

THE NOTION OF ACTUALITY IN KIERKEGAARD AND SCHELLING'S INFLUENCE

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ABSTRACT: Historians of philosophy have long regarded Kierkegaard as one of the most important forerunners of twentieth-century existentialism. One obvious reason for this is his rejection of abstraction and system-building and his insistence on the sphere of existence and actuality. One of his most famous criticisms of German idealism (and Hegel in particular) is that it neglects the realm of actuality, which cannot be captured by abstract concepts. His emphasis on the immediate lived experience of the individual seems to be at the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum from any form of idealism. What is interesting about this criticism is that it seems, at least in part, to be inspired by another German idealist, namely Schelling. This paper explores this criticism and attempts to come to terms with its implications. It is argued that this amounts to a somewhat unphilosophical criticism and that Kierkegaard does not end up with a philosophically plausible position, despite whatever merits it may have for the individual religious believer.

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El concepto de actualidad en Kierkegaard y la influencia de Schelling

RESUMEN: Los historiadores de la filosofía vienen considerando a Kierkegaard, desde hace ya algún tiempo, como uno de los precursores más importantes del existencialismo del siglo veinte. Una razón obvia para tal consideración puede hallarse en su rechazo de la abstracción y la construcción sistemática, así como su insistencia en la esfera de la existencia y la realidad. Una de las críticas más famosas que dirigió al idealismo alemán (Hegel en particular) es, así, por despreciar el reino de aquella realidad que no puede ser captada mediante conceptos abstractos. Su énfasis en la experiencia del individuo, inmediatamente vivida, parece encontrarse en el extremo opuesto de cualquier forma de idealismo. Lo que resulta interesante acerca de esta crítica es que parece, al menos en parte, haber sido sugerida por otro idealista alemán, concretamente Schelling. El presente artículo se adentra en esta crítica y trata de dilucidar sus implicaciones. Se argumenta que lleva a un criticismo en buena medida a-filosófico, y que Kierkegaard no alcanza ninguna posición filosóficamente plausible, por muchos que sean los méritos que pueda tener para el creyente, para el individuo religioso.

Historians of philosophy have long regarded Kierkegaard as one of the most important forerunners of twentieth-century existentialism. One obvious reason for this is his rejection of abstraction and system-building and his insistence on the sphere of existence and actuality. One of his most famous criticisms of German idealism (and Hegel in particular) is that it neglects the realm of actuality, which cannot be captured by abstract concepts. His emphasis on the immediate lived experience of the individual seems to be at the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum from any form of idealism. What is interesting about this criticism is that it seems, at least in part, to be inspired by another German idealist, namely Schelling.

In this paper I wish to explore this criticism and attempt to come to terms with its implications. I wish to argue that in fact this amounts to a somewhat unphilosophical criticism and that Kierkegaard does not end up with a philosophically plausible position, despite whatever merits it may have for the individual religious believer.

I. The Young Kierkegaard and the Concept of Actuality

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While Kierkegaard was a student at the University of Copenhagen in the 1830s, he, like many Danish students of the period, looked up to the professor Frederik Christian Sibbern, who was the leading figure in Danish philosophy during the period. Kierkegaard's deference was not misplaced. Sibbern was a major thinker, judged by the standards of any time. His philosophy was profoundly and decisively influenced by German idealism. He had personally met Fichte, Schleiermacher, Goethe, Solger, Schopenhauer and Steffens during a long journey to Prussia and the German states from 1811-1813.¹ Of particular importance was his encounter with Schelling in Munich in 1813. Schelling would prove to be the decisive influence in Sibbern's philosophical development.²

Sibbern's philosophy was very much modeled on the paradigm of philosophical enquiry that was current in Prussia and the German states at the time. One aspect of this was his development and use of a very idiosyncratic and difficult philosophical jargon, partly borrowed from ancient philosophy and German idealism but also

¹ See Jon Stewart, *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark*, Tome I, *The Heiberg Period: 1824-1836*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2007 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 3), pp. 98-102.

² Carl Henrik Koch, "F.C. Sibbern," in his *Den Danske Idealisme 1800-1880*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 2004, pp. 87-160; see pp. 94ff.

party self-created, full of enigmatic neologisms.³ He was in many ways very much a school or university philosopher. This is perhaps one of the reasons why he (and indeed others at the university) were somewhat irritated by the unscholarly tone of parts of Kierkegaard's master's thesis *The Concept of Irony*. In a letters circulated among Kierkegaard's dissertation committee and commented upon by each of the members, Sibbern laments,

Indeed, one might wish that our author's idea were carried through with more precision than seems to me to have been the case with all these efforts at bringing forth everything in order to clarify it—which is what we see here in our author, whose work has thereby taken on large proportions. With respect to various details, it would certainly be desirable that in the final revision of the dissertation a few things that are appropriate to a lower sort of genre could be trimmed away as luxuriant growths.⁴

This demonstrates clearly that Sibbern represented a very different kind of mindset from Kierkegaard, in any case from the young Kierkegaard. Sibbern represented the standard practice of philosophy of the period, whereas the young Kierkegaard found this form of philosophy increasingly dissatisfying.

This constitutes the background for an intriguing encounter between Sibbern and the young Kierkegaard presumably from this period when Kierkegaard was still a student.⁵ In connection with

3 Sibbern apparently had a notorious reputation for his difficult manner of expression among the generations of students which he taught at the University of Copenhagen. This prompted one of them to create a dictionary of Sibbernisms. See Hans Dahl, *Frederik Christian Sibbern og Modersmålet. Et Stykke Dansk Ordbogsarbejde*, Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad 1884.

4 Quoted from *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen By His Contemporaries*, trans. and ed. by Bruce H. Kirmmse, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, p. 29. See also Carl Weltzer's "Omkring Søren Kierkegaards Disputats," in *Kirkehistoriske Samlinger*, sixth series, ed. by J. Oskar Andersen and Bjørn Kornerup. Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads Forlag 1948-50, pp. 284-311.

5 Sibbern himself underscores that his memory for dates is somewhat faded and thus he cannot pinpoint exactly the date of this exchange. But he notes, "But my daughter tells me that Kierkegaard was visiting us even as early as when we lived on Chrystalgade—that is, between 1831 and 1836. These were undoubtedly his early years as a university student, if, as I assume, he entered the university in 1833." H.P. Barfod (ed.), "Indledende Notiser," in his *Af Søren Kierkegaards Efterlaede Papirer. 1833-1843*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag 1869, pp. lii-liiii. In English in *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, trans. and ed. by Bruce H. Kirmmse, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, p. 217.

his edition of Kierkegaard's *Nachlass*, Hans Peter Barfod (1834-92) solicited biographical information from people who knew him. In this connection he contacted Sibbern and asked him if he could give some information about his interaction with Kierkegaard. In a letter dated September 19, 1869, Sibbern writes back to Barfod and gives some minor anecdotes about events or conversations that he can remember. The first concrete event that he recalls is meeting Kierkegaard on the square where the latter lived. Sibbern recounts the following about their exchange: "I do remember, however, that once during his Hegelian period, he met me at Gammeltorv [sc. the old market] and asked me what relationship obtained between philosophy and actuality [*Virkelighed*], which astonished me, because the gist of the whole of my philosophy was the study of life and actuality [*Virkelighed*]."⁶ One can see Kierkegaard, already at this early period, struggling with the issue. He felt that philosophy should have something meaningful to say about actuality and existence in his existential understanding of these terms. He felt dissatisfaction with the way in which philosophy seemed to escape into abstractions and to ignore these issues, thus losing touch with actuality. Given this, it was natural for him to ask Sibbern, perhaps even in a slightly critical manner, to explain this relation. The old professor failed to understand the question since, according to his conception, there was no radical split between philosophical explanation and actuality and never had been. The reason for this is clearly that Kierkegaard is operating with a somewhat different conception of "actuality" than Sibbern. For Sibbern it was obvious that the entire philosophical enterprise was trying to give an account of actuality, but this was "actuality" understood in a more general, indeed, more abstract sense, and not "actuality" in terms of the individual's own existential relation to the world. When seen in this light, Kierkegaard's implied criticism is in a sense question begging since he has already assumed his own special understanding of "actuality" and then been disappointed that Sibbern cannot account for it. But Kierkegaard has not, at least in this context, given any independent argument for his use of the term.

What is particularly intriguing about this passage is what Sibbern goes on to say. In the passage already cited, he casually refers to

⁶ H.P. Barfod (ed.), "Indledende Notiser," in his *Af Søren Kierkegaards Efterladte Papirer. 1833-1843*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag 1869, pp. lii-liii. In English in *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, trans. and ed. by Bruce H. Kirmmse, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, p. 217. Translation slightly modified.

Kierkegaard's "Hegelian period," which can presumably be taken to be around this time when he was a student or was perhaps in the process of writing his dissertation. During this time he was reading a number of important works by Hegel such as the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*,⁷ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*,⁸ *Lectures on Aesthetics*,⁹ the *Philosophy of Right*¹⁰ and the review of Solger's posthumous writings.¹¹ Aware of Kierkegaard's current occupation with Hegel, Sibbern finds here the key to the motivation behind Kierkegaard's question: "But subsequently I, of course, realized that the question was a natural one for a Hegelianized thinker, because the Hegelians did not study philosophy existentially...."¹² Given Kierkegaard's Hegelian point of view, he was dissatisfied since Hegel did not seem to give an adequate account of "actuality" as he understood it. Sibbern, himself coming from the perspective of Schelling's philosophy, shared in many ways Schelling's criticism of Hegel on this point. (Indeed, in 1838 he would publish an entire book about Hegel's philosophy, which was largely critical: *Remarks and Investigations Primarily Concerning Hegel's Philosophy*.¹³) In this criticism he then naturally sees the root of Kierkegaard's

⁷ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. by Eduard Gans. Berlin 1837, vol. 9 in *Hegel's Werke*. Vollständige Ausgabe, vols. 1-18, Berlin 1832-45.

⁸ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, I-III, ed. by Karl Ludwig Michelet. Berlin 1833-36, vols. 13-15 in *Hegel's Werke*. Vollständige Ausgabe, vols. 1-18, Berlin 1832-45. ASKB 557-559.

⁹ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Aesthetik*, I-III, ed. by Heinrich Gustav Hotho. Berlin 1835-38, vols. 10-1, 10-2, 10-3 in *Hegel's Werke*. Vollständige Ausgabe, vols. 1-18, Berlin 1832-45. ASKB 1384-1386.

¹⁰ Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*, ed. by Eduard Gans. Berlin 1833 (Zweite Auflage 1840), vol. 8, in *Hegel's Werke*. Vollständige Ausgabe, vols. 1-18, Berlin 1832-45. ASKB 551.

¹¹ Hegel, "Über Solger's nachgelassene Schriften und Briefwechsel. Herausgegeben von Ludwig Tieck und Friedrich von Raumer. Erster Band 780 S. mit Vorr. XVI S. Zweiter Band 784 S. Leipzig, 1826," *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*, Erster Artikel (March 1828), no. 51-52, pp. 403-416, no. 53-54, pp. 417-428; Zweiter Artikel (June 1828), no. 105-106, pp. 838-848, no. 107-108, pp. 849-864, no. 109-110, pp. 865-870. Reprinted in *Vermischte Schriften*, I-II, ed. by Friedrich Förster and Ludwig Boumann, Berlin 1834-35, vols. 16-17 in *Hegel's Werke*. Vollständige Ausgabe, vols. 1-18, Berlin 1832-45, vol. 16, (1834) pp. 436-506. ASKB 555-556. In *Jub.* vol. 20, pp. 132-202.

¹² H.P. Barfod (ed.), "Indledende Notiser," in his *Af Søren Kierkegaards Efterladte Papirer. 1833-1843*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag 1869, pp. lii-liii. Cited from *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, trans. and ed. by Bruce H. Kirmmse, op. cit., "Letter F.C. Sibbern to H.P. Barfod," September 19, 1869, p. 217. Translation slightly modified. See also *JP*, vol. 2, 1592; *SKS*, vol. 19, p. 245, Not8:51.

¹³ Frederik Christian Sibbern, *Bemærkninger og Undersøgelser fornemmelig betræffende Hegels Philosophie, betragtet i Forhold til vor Tid*. Copenhagen 1838.

dissatisfaction. For Sibbern, the problem was that Kierkegaard was taking Hegel's philosophy to be philosophy in general, which was in some ways natural since the young student was at the time immersed in Hegel. But, for Sibbern, what was really at issue was a shortcoming in Hegel's philosophy and not in the philosophical enterprise as such.

This exchange clearly shows the young Kierkegaard struggling with this issue. Sibbern's interpretation of the matter seems to be confirmed by a remark that Kierkegaard makes in his first book, *From the Papers of One Still Living*. As is well known, this work was originally written as a review article intended for publication in Johan Ludvig Heiberg's Hegelian journal *Perseus*.¹⁴ Kierkegaard inserted specific proHegelian statements in the text, either because he genuinely believed them or because he thought his chances of getting the article approved for publication would thereby be enhanced. In any case, at the beginning of the work he discusses in a somewhat odd manner the question of the beginning of philosophy and Hegel's attempt to begin without presuppositions or with nothing. In this context he writes, "the entire recent literature....has forgotten that the beginning with nothing of which Hegel speaks was mastered by himself in the system and was by no means a failure to appreciate the great richness actuality has."¹⁵ The last part of this statement is particularly intriguing. At the time Hegel's philosophy was being discussed critically by some of the leading Danish intellectuals of the day, and the young Kierkegaard followed these discussions. Here he appears, wholly in line with Sibbern's assessment as a "Hegelianized thinker." In short, he seems quite convinced of the merits of Hegel's philosophy. With the last sentence in the passage quoted, he acknowledges indirectly that Hegel's philosophy has been reproached for "a failure to appreciate the great richness actuality." But here he goes out of his way to underscore that this is "by no means" the case. If we take this to be an authentic representation of Kierkegaard's view at the time, then it would seem to imply that he at this point was still convinced that Hegel's philosophy could capture the truth of actuality. However, as Kierkegaard came to develop his own existential conception of this term, he began to struggle with the question of how adequate Hegel's philosophy really managed to account for it. This then would account for the exchange with Sibbern on Gammeltorv.

¹⁴ See Jon Stewart, *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark*, Tome II, *The Martensen Period: 1837-1842*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2007 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 3), pp. 270-277.

¹⁵ *EPW*, p. 62; *SKS*, vol. 1, p. 18.

These are issues that Kierkegaard continued to struggle with for many years. But his position became clearer and clearer over time as he developed his own conception of the existential categories of actuality and existence in large part in opposition to the strictly abstract treatment of these terms in German philosophy at the time. (One could perhaps argue that in the later Kierkegaard this is also accompanied by a somewhat caricatured view of the abstract speculative thinker, which only partially overlaps with any actual philosophical position or person but rather is used by him merely as a kind of polemical whipping boy in order to help him to develop his own views.)

II. Schelling's Account of Actuality in Berlin

As is well known, Kierkegaard went to Berlin after completing his dissertation in the fall of 1841 in order, among other things to attend Schelling's lectures. He stayed in Berlin from October 25, 1841 until March 6, 1842. The significance of Schelling's lectures for Kierkegaard has been a point of some discussion in the secondary literature.¹⁶ One important aspect of Schelling's lecture was his criticism of Hegel, and it has been claimed that this had an enduring influence on Kierkegaard.¹⁷

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In his lectures Schelling treated the concept of actuality in a way that immediately caught Kierkegaard's attention as being potentially a very fruitful approach. While it is known that Kierkegaard soon became disappointed with Schelling's lectures, he was at first entirely captivated, and it was Schelling's account of the category of actuality

¹⁶ Dempf Alois, "Kierkegaard hört Schelling," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, vol. 65, 1957, pp. 147-161. Peter Fenves, "The Irony of Revelation: The Young Kierkegaard Listens to the Old Schelling," in *The Concept of Irony*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press 2001 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 2), pp. 391-416. Anton Mirko Koktanek, *Schellings Seinslehre und Kierkegaard. Mit Erstaussgabe der Nachschriften zweier Schellingsvorlesungen G.M. Mittermair und Sören Kierkegaard*, Munich: R. Oldenbourg 1962. Niels Thulstrup, "Kierkegaard and Schelling's Philosophy of Revelation," *Kierkegaard and Speculative Idealism*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1979 (*Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 4), pp. 144-159.

¹⁷ Bruno Majoli, "La critica ad Hegel in Schelling e Kierkegaard," *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica*, vol. 46, 1954, pp. 232-263. Francesco Rinaldi, "Della presenza schellinghiana nella critica di Kierkegaard a Hegel," *Studi Urbinati di Storia, Filosofia e Letteratura*, vol. 43, 1969, pp. 243-262. Michael Theunissen, "Die Dialektik der Offenbarung. Zur Auseinandersetzung Schellings und Kierkegaards mit der Religionsphilosophie Hegels," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, vol. 72, 1964-1965, pp. 134-160. Niels Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*, trans. by George L. Stengren, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980, pp. 267-274.

(*Wirklichkeit*) that played a key role in this fascination. In his *Notebook 8*, he describes his excitement in hearing Schelling's initial treatment:

I'm so glad to have heard *Schelling's* 2nd lecture—indescribable. I have been sighing and the thoughts within me have been groaning long enough; when he mentioned the word “*actuality*” concerning philosophy's relation to the actual, the child of thought leaped for joy within me....After that I remember almost every word he said. Perhaps here there can be clarity. This one word, it reminded me of all my philosophical pains and agonies.¹⁸

Prior to this period Kierkegaard was already beginning to develop his own intuitions about notions such as existence and actuality, which he regarded to be somehow fundamentally different from the usual abstract categories of logic. Indeed, these terms seemed to be a protest against abstract categories and thinking. One recalls here Johannes Climacus' objection in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that speculative philosophy has “forgotten” existence and actuality. The objection is that the speculative philosophers become so transfixed in abstract thinking that they must entirely abstract from themselves as living and breathing individuals. It is this immediate experience of simply living that is forgotten in a purely conceptual analysis. When he talks about being reminded of all of his “philosophical pains and agonies,” this fits well with his query to Sibbern. In other words, he felt dissatisfied with the philosophy that he studied as a student at the University of Copenhagen and in connection with his dissertation. He felt pained that philosophy did not seem to be addressing itself to the real problems as he perceived them but instead was often concerned with pseudoproblems that had nothing to do with real life. Thus since it seems clear that Kierkegaard was beginning at this stage to develop his own intuitions about this matter, when he heard Schelling mention this conception, he was suddenly wholly attentive. He immediately thought that he recognized a philosophical kindred spirit in Schelling, who likewise was interested in developing a more existential understanding of these concepts and who was likewise critical of pure, abstract conceptual analysis. This explains Kierkegaard's initial positive reaction and understanding of these concepts.

¹⁸ *KJN* 3, 229; *SKS* 19, p. 235, Not8:33.

It should be noted that while he was attending Schelling's lectures, he was also regularly going to the lectures of the Hegelian Karl Werder, who was giving a course on Hegel's *Science of Logic*. In this course Kierkegaard could witness firsthand a very abstract analysis of the categories of metaphysics. He was presumably already aware of this kind of analysis from his own reading of Hegel, but in any case, attending Werder's lectures was almost certainly a fresh reminder to him of the limitations of pure conceptual analysis. This would have made even stronger the contrast to what Schelling's philosophy seemed to be offering.

In the entry from *Notebook 8* cited just above Kierkegaard refers to Schelling's second lecture, where Schelling began his discussion of the relation of philosophy to actuality (sometime between November 15 and 22, 1841). In fact he introduces this discussion under the heading "Philosophy and Actuality."¹⁹ Schelling begins by making the classical distinction between existence and essence:

Everything actual has a dual aspect: *quid sit* (what it is), *quod sit* (that it is). Philosophy can thus enter into a dual relationship with it; one can have a concept without knowledge but no knowledge without the concept. In knowledge there is a duality whereby it is recollection. When I see a plant, I recollect and refer it to the universal, inasmuch as I recognize it as a plant.²⁰

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For Schelling "knowledge" amounts to empirical knowledge, according to this definition. It is empirical awareness of the existence of things in the world, a knowledge that something exists. By contrast, conceptual thinking is not knowledge. It is a familiarity with a concept but knowledge only comes when one encounters an example of that concept in the real world, when one sees or perceives something and recognizes it as falling under a specific concept. One sees a green, leafy thing, and recognizes it as a plant because one has the universal concept of plant in one's mind ahead of time. Kierkegaard writes in the margin, "a concept is expressed by *quid sit*, but from this it does not follow that I know *quod sit*."²¹ Just because one is familiar with the concept of dog or plant, it does not follow that one has knowledge of a specific dog or plant. This knowledge only comes with the empirical encounter with it in perception.

¹⁹ *KJN* 3, 303; *SKS* 19, p. 305, Not11:2.

²⁰ *KJN* 3, 303; *SKS* 19, p. 305, Not11:2.

²¹ *KJN* 3, 303, margin; *SKS* 19, p. 305, Not11:2a.

These comments seemed to serve as a kind of wake up call for Kierkegaard. He did not take any notes to Schelling's first lecture but only wrote down a single comment.²² For the second lecture he notes a bit more, including the passage quoted here. But it is only with the third lecture that Kierkegaard seems to take pains to write down as much as he can of what Schelling said. From this point on his notes become much more thorough.

Schelling goes on to connect this analysis of the relation of philosophy to actuality to a criticism of Hegel's philosophy. Schelling criticized Hegel's philosophy as overly abstract. In Kierkegaard's notes, Schelling is made to say the following:

Hegel himself says: "Logic is a purely subjective science, without any content; only the philosopher traverses all these stages; its content has nothing actual corresponding to it in actuality. Thinking has only itself as content, has the whole concretion of actuality outside itself, is, right up to one's arrival at the idea, a shadowy kingdom of pure essence without any concretion." In this he is different from other philosophers; for their philosophy found itself immediately in the midst of nature, even if not in actual nature. All concepts were *a priori*, such that objects correspond to them; in the Hegelian philosophy every relation to actuality is cancelled.²³

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At some point Kierkegaard became impatient with Schelling, whose initial proposal seemed to be so promising. In a letter to his brother P.C. Kierkegaard from February 1842, he begins by complaining, "Schelling spouts the most insufferable nonsense."²⁴ He declares that he has stopped going to the lectures, and since there is nothing left for him to do in Berlin he will return to Copenhagen. Clearly an important part of what alienated him from Schelling was the feeling of being betrayed or let down by what Schelling subsequently went on to say about actuality. While Kierkegaard has initially been so excited, he soon realized that his own conception of actuality was quite different from that of Schelling and that he had in fact been seduced by the latter's use of the same word. While he was in Berlin Kierkegaard was working on his first major work *Either/*

²² *KJN* 3, 303; *SKS* 19, p. 305, Not11:1: "he wished to be regarded as one who, in the Greek sense, in the Platonic sense, was dead."

²³ *KJN* 3, 314; *SKS*, vol. 19, p. 315, Not11:11.

²⁴ *LD*, 141, Letter 70; *B&A*, vol. 1, p. 109.

Or. His disappointment with Schelling is reflected in one of the diapsalmata, which reads "What philosophers say about actuality [*Virkelighed*] is often just as disappointing as it is when one reads on a sign in a second-hand shop: Pressing Done Here. If a person were to bring his clothes to be pressed, he would be duped, for the sign is merely for sale."²⁵ Kierkegaard himself presumably felt duped by Schelling who had led him to believe that he was going to be developing a new existential philosophy, while in fact he was only engaged in abstract conceptual analysis like the other German idealists. Schelling's theory of potency was, for Kierkegaard, a clear demonstration of a reversion to abstractions: "His whole doctrine of potencies betrays the highest degree of impotence."²⁶ He concludes his letter to his brother, "I think I might have become utterly stupid if I had continued to listen to Schelling."²⁷ From these comments alone it would be difficult to infer that Schelling's lectures exercised any positive influence on Kierkegaard at all.

III. Schelling and Actuality in The Concept of Anxiety

A few years later Kierkegaard takes up the notion of actuality again in *The Concept of Anxiety* under the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis. This is a particularly important work for our purposes since it is the Kierkegaard text where Schelling is mentioned most frequently. Moreover, Kierkegaard even refers to Schelling's Berlin lectures, for a moment slipping out of the pseudonymous role of Vigilius Haufniensis.²⁸

The discussion begins in the Introduction to the work with Vigilius Haufniensis apparently giving a positive account of the importance of systematic, scientific thinking, which he believes is necessary in order to avoid confusions in the realm of scholarship. He explains,

The view that every scientific issue within the larger compass of science has its definite place, its measure and its limit, and thereby its harmonious blending in the world as well as its legitimate participation in what is expressed by the whole, is not merely a *pium desiderium* that ennobles the man of science

²⁵ *EOI*, 32; *SKS* 2, 41.

²⁶ *LD*, 141, Letter 70; *B&A*, vol. 1, p. 110.

²⁷ *LD*, 142, Letter 70; *B&A*, vol. 1, p. 110.

²⁸ *CA*, 21n; *SKS* 4, 328n.

by its enthusiastic and melancholy infatuation. This view is not merely a sacred duty that commits him to the service of the totality and bids him to renounce lawlessness and the adventurous desire to lose sight of the mainland; it also serves the interest of every more specialized deliberation, for when the deliberation forgets where it properly belongs, as language often expresses with striking ambiguity, it forgets itself and becomes something else, and thereby acquires the dubious perfectibility of being able to become anything and everything.²⁹

When one is familiar with Kierkegaard's criticism of systematic philosophy, it is difficult not to see the irony in this. In any case, he has Haufniensis argue that it is of utmost importance to proceed in a systematic manner, lest one end up in ambiguities and conceptual confusions. Everything should be understood in its proper place in the context of the whole. This then leads to the discussion of the concept of actuality.

Science should be systematic, with each object being allotted its proper place and treated accordingly. A problem arises when one tries to incorporate actuality into this systematic account. Vigilius Haufniensis makes his thesis clear that actuality does not belong among the categories of logic since it is something altogether different in kind. He thus rebukes those unnamed scholars who include it as a part of their systems of logic:

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Thus when an author entitles the last section of the *Logic* "Actuality," he thereby gains the advantage of making it appear that in logic the highest has already been achieved, or if one prefers, the lowest. In the meantime, the loss is obvious, for neither logic nor actuality is served by placing actuality in the *Logic*. Actuality is not served thereby, for contingency, which is an essential part of the actual, cannot be admitted within the realm of logic. Logic is not served thereby, for if logic has thought actuality, it has included something that it cannot assimilate, it has appropriated at the beginning what it should only *praedisponere*. The penalty is obvious. Every deliberation about the nature of actuality is rendered difficult, and for a long time perhaps made impossible, since the word "actuality" must first have time to collect itself, time to forget the mistake.³⁰

²⁹ CA, 9; SKS 4, 317.

³⁰ CA, pp. 9-10; SKS, vol. 4, pp. 317-318. See CA, p. 16fn.; SKS, vol. 4, p. 324fn.:

The concrete target of this criticism has been identified with A.P. Adler, whose *Popular Lectures on Hegel's Objective Logic*,³¹ in fact concludes with a section on "actuality" in contrast to Hegel's *Science of Logic*.³² The important point is not so much the target of this criticism as what it tells us about Kierkegaard's understanding of this concept.

The criticism concerns what Haufniensis considers to be a confusion between different spheres: logic and existence. The Hegelians make use of the categories "actuality" and "existence" in their works on metaphysics (sc. logic). But, according to Haufniensis, this amounts to a serious distortion of these concepts and confuses the relation between the two separate spheres. Logic is necessary, but existence and actuality are contingent. They thus represent two fundamentally different spheres. When existence and actuality are treated in logic, a serious conceptual distortion and subsequent confusion takes place. Ultimately logic cannot include or "assimilate" actuality, when this concept is properly understood. Thus any attempt to do so merely leads to misunderstanding. In short it is a distortion of the concept of actuality to give it an abstract, conceptual analysis.

All of this is relevant for the main topic of *The Concept of Anxiety*, namely, sin since sin likewise does not belong to a system or is not the object of science: "Sin does not properly belong in any science, but it is the subject of the sermon, in which the single individual speaks as the single individual to the single individual."³³ The attempt in dogmatics to give an account of sin must thus begin with actuality.³⁴ For Haufniensis, sin is an action; it belongs to the realm of actuality (and not to necessity or the realm of logic) "sin is not a state. Its idea is that its concept is continually annulled. As

"If this is considered more carefully, there will be occasions enough to notice the brilliance of heading the last section of the *Logic* 'Actuality,' inasmuch as ethics never reaches it. The actuality with which logic ends means, therefore, no more in regard to actuality than the 'being' with which it begins." See also *JP*, vol. 3, 3653; *Pap. V B* 49.1: "Thus when an author entitles the last section of the *Logic* 'actuality' which Hegel has done and the Hegelian school did again and again the advantage is gained that it seems as if through logic the highest were already reached, or, if one prefers, the lowest."

³¹ Adolph Peter Adler *Populair Foredrag over Hegels objective Logik*, Copenhagen 1842. Ktl. 383.

³² See Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2003, pp. 380-385.

³³ *CA*, 16; *SKS* 4, 323.

³⁴ *CA*, 19; *SKS* 4, 326: "With dogmatics begins the science that...proceeds from actuality."

a state (*de potentia*), it is not, but *de actu* or *in actu* it is, again and again."³⁵ Here an attempt is made to flesh out the larger sphere of actuality and distinguish it from abstract thinking. Interesting, there is an appeal here to Schelling's concept of potential as a concept.

Mention is made of Schelling's lectures in Berlin in a footnote to the term "first philosophy." Here we read, "Schelling called attention to this Aristotelean term in support of his own distinction between negative and positive philosophy. By negative philosophy he meant 'logic': that was clear enough. On the other had, it was less clear to me what he really meant by positive philosophy, except insofar as it became evident that it was the philosophy that he himself wished to provide. However, since I have nothing to go by except my own opinion, it is not feasible to pursue this subject further."³⁶ One can hear in this a slightly critical tone with respect to the vagueness of Schelling's own position, the proposed positive philosophy. For Kierkegaard, this should have been an existential account of the sphere of existence and actuality, but this was clearly not what Schelling was interested in exploring. His own view, which he wanted to oppose Hegel's abstract conceptual analysis, remained unclear.

IV. Actuality in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript

In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* the account of actuality takes on much larger dimensions in connection Johannes Climacus' famous distinction between objective and subjective knowing. In this work he develops his theory of the subjective appropriation of the objective.³⁷ In this context it is clear that the terms actuality and existence fall squarely on the side of the subjective.

In this text Kierkegaard repeats in a more polemical tone the criticism that he issued in *The Concept of Anxiety* about the confusion of spheres involved when one attempts to incorporate actuality into a system of science or concepts: "So-called pantheistic systems

³⁵ CA, 15; SKS 4, 323.

³⁶ CA, 21n; SKS 4, 328n.

³⁷ CUP1, p. 21; SKS, vol. 7, p. : "The inquiring, speculating, knowing subject accordingly asks about the truth but not about the subjective truth, the truth of appropriation. Accordingly, the inquiring subject is indeed interested but is not infinitely, personally, impassionedly interested in his relation to this truth concerning his own eternal happiness." CUP1, p. 22; SKS, vol. 7, p. : "With regard to the subject's relation to known truth, it is assumed that if only the objective truth has been obtained, appropriation is an easy matter; it is automatically included as part of the bargain, and *am Ende* the individual is a matter of indifference. Precisely this is the basis of the scholar's elevated calm and the parrot's comical thoughtlessness."

have frequently been cited and attacked by saying that they cancel freedom and the distinction between good and evil. This is perhaps expressed just as definitely by saying that every such system fantastically volatilizes the concept *existence*. But this should be said not only of pantheistic systems, for it would have been better to show that every system must be pantheistic simply because of the conclusiveness. Existence must be annulled in the eternal before the system concludes itself."³⁸ He continues, "No existing remainder may be left behind, not even such a tiny dingle-dangle as the existing Herr Professor who is writing the system. But the issue is not presented this way. No, the pantheistic systems are contested, partly with tumultuous aphorisms that again and again promise a new system, partly with a compilation that is supposed to be a system and has a separate paragraph in which it is declared that emphasis is placed on the concepts 'existence' and 'actuality.'" That such a paragraph mocks the entire system, that instead of being a paragraph in the system it is an absolute protest against the system, is of no consequence to busy systematic triflers. If the concept of existence is actually to be emphasized, this cannot be stated directly in a paragraph in a system....That existence is actually emphasized must be expressed in an essential form, and in relation to the illusiveness of existence this is an indirect form—that there is no system."³⁹

V. Critical Evaluation

It is clear that Kierkegaard rejects idealism since he believes that it fails to capture the realm of actuality. Kierkegaard enjoins us to focus on this realm and not lose sight of it. This realm is characterized by things such as passion, consciousness of sinfulness, mortality, etc. The question remains about the merits of this as a philosophical criticism.

It seems that this criticism betrays a misunderstanding of the nature of philosophy, if indeed it is intended as a philosophical criticism in the first place. A philosophical theory, like any theory is an attempt to understand a certain object domain by means of an ideal, a rule or explanatory principle. Thus, there are always two elements involved: first there is a seemingly chaotic object domain that is full of disorderly individual items or events. The characteristic feature of this first element is particularity. Second, there is the realm of the idea

³⁸ *CUP1*, 122; *SKS* 7, 117f.

³⁹ *CUP1*, 122f.; *SKS* 7, 118.

or the rule or principle which attempts to bring order to the chaos of the particulars. The characteristic feature of this realm is universality. All attempts at understanding and giving an account of something operate with these two elements: particularity and universality. It is thus no accident that the entire history of philosophy can be told as the story of the different ways of understanding the relation of the universal to the particular. One might well argue that Hegel's conception of the Idea is too abstract, but it is a universal principle intended to explain individual phenomena, and thus constitutes a part of a philosophical theory of the way things hang together.

What then is Kierkegaard's proposal? He proposes that we dwell on the particular and avoid the seduction of the universal, which always ultimately distorts the particular and the realm of actuality. He thus seems to want to resist any attempt to give an account of the realm of particularity with any kind of principle or theory. But to reject this altogether is ultimately to reject all philosophy and all scientific account giving. It is then not clear what he is left with. Is he advocating an absurdly exaggerated form of empiricism, arguing that only the concrete individual things are real, and all ideas or ways of understanding them are nonsense? Here one can see that his position leads in the direction of an implausible kind of empiricism which insists on the irreducibility of individual things.

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Some insight on this can be garnered when he take a step back and consider his motivation with his writing. His goal is to give his readers, albeit for the most part indirectly, some insight into the radical meaning of what it is to be a Christian. It is in this context that he enjoins us to focus on ourselves as irreducible individuals, which makes perfect sense given his view of the nature of the Christian message and the obligation of each individual to take a stand on it of either faith or offense. However, it will be noted that this is not a philosophical theory. There is no theory of each particular Christian. This is indeed the whole point. Each person must appropriate the Christian message by him- or herself. There is no simple way to faith that a theory might facilitate. Thus what might appear as bad philosophy ends up looking like an at least somewhat plausible view of what it means to be a Christian.

In Kierkegaard studies, it is sometimes claimed that Kierkegaard's great insight lies in the realization that the problem of the universal and particular cannot be resolved by metaphysics, but needs to be grasped in the realm of one's own personal existence. This is why the entire history of philosophy, sticking doggedly to metaphysics, has failed to resolve the problem. This also recalls a passage from the

Postscript, namely, where Climacus criticizes the Hegelian doctrine of mediation for being hollow since the terms that are to be mediated are both in thought; thus thought is mediated with thought, which is a tautology and not true mediation. One cannot resolve the universal-particular problem by mediating two universals. By shifting the issue over into the realm of subjectivity and faith, according to this view, Kierkegaard has managed to solve this age-old philosophical problem. The question is whether or not this is a genuine solution to the problem. In the history of philosophy the problem has traditionally been understood as how to find the correct relation or status of the two terms, universal-particular. This means that both terms need to be present in any solution; hence Climacus' criticism of Hegelian mediation would, if accurate, be a good one since Hegel ends up with just universals and no particulars. The problem I wish to suggest with Kierkegaard's solution on this view is that he ends up with only particulars. In faith it is a question of particulars: a particular believer, a particular God and a particular relation between the two. God relates to the individual as one individual to another. There is no universal in this relation. Hence, one seems to end up here with a manifold of particularity and not a resolution to the problem of universal and particular.

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If his view is intended to be a solution to the philosophical problem, then it appears to be conceptually confused. There can be no science of the particular. Kierkegaard wants an exclusive focus on the faith of the individual, but there is no logos in this. Science cannot be about particulars in this sense. But he seems to recognize this by indicating that this is an area that science cannot encroach upon. Thus the confusion arises perhaps by ascribing to him a philosophical theory instead of seeing him as a Christian thinker developing a challenging theory of Christian faith. It is perhaps for this reason that thinkers such as Hegel or Schelling could not hold his attention for long.

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