to represent a landmark work in the history of philosophy, proving to be an inspiration for a number of later thinkers, such as Nietzsche and Marx. This work brought to the attention of philosophers the importance of history in the development of ideas and concepts. The introduction to this work contains some of the most famous passages in the entire Hegelian *corpus* such as his influential remarks about the end of history,<sup>3</sup> the cunning of reason,<sup>4</sup> the slaughter bench of history,<sup>5</sup> the historical movement from east to west,<sup>6</sup> and, not least of all, the famous thesis about reason in history<sup>7</sup> and the development of the consciousness of freedom.<sup>8</sup>

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- 1 G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. by Eduard Gans, vol. 9 [1837], in *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Werke. Vollständige Ausgabe*, vols. 1–18, ed. by Ludwig Boumann, Friedrich Förster, Eduard Gans, Karl Hegel, Leopold von Henning, Heinrich Gustav Hotho, Philipp Marheineke, Karl Ludwig Michelet, Karl Rosenkranz, Johannes Schulze, Berlin: Duncker und Humblot 1832–45.
  - 2 G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. by Karl Hegel, vol. 9 [1840], in *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Werke. Vollständige Ausgabe*, vols. 1–18, ed. by Ludwig Boumann, Friedrich Förster, Eduard Gans, Karl Hegel, Leopold von Henning, Heinrich Gustav Hotho, Philipp Marheineke, Karl Ludwig Michelet, Karl Rosenkranz, Johannes Schulze, Berlin: Duncker und Humblot 1832–45. This work was also translated into Danish during Kierkegaard's time, but there is no evidence that he knew or worked with this translation: *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Forelæsninger over Historiens Philosophie*, ed. by Dr. Eduard Gans, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition by Dr. Karl Hegel, trans. by S. Kattrup, Copenhagen: H.C. Kleins Forlag 1842.
  - 3 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 102; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 150. (*Phil. of Hist* = *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree, New York: Willey Book Co. 1944. *Jub.* = *Sämtliche Werke*. Jubiläumsausgabe in 20 Bänden, ed. by Hermann Glockner, Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag 1928–41.)
  - 4 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 33; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 63.
  - 5 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 21; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 49.
  - 6 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 102; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 150.
  - 7 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 9; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 34–35.
  - 8 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 19; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 46.

Although Kierkegaard owned many of the other volumes in the collected edition of Hegel's works, somewhat oddly he apparently did not possess a copy of this set of lectures. We know, however, that he knew of this work since he quotes from the second edition of it in both his *Journal DD*<sup>9</sup> and *The Concept of Irony*.<sup>10</sup> Given his knowledge of this important text's account of the methodology of the philosophy of history, it does not seem off the mark to use Hegel's statements on this issue as background for understanding Kierkegaard's difficult scattered comments in his Introduction.

### I. Hegel's Introduction

In his Introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* Hegel wishes to establish the field of speculative philosophy of history. In order to do so, he must first distinguish this from other forms of historiography. To this end he begins by distinguishing three basic kinds of history writing: original history, reflective history (which has several subdivisions) and philosophical history. Since the first two types are rather familiar he passes over them fairly quickly in order to dwell in great detail on an explanation of his own view, which is represented by the third type.

1. *Original History* involves the account of events as given by a first-hand witness who was bound up in them.<sup>11</sup> It is in large part a retelling of events from the narrator's own memory or that of others whom he knew.

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9 SKS 17, 266, DD:161b / KJN 1, 257: "...just like the Gymnosophists among the Indians: 'Naked Fakirs wander about without any occupation, like the mendicant friars of the Catholic Church; they live from the alms of others, and make it their aim to reach the highest degree of abstraction.' Cf. Hegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 183." The quoted passage corresponds to *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 150 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 205.

10 SKS 1, 211 / *CI*, 161. SKS 1, 245 / *CI*, 199. SKS 1, 247–248n / *CI*, 201–203n. When Kierkegaard refers to Socrates as the founder or inventor or morality (SKS 1, 268 / *CI*, 225), his source is the following passage in Hegel's lectures: "...it was in *Socrates*, that at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, the principle of subjectivity—of the absolute inherent independence of thought—attained free expression. He taught that man has to discover and recognize in himself what is the right and good, and that this right and good is in its nature universal. Socrates is celebrated as a teacher of morality, but we should rather call him the *inventor of morality*." Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 328. *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 269 / *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 350.

11 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, pp. 1–4; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 25–28.

Since this kind of history is closely connected to a single historian, the events related cannot span a long period of time or be geographically very expansive. They are instead confined to a limited time and place that can be experienced by a single human being. These writers share the spirit and views of the period which they recount and are not temporally or culturally separated from it. Since these writers are caught up in the events themselves, they are not reflective about them: the goal of this kind of historian “is nothing more than the presentation to posterity of an image of events as clear as that which he himself possessed in virtue of personal observation, or life-like descriptions. Reflections are none of his business, for he lives in the spirit of his subject; he has not attained an elevation above it.”<sup>12</sup> As examples of original history Hegel names Herodotus’ *Persian Wars*, Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War*, Caesar’s war commentaries, and Xenophon’s *Anabasis* (and in the next section he also mentions Polybius as an original historian).<sup>13</sup> Of modern historians in this category he mentions Francesco Guicciardini’s (1483–1540) *History of Italy*, Frederick the Great’s *Histoire de mon temps*, and the *Memoirs* of Jean François Paul de Gondi, Cardinal de Retz (1613–79).

2. The second form of historiography is *Reflective History*.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to original history, in reflective history the author is not a participant in the times or the events that he relates but instead lives at a later time and is not personally invested in the events in the same manner. His culture and spirit are to some extent foreign to the material about which he is writing. Under the rubric of reflective history Hegel mentions four different subcategories.

A. The first is *Universal History*, the goal of which is to give an overview of an entire people or country, etc.<sup>15</sup> This can involve national histories or annals of a specific country. As examples of universal history Hegel mentions Livy’s *History of Rome*, Didorus Siculus’ *Bibliotheca historica* (which provides an overview of, among other things, Greek history), Johannes von Müller’s (1752–1809) *History of Switzerland*, and Aegidius Tschudi’s (1505–72) history of the Swiss Confederation. There is a cultural or temporal split between the historian and the subject matter he relates. Since the goal is to see things in a grand overview, individual events must be selected, edited, and abbreviated. One shortcoming of this kind

12 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 2; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 26–27.

13 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 5; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 30.

14 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, pp. 4–8; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 28–33.

15 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, pp. 4–5; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 28–30.

of history is the tendency towards anachronism. Hegel points out the many cases in Livy, where the historian tends to see the period of early Roman history through the categories and mindset of the Augustan period. This is a result of the fact that the periods covered are usually very long and not always well documented, leaving it to the historian to fill in the blanks. Moreover, since the later historian like Livy represents a different spirit from the earlier ages on which he is commenting, he unknowingly slips into anachronisms as he attempts to understand and explain a previous time in a manner typical of his own.

B. The second subcategory is *Pragmatic History*.<sup>16</sup> This involves the use of history for specific goals in the present. These goals can be most anything at all: moral reflections, edification, political ideology, etc. This is the kind of history writing that believes that one can learn from the past and that by studying the great figures of the past one can improve the moral character of people. Thus there is a tendency to appeal to the past for examples of moral and righteous behavior or good statesmanship. This often involves reorganizing the past according to the needs of the present since it is the present where the goals that are to be met are to be found. Marx's understanding of the history of humankind as a history of class conflict can be understood in this manner. This kind of history attempts to bring the past to life in terms of the present. The shortcoming of this view is that the historical conditions of any given time are ultimately unique to that period, and no universal rules can be deduced that can immediately be transferred to another period, which has its own issues and sets of problems unique to it. When confronted with the very concrete problems of the present, precious little guidance can be gleaned from a very general rule deduced from circumstances of the past which are only vaguely similar to the present situation. As an example of this kind of history Hegel mentions again Johannes von Müller's *Universal History* and *History of Switzerland*, and Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*.

C. The third subcategory is *Critical History*.<sup>17</sup> This can be seen as a kind of history of history or history at a metalevel. It is a criticism of historical narratives and an investigation of their truth and believability. This is the historical analogue to higher criticism in philology, which critically examines individual texts. This form of history can have the detrimental effect of undermining the historical enterprise in general since in its

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16 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, pp. 5–7; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 30–32.

17 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 7; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 32–33.

extreme forms it can lead people to dismiss history altogether. While Hegel notes that this is a form of history writing that is quite in fashion in Germany at the moment, he omits mentioning specifically the names of any writers in this category.

D. The fourth subcategory is *Special History*.<sup>18</sup> This can be seen as any form of history of ideas or the history of specialized fields, such as the history of art, the history of law, the history of religion. In special history, specific spheres of human thought and activity are focused on, while the writer abstracts from all other contexts.

3. Hegel finally arrives at the third and final form of history, namely, *Philosophical History*.<sup>19</sup> This is the kind of history writing that he wishes to advocate and to make use of in his lectures. He explains this as the thoughtful consideration of history, by which he means that it is thought which is applied to the empirical details of history and sees in them an order and meaning. Here Hegel immediately recognizes the objection to this form of history that comes from the side of the empirical historian: “To insist upon thought in this connection with history may, however, appear unsatisfactory. In this science it would seem as if thought must be subordinate to what is given, to the realities of fact; that this is its basis and guide: while philosophy dwells in the region of self-produced ideas, without reference to actuality.”<sup>20</sup> The point of philosophy is surely not to impose some abstract, alien thought structure or scheme onto the subject matter of history. Hegel portrays philosophy, according to this view, as a kind of tyrant, forcing history into a position of submission: “Approaching history thus prepossessed, speculation might be expected to treat it as a mere passive material; and, so far from leaving it in its native truth, to force it into conformity with a tyrannous idea, and to construe it, as the phrase is, *a priori*.”<sup>21</sup> This passage anticipates Kierkegaard’s colorful descriptions of the relation between philosophy and history. Philosophy is thought to subjugate the empirical material of history and to make it fit a preconceived abstract idea. Hegel takes this view to be a misunderstanding of speculative philosophy of history.

He is critical of the kind of historiography that lies behind this criticism, namely, the kind that focuses exclusively on the empirical details and fails to see any deeper meaning in the events recorded. According

18 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, pp. 7–8; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 33.

19 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, pp. 8ff.; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 33ff.

20 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 8; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 34.

21 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 8; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 34.

to this view, "it is the business of history simply to adopt into its record what is and has been, actual occurrences and transactions,"<sup>22</sup> and nothing more. Such a view amounts to simply an aggregate of facts and not a true science. In order to counter the criticism, Hegel says at the outset, "We might then announce it as the first condition to be observed that we should faithfully adopt all that is historical."<sup>23</sup> In other words, philosophy of history should not flee to abstractions but rather should meticulously make use of the actual material of history. While this seems to be straightforward enough, it is more complicated than it appears at first sight. What does it really mean to say that the philosophy of history is thought applied to the empirical subject matter of the past? As Hegel goes on to note, all forms of historiography involve some element of thought. The historian must always consider and work on the subject matter to be treated in order to present it. There is thus no immediate presentation of purported raw facts of history. No historian is entirely passive or receptive to the subject matter; there is always some element of organization, structure or thought in it implicitly. This cannot be avoided since the categories of thought are involved in every perception and idea. It is not a matter of imposing thoughts on a preexistent reality but rather of seeing the rationality in the world itself. Hegel explains, "To him who looks upon the world rationally, the world in its turn presents a rational aspect. The relation is mutual."<sup>24</sup> The key for Hegel is the ability of philosophy to grasp the idea in the empirical subject matter, whatever that may be. This is the key to avoiding the charge of abstraction, which rebukes philosophy for operating with abstract concepts that are wholly detached from reality. He explains to his auditors, "I wish, at the very outset, to call your attention to the important difference between a conception, a principle, a truth limited to an abstract form and its determinate application, and concrete development. This distinction affects the whole fabric of philosophy...."<sup>25</sup>

So the question that is raised concerns the specific nature of thought that speculative philosophy of history will employ in its treatment of the past. How does this kind of thought differ from that employed by traditional historians? Hegel explains that his view of history contains one phenomenon that manifests itself in two elements. First, he states his

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22 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist*, pp. 8–9; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 34.

23 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist*, p. 11; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 37.

24 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist*, p. 11; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 37.

25 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist*, p. 12; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 38–39.

famous thesis, “The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom.”<sup>26</sup> Freedom is an idea in the human mind, and its awareness takes place over a long period of time, running through the different peoples and cultures of the world. Second, this idea is realized by means of actual, concrete events in the world: “Although freedom is, primarily, an undeveloped idea, the means it uses are external and phenomenal; presenting themselves in history to our sensuous vision.”<sup>27</sup> There is thus an important empirical side as well, and there can be no talk of simply an abstract conception operating on its own, hovering far above the world. The view of history that Hegel advocates involves understanding history based on these two poles: *the idea* of freedom and its *concrete manifestations* in history, the universal and the particular, the one and the many. Both elements must always be present; indeed, strictly speaking, the true idea of freedom is that which is manifested in the empirical events themselves and not something purely cognitive, separated from them.

Hegel also characterizes this dual element in terms of a plan or design for history and its realization: “Aims, principles, etc., have a place in our thoughts, in our subjective design only; but not yet in the sphere of reality. That which exists for itself only, is a possibility, a potentiality; but has not yet emerged into existence. A *second* element must be introduced in order to produce actuality—namely, actuation, realization; and whose motive power is the will—the activity of man in the widest sense.”<sup>28</sup> Again it is the idea and the concrete actions of events in the world that come together to form the complete concept. Along the same lines, he explains, “Two elements, therefore enter into the object of our investigation: the first the Idea, the second the complex of human passions; the one the warp, the other the woof of the vast arras-web of universal history. The concrete mean and union of the two is freedom.”<sup>29</sup> In another passage he uses the metaphor of a syllogism to capture the relation between these parts: “The realizing *activity* of which we have spoken is the middle term of the syllogism, one of whose extremes is the universal essence, the *Idea*, which reposes in the penetralia of Spirit; and the other, the complex of external things—objective matter. That activity is the

26 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 19; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 46.

27 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 20; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 47–48.

28 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 22; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 50. See also *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 25; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 53–54.

29 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 23; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 52. Translation modified.

medium by which the universal latent principle is translated into the domain of objectivity.”<sup>30</sup> From this it is clear that the well-known objection to Hegel as dealing solely with abstractions is a strawman, at least with what concerns his intentions and his officially stated methodology. The ideal aspect is only one side of the whole, and he is keen at every turn to point out the importance and indeed necessity of the other side, that is, that of empirical actuality.

He also calls this “speculative history” in the sense that speculation is the attempt to see everything in its relation to everything else, that is, to see the individual parts in their relation to the whole. Philosophical history attempts to find the rational structure in history as a whole. It is at this point that Hegel begins his famous and highly controversial discussion of reason in history.

Ultimately the key for Hegel is to find the correct dialectical balance between the two elements: the universal and the particular. On the one hand, conventional historiography is too focused on the particular and fails to see the conceptual development of history. Hegel sometimes criticizes historians for losing themselves in the empirical detail and failing to see the deeper meaning behind the events that they describe. This tendency loses the universal elements and renders history simply a confused and random set of events. On the other hand, other forms of historiography, such as pragmatic history, go to the other extreme and focus too exclusively on the abstract universal, for example, on some moral virtue or political idea. This leads them to be ignorant of the actual historical facts, which at times contradict their preconceived ideas. This further leads them to be anachronistic as they try to force ideas from the present onto the past. In short, this tendency loses the particular and ends up in abstractions with no anchor in actuality. Hegel's view is that speculative history achieves the balance between these two tendencies. It takes into account the full wealth of the empirical information that is necessary for history, but it interprets and understands it in accordance with the philosophical Concept. Thus, the “Idea” is not a mere abstraction, as it is often said to be by Hegel's critics. Rather, it is the Concept as it appears in actuality in the empirical events of history.

Kierkegaard, in his later writings is critical of speculative philosophy for its tendency towards abstraction. He claims that speculation “forgets” actuality and existence, and this leads to grotesque distortions of key concepts such as faith, freedom and responsibility. In the Introduction to *The*

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30 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, p. 27; *Jub.*, vol. 11, p. 56.

*Concept of Irony*, however, the young Kierkegaard seems surprisingly positively disposed towards this dimension of Hegel's thought. About to embark on a historical study of the development of a specific concept, Kierkegaard presumably investigated different methodological approaches, among others, that of Hegel. In the Introduction the conclusion that he seems to reach is the Hegelian one, namely, that the goal of a philosophical historian is to try to aim at a balance of the empirical and the idea, the particular and the universal.

## *II. Kierkegaard's Introduction to The Concept of Irony*

Covering only about five pages, Kierkegaard's Introduction is surprisingly short; especially for an academic work submitted for an advanced degree, one would usually expect a more detailed account of the issue and the methodology used to address it. This would seem to imply that he feels that he can assume that his readers will be able to recognize the historical method that he describes and thus that it would be superfluous for him to dwell on it at any length. In the very first sentence of the work he signals the source of his historical methodology with a reference to the "modern philosophical endeavor" which in what follows seems clearly to be an allusion to Hegel's philosophy. There Kierkegaard writes, "If there is anything that must be praised in the modern philosophical endeavor in its magnificent manifestation, it certainly is the power of genius with which it seizes and holds on to the phenomenon."<sup>31</sup> This would presumably strike some of the contemporary readers as a somewhat counterintuitive claim since Hegel's philosophy was usually praised for its ability to grasp the abstract Concept but, by contrast, was criticized for not being historically grounded in the actual details and facts. But here Kierkegaard lauds Hegelian philosophy for just the opposite tendency: for its ability to grasp the particular, and to hold "on to the phenomenon." In fact this echoes a remark that Kierkegaard made a few years earlier in his debut book, where he also made some general observations about the nature of history. In that context he explains that Hegel's famous attempt to begin philosophy from the most basic, abstract category of thought was "by no means a failure to appreciate the great richness actuality has."<sup>32</sup>

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31 SKS 1, 71 / *CI*, 9. Translation slightly modified.

32 SKS 1, 18 / *EPW*, 62.

*A. Kierkegaard's First Metaphor:  
History as a Woman and Philosophy as a Knight*

Kierkegaard is sensitive to the counterintuitive nature of the claim, and goes on to explain this further in his own inimitable manner. He continues,

Now if it is fitting for the phenomenon, which as such is always *foeminini generis* [of the feminine gender], to surrender to the stronger on account of its feminine nature, then in all fairness one can also demand of the philosophical knight a deferential propriety and a profound enthusiasm, in place of which one sometimes hears too much the jingling of spurs and the voice of the master.<sup>33</sup>

Kierkegaard here compares the empirical events of history as a woman and the conceptual understanding of them as a man or a knight. The woman, by virtue of her weakness, is vulnerable to being overpowered by the strength of the knight, just as the empirical dimension of history can quickly yield to a more abstract philosophical interpretation of it. Thus it is not inappropriate to ask philosophy to display a “deferential propriety” towards the empirical. It must not overwhelm and destroy it but rather respect and honor it. Too often philosophy fails to do this and appears on the scene with great bravado or with “the jingling of spurs and the voice of the master.” Thus Kierkegaard restores his readers’ natural intuitions by acknowledging that philosophical history has tended to err in the direction of the abstract and the universal.

Kierkegaard continues to develop his image of the phenomena as female and the idea or concept as male: “The observer ought to be an amorist; he must not be indifferent to any feature, any factor. But on the other hand he ought to have a sense of his own predominance—but should use it only to help the phenomenon obtain its full disclosure.”<sup>34</sup> Here one can already begin to hear Kierkegaard’s plea for striking the correct balance between the two aspects. The philosopher must be sensitive to the concrete subject matter of history, paying attention to every detail and meticulously noting every feature. This would seem to imply that philosophy should put aside the abstract idea and capitulate to the empirical. But this is not the case. On the contrary, the male, philosophy, aware of its strength and dominance can feel free to exercise it but not gratuitously or in a way that is destructive to the empirical. Rather it should use the strength of the Concept and the Idea to disclose or reveal

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33 SKS 1, 71 / CI, 9.

34 SKS 1, 71 / CI, 9.

the truth that lies in the empirical. The true harmony is when the universal and the particular work together and are not set at odds with one another. This is precisely Hegel's point with his understanding of mediation that unites the universal and the particular into a unity, with both sides being respected and receiving their due.

Kierkegaard concludes his initial paragraph, by saying, "Therefore, even if the observer does not bring the concept along with him, it is still of great importance that the phenomenon remain inviolate and that the concept be seen as coming into existence through the phenomenon."<sup>35</sup> The key is that the empirical dimension, like a vulnerable maiden, should "remain inviolate." Due to its weakness, one must take special precautions not to destroy it. The concept must not be imposed on it as a foreign entity, but rather it must be seen as developing out of the historical material itself in an organic manner. Again this is precisely Hegel's point. The Idea is not something that is imposed on history but develops in the phenomena of history.

This single paragraph represents Kierkegaard's general statement about the methodology that he intends to use in the work. He then turns the discussion to the specific subject matter or phenomenon that he intends to treat. The notion of irony can be regarded as a concept but also as a specific empirical historical event in the hands of figures like Socrates and the Romantics. He explains that it is imperative that the historical dimension first be taken into account in a historically responsible manner: "Before I proceed to an exposition of the concept of irony, it is necessary to make sure that I have a reliable and authentic view of Socrates' historical-actual, phenomenological existence with respect to the question of its possible relation to the transformed view that was his fate through enthusiastic or envious contemporaries."<sup>36</sup> It is necessary that one make a careful study of the historical sources and weigh all of the evidence carefully before drawing any conclusion about the idea or concept that Socrates represents.

Kierkegaard then makes a general methodological statement about the nature of what we would today call the history of ideas: "This becomes inescapably necessary, because the concept of irony makes its entry into the world through Socrates. Concepts, just like individuals, have their history and are no more able than they to resist the dominion of time, but in and through it all they nevertheless harbor a kind of home-

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35 *SKS* 1, 71 / *CI*, 9.

36 *SKS* 1, 71 / *CI*, 9.

sickness for the place of their birth.”<sup>37</sup> Ideas and concepts are born, develop and run their course in time, and it is the goal of the philosophical historian to trace them. But in order to do so responsibly the philosopher must be sensitive to the historical context in which the specific ideas appear. Thus in order to adequately understand the concept of irony, one must first get a sense for the life and times of Socrates, who was, according to Kierkegaard, the first to employ it. Kierkegaard would regard as absurd the method of analytic philosophy today, which would simply try to understand irony at a purely conceptual level, wholly abstracted from any particular historical context. He shares with Hegel the fundamental intuition that ideas are part and parcel of the historical development of the collective human mind. He would reject as pure abstraction the analytic method because it is wholly ahistorical and gives no credence to the idea that history can provide any insight into the nature of a philosophical concept.

In this spirit Kierkegaard continues, “Indeed, philosophy can now on one side no more disregard the recent history of this concept than it can stop with its earliest history no matter how copious and interesting.”<sup>38</sup> In order to truly understand a concept, the philosopher must explore its entire history from its beginning down to our own present age. Only when this complete view is given can the concept itself, in its historical development and meaning, be truly understood. Again, Kierkegaard appears alongside Hegel as a kind of historicist in stark opposition to analytic philosophy. But he is quick to add that philosophy does not simply stop with the historical: the common charge that analytic philosophy likes to level against historicism. Rather philosophy uses the historical in order to grasp the abstract ideas: “Philosophy continually demands something more, demands the eternal, the true, compared with which even the most sterling existence is in itself just a fortunate moment.”<sup>39</sup>

*B. Kierkegaard's Second Metaphor:  
History as a Penitent and Philosophy as a Confessor*

After the metaphor of the strength of a male versus the weakness and vulnerability of a female, Kierkegaard introduces a new metaphor, no less strange, to characterize the relation between the abstract conceptual

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37 SKS 1, 71 / CI, 9.

38 SKS 1, 71–2 / CI, 9.

39 SKS 1, 72 / CI, 9–10.

dimension and the empirical one. Empirical history is cast in the role of the penitent going to confession, while philosophy corresponds to the priest taking the confession. He writes,

On the whole, the relation of philosophy to history is like that of a father confessor to a penitent and therefore like him ought to have a sensitive, perceptive ear for the secrets of the penitent but, having examined the whole sequence of the confessed sins, is then also able to make this manifest to the penitent as something else. Just as the individual making a confession is certainly able not only to reel off the incidents of his life chronologically but also to relate them entertainingly but still does not comprehend them himself, so history certainly is also able to declare the eventful life of the human race with pathos in a loud voice but must leave it to the senior (philosophy) to explain it....<sup>40</sup>

The penitent is able to recount the events of his life without further reflection just as the naïve historian is able to recount a series of events and episodes without seeing any deeper meaning in them. The confessor listens attentively to the account given by the penitent and is able to interpret the various stories and anecdotes in a larger context, giving them meaning in a way that the penitent could not see. So also the philosopher of history can take the episodes and events related by the historian and see in them a deeper meaning. This corresponds to Hegel's criticism of the first form of historiography or "original history."<sup>41</sup> The naïve historian is too caught up in the details of the empirical events to be able to see the bigger picture that the speculative philosopher of history of able to discern. Again, Kierkegaard seems to be saying that methodologically he is wholly in agreement with Hegel, although he uses his own unique and indeed odd way of explaining this.

While the penitent or the historian at first has a difficult time understanding the events they recount in a philosophical manner, once the philosophical exposition is given, they recognize that this is in fact the truth of their own story: the penitent "is then able to relish the delightful surprise that while at first he is almost unwilling to acknowledge the corresponding account [*Gjenpart*] provided by philosophy but gradually, to a degree that he familiarizes himself with this philosophical view, eventually regards this as the actual truth and the other as apparent truth."<sup>42</sup> Thus the philosophical account is ultimately the higher truth, but it requires time and a certain philosophical education to understand and appreciate this. The philosophical account will strike some at first glance as overly

40 SKS 1, 72 / CI, 10.

41 Hegel, *Phil. of Hist.*, pp. 1–4; *Jub.*, vol. 11, pp. 25–28.

42 SKS 1, 72 / CI, 10. Translation modified.

abstract or even incomprehensible. But with time they will come to see that in fact it captures the empirical actuality and the phenomena that they are familiar with.

*C. Kierkegaard's Hegelian Plea for a Balance  
between Philosophy and History*

Kierkegaard then draws the conclusion from this discussion that the key methodologically is to strike the correct balance between the two sides: the empirical and the ideal, the particular and the universal, the historical and the philosophical. The two images, first of a weak, vulnerable woman and a strong, powerful man and, second of a penitent and a confessor, seem to suggest that there is a natural relation of submission and dominance in the relation. Kierkegaard's point with the two images is that both should be given their due, and the stronger side should not overwhelm the weaker one. He now expresses this in terms of a balance or harmony in which each side receives its due:

Thus there are these two elements that constitute the *essential issue* [*Mellemværende*] between history and philosophy. Both of them ought to have their rights so that, on the one hand, the phenomenon has its rights and is not to be intimidated and discouraged by philosophy's superiority, and philosophy, on the other hand, is not to let itself be infatuated by the charms of the particular, is not to be distracted by the superabundance of the particular.<sup>43</sup>

Kierkegaard formulates this in a way so as to capture the dialectical nature of the issue. There are dangers on both sides: philosophy can become infatuated and mesmerized by the particulars of the historical account and thereby lose sight of the universal Concept. So also the historical can be crushed under the weight of the philosophical explanation and thus be dismissed. The key is to keep these two elements in balance.

As he did previously, Kierkegaard then goes on to relate this general conclusion to the specific object of his own investigation, "The same holds for the concept of irony: philosophy is not to look too long at one particular side of its phenomenological existence and above all at its appearance but is to see the truth of the concept in and with the phenomenological."<sup>44</sup> In his investigation, Kierkegaard claims, he will give a solid and responsible account of the historical origins and development of irony, but, so he implies, he will be wary of becoming fixated on this and losing

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43 SKS 1, 72–3 / CI, 10–11.

44 SKS 1, 73 / CI, 11.

sight of the conceptual or philosophical dimension. He will aim to discern the philosophical truth of the concept of irony in the historical development that he traces, just as Hegel's speculative philosophy of history aims to discern the philosophical Idea in its development in world history. Kierkegaard is in effect saying that he will apply Hegel's general methodology to a specific subject matter that has both a historical and a philosophical dimension.

In this connection, he goes on in a sense to warn against misunderstanding the concept of irony by focusing too much on the concrete historical manifestation of it. In short, he pleads that one should keep in mind the abstract and the universal aspect:

It is common knowledge, of course, that tradition has linked the word "irony" to the existence of Socrates, but it by no means follows that everyone knows what irony is. Moreover, if through an intimate acquaintance with Socrates' life and way of living someone gained a notion of his singularity, he still would not therefore have a total concept of what irony is.<sup>45</sup>

This is the danger of the naïve historical approach, where the investigator is overly fixated on the particular and fails to see the universal. One can easily be charmed by the ancient accounts of the life and character of Socrates, but this should not lead one to miss the more general and universal significance that he represents and that can only be understood conceptually.

Kierkegaard goes on to make an even stronger statement of his affiliation with Hegelian methodology. Hegelian idealism is known for the claim that ideas develop in history. This stands in contrast to the earlier forms of idealism in the history of philosophy, where the ideas are thought to be absolutely fixed entities. Hegel's modification of this point has brought with it the charge that such a conception of ideas renders them no longer meaningful or universal. Kierkegaard, following Hegel's methodology, feels obliged to clarify this point: "In saying this, we are by no means nourishing the distrust of historical existence that would identify becoming with a falling away from the idea, since it is much more the unfolding of the idea."<sup>46</sup> Although ideas develop in time, these mutations are a part of a larger universal structure that appears in empirical, historical form in its different stages of development.

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45 *SKS* 1, 73 / *CI*, 11.

46 *SKS* 1, 73 / *CI*, 11.

He continues with a detailed formulation of the very nature of speculative thinking, that is, the ability to see the particular parts in their specific role in the context of the larger whole. Agreeing with Hegel, Kierkegaard explains that this is the goal of history:

This, to repeat, is far from our intention, but on the other hand neither can one assume that a specific element of existence as such would be absolutely adequate to the idea. In other words, just as it has been correctly pointed out that nature is unable to adhere to the concept—partly because each particular phenomenon contains but one element, and partly because the whole sum of natural existence is still always an imperfect medium that engenders longing rather than gratification—so also something similar can legitimately be said about history, inasmuch as every single fact does indeed evolve, but only as an element, and the whole sum of historical existence is still not the completely adequate medium of the idea, since it is the idea's temporality and fragmentariness (just as nature is its spatiality) that long for the backward-looking repulse emanating, face to and against face, from consciousness.<sup>47</sup>

The innumerable particulars, taken on their own, are meaningless. In the realm of nature each individual plant, animal, rock, etc. is unique and cannot, as a mere particular, be the object of scientific investigation. It is only when these things are grasped in the context of a larger systematic structure that they can be said to be truly understood. As in the realm of history, individual people, events or facts have no meaning when taken on their own and in isolation. They can only be understood at a higher level of abstraction that sees them as a part of the larger flow and development of history.

#### *D. Kierkegaard's Caveat about Socrates as a Special Case*

Kierkegaard ends his brief methodological reflections by noting that Socrates can be seen to represent a special case, and thus special care must be taken in the investigation of Socratic irony. This claim might be taken to mean that Kierkegaard wishes to retract everything that he just said about the nature of the proper relation of philosophy to history, but a closer look reveals that this is not the case. He explains his caveat about the person of Socrates as follows:

This must be enough on the difficulty inherent in any philosophical conception of history and the care that therefore ought to be taken. Special situations, however, may be attended with new difficulties, which is especially the case in the present inquiry. For example, what Socrates himself prized so highly, namely,

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47 SKS 1, 73 / CI, 11.

standing still and contemplating—in other words, silence—that is his whole life in terms of world history.<sup>48</sup>

Here Kierkegaard anticipates his thesis that Socrates was entirely negative and had no trace of a positive doctrine. This means that it will be particularly difficult to understand his contribution since it is a negative one. Any attribution of a positive view to him would be a distortion. The interpretation of Socrates is doubly difficult due to his employment of irony. When one uses irony, one does not mean what one directly and literally says; on the contrary, one usually means just the opposite. Thus, there is a disharmony between the inward intention and meaning and the outward expression. Kierkegaard explains, “In other words, he belonged to the breed of persons with whom the outer as such is not the stopping point. The outer continually pointed to something other and opposite.... The outer was not at all in harmony with the inner but was rather its opposite, and only under this angle of refraction is he to be comprehended.”<sup>49</sup> In this sense Socrates represents something different from most historical personalities or events, and this requires the observer to be especially careful in the treatment of him.

It will be noted here that in none of this is Kierkegaard saying that the relation between philosophy and history that he traced in the previous pages is now no longer relevant or applicable for his investigation. In what he goes on to say, it is abundantly clear that he still regards it as highly relevant. Given that Socrates employs irony, he cannot be taken at face value. It would be a mistake to ascribe a direct and straightforward meaning to words that were uttered ironically. A special procedure must instead be employed. Kierkegaard explains, “Therefore, the question of a view in regard to Socrates is quite different from what it is in regard to most other people. Because of this, Socrates can of necessity be comprehended only through a combined reckoning.”<sup>50</sup> One must first analyze what Socrates said, and then combine this with an account of the context in which he said it, and then, based on this, combine this with an account of the true meaning of what he said, which if he is speaking ironically, is the opposite of what he literally said. This idea of a “combined reckoning” is precisely a philosophical understanding. In other words, the naïve historian would simply take Socrates’ statements individually at face value and thus miss an important dimension of his thought. But it

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48 *SKS* 1, 73–4 / *CI*, 11.

49 *SKS* 1, 74 / *CI*, 12.

50 *SKS* 1, 74 / *CI*, 12.

is the philosophical observer who can see Socrates' statements in a larger context and discern the use of irony. This requires a degree of abstract understanding and not a straightforward acceptance of what one hears or reads. So also the philosophical historian is able to execute the "combined reckoning" in contrast to the naïve historian, since only the former is able to discern the use of irony and correct for it in the analysis.

This view is further complicated by our historical distance from Socrates: "But since we are now separated from him by centuries, and even his own age could not apprehend him in his immediacy, it is easy to see that it becomes doubly difficult for us to reconstruct his existence, inasmuch as we must strive to comprehend an already complicated view by means of a new combined reckoning."<sup>51</sup> The modern philosophical historian must make the correction required in dealing with Socrates' irony and also take into account the historical distance. Again this requires philosophical or conceptual abstraction that is not available to the naïve historian. Thus, Kierkegaard is in no way retracting what he said previously but instead reinforcing it. Only a philosophical historian is able to understand Socrates as a person and Socratic irony as a concept. Hegel's methodology provides the tool needed to come to terms with these phenomena.

Kierkegaard ends his Introduction with an odd image. He compares the irony and negativity of Socrates with a nisse. His task as a philosophical historian in this work is to capture the truth of Socrates, but this is like trying "to picture a nisse with a cap that makes him invisible."<sup>52</sup> If Socrates is sheer negativity, then he cannot be observed directly and seems invisible to the straightforward, naïve observer. The task is to use Hegel's methodology to understand the nature and context of Socrates' irony and then to put this in its larger context. This is not to say that Socrates becomes fully visible and we can see the nisse appear after his cap is removed. But it is only the philosophical approach that can grasp this negativity correctly in its conceptual and historical context.

### *III. Kierkegaard's Employment of the Method in The Concept of Irony*

One might also argue that Kierkegaard's Introduction is simply a planned misdirection intended merely to throw off his naïve readers or to seduce them into thinking that he was a Hegelian. However, an examination of

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51 SKS 1, 74 / CI, 12.

52 SKS 1, 74 / CI, 12.

the body of the work shows that in fact he consistently follows the procedure that he outlined in his introductory comments. *The Concept of Irony* can, in short, be seen as a kind of specialized philosophy of history along Hegelian lines.

In one passage he states that he wishes to “become conscious of the idea that is the meaning of his existence in the world, of the phase in the development of world spirit that is symbolically indicated by the singularity of his existence in history.”<sup>53</sup> Here one can readily recognize the dialectical balance between universal and particular that he pleaded for in the Introduction. The particular represents a finite phase in the development of the universal. His goal is to see the individual or the singularity as a part of this larger development.

In this context he dismisses the view that one can adequately grasp Socrates by a collection of the individual historical details about him. Instead, one needs the philosophical, conceptual dimension to abstract from these details and see the larger picture, the Idea: Socrates “is not, because he is not the object of immediate apprehension....He is, because of thought he is, which corresponds to the emergence of the Idea in the world of mind—but, please note, the Idea in its abstract form, its infinite negativity. Thus, the form of his existence in history is not a perfectly adequate pictorial indication of his significance for spirit.”<sup>54</sup> The meaning and signification of history come from the philosophical understanding of it. Here it is clear that Kierkegaard is following the methodological line that he expounded at the outset.

It is difficult to know what conclusions one can draw from this analysis. One might argue that Kierkegaard’s seeming Hegelian methodological statements in his Introduction are all simply ironic and that he intended to criticize Hegel’s methodology all along. But this view does not seem to be in harmony with the fact that he indeed uses this methodology in the body of the work itself. Moreover, he seems later to have regarded the work as profoundly Hegelian.<sup>55</sup>

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53 SKS 1, 244 / CI, 198.

54 SKS 1, 244 / CI, 198. Translation slightly modified.

55 Here one can refer to the oft cited journal entry from 1850: “Influenced as I was by Hegel and whatever was modern, without the maturity really to comprehend greatness, I could not resist pointing out somewhere in my dissertation that it was a defect on the part of Socrates to disregard the whole and only consider individuals numerically. What a Hegelian fool I was!” SKS 24, 32, NB21:35 / JP 4, 4281. Translation slightly modified.

Second, one might wish to argue that the criticism is in fact not aimed at Hegel's methodology itself, which Kierkegaard seems clearly to affirm. Rather, the criticism is that Hegel does not stick to his own methodology. Specifically, the upshot of Kierkegaard's introductory comments was that a balance between the empirical and the idea should always be maintained, a plea that he takes directly from Hegel's own methodological statements. However, when he sees Hegel's treatment of Socrates, Kierkegaard feels that Hegel is not adequately preserving the balance since he has put too much weight on the ideal at the expense of the empirical. On this interpretation, Kierkegaard would be seen, somewhat ironically, as rebuking Hegel for not being Hegelian enough. Hegel has escaped to abstractions and lost the dialectical harmony that his speculative methodology aims at. This does seem to be in fact what Kierkegaard is saying. He thus makes himself the champion of the neglected actual and empirical dimension, and is able to argue that he is more historically exacting in his analysis.

This can be seen as a forerunner of Kierkegaard's later criticisms of speculation for abstraction and neglect of actuality and existence. Seen in the context of Kierkegaard's overall development, this text then can be regarded as a transitional one, whereby he starts to move away from certain Hegelian intuitions and to develop the thoughts that we recognize as the mature Kierkegaard, that is, the champion of the individual in opposition to the system, the champion of existence and actuality in opposition to empty abstraction.

