

The Crisis of the Danish Golden Age as the Problem of Nihilism

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Nihilism has long been recognized as a central motif in the works of thinkers such as Heidegger, Sartre and Camus. For this reason it has been regularly associated with the philosophical movement of 20th-century existentialism. However, before this, a number of writers and philosophers in the 19th century were already profoundly occupied with the topic. These figures come from different traditions and intellectual contexts, but they all perceived nihilism to be a pressing issue in their own day.

For example, in the Anglophone tradition, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the central representative of New England Transcendentalism, takes up the problem of nihilism in his essay “Experience” (1844), where he addresses the sense of isolation, meaninglessness, and disorientation that is found in the face of the contingencies of modern world. This essay was written following the death of his young son, and it speaks to the sense of human vulnerability and helplessness vis-à-vis nature. *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34), the satirical masterpiece of Emerson’s friend Thomas Carlyle is known for the famous chapter “The Everlasting No,” which is one of the most celebrated literary expressions of nihilism. It represents an account of the metaphysical crisis experienced by the protagonist,

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Professor Teufelsdröckh, and portrays a mechanical universe indifferent to human needs and hopes. At the turn of the century, the American philosopher and psychologist William James addressed the question of nihilism in his essay “Is Life Worth Living” (from in his collection *The Will to Believe* (1897)). Returning to this issue in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James explored different forms of what he refers to as “the sick soul,” that is, the nihilist or pessimist.

In the German tradition, Schopenhauer stands as one of the most important figures to embrace a form of nihilism. His *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851), for example, argues that suffering is the basis of all human existence. He explores a handful of Christian doctrines, such as the original sin, eternal damnation, etc., which, he claims, are both alienating and indeed terrifying for common sense. He argues that Christianity is ultimately detrimental to cultural and scientific development. Nietzsche praised Schopenhauer on many points and hailed him as a great source of inspiration; however, he was critical of Schopenhauer’s nihilism. Nietzsche’s famous statement about the encroachment of nihilism into modern European culture appears in his *Twilight of the Idols* (1888) and his posthumous work *The Will to Power* (1901). In the former, Nietzsche argues that Christianity and modern rationalism create a metaphysics which is nihilistic in the sense that it denies life and the positive, spontaneous impulses necessary for a flourishing existence. In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche prophesies a cataclysmic disaster for modern culture, which has become sick and debilitated by the forces of nihilism. The theologian Ernst Troeltsch, in his *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religion* (1901), explores the question of how Christianity can make an absolute claim for being in possession of the truth when it is merely one historical form of religion among others. Using this as his point of departure, he tries to answer the problems raised by historical relativism. Nihilism is also a well-known topic in Russian philosophy and literature.¹ The decade of the 1860s is often referred to

¹ See Philip Pomper, “The Period of Nihilism, 1855-1869,” in his *The Russian Revolutionary Intelligentsia*, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company 1970, pp. 59-100. Charles I. Glicksberg, “Revolt and Despair in the Russian Soul,” in his *The Literature of Nihilism*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press and London: Associated University Presses 1975, pp. 73-115. See the useful collection of primary materials in *Russian Philosophy*, vol. 2, *The Nihilists, The Populists, Critics of Religion and Culture*, ed. by James M. Edie et al., Chicago: Triangle Books 1965.

as the nihilist period in Russian philosophy. Although the individual thinkers who constituted the movement are not generally well-known today, their spirit comes to life in a series of great fictional characters from Russian literature. Ivan Turgenev's Yevgeny Bazarov from *Fathers and Sons* (1862) is perhaps the most famous character sketch of a nihilist. Bazarov recognizes only the truth of natural science and is critical and dismissive of religion and social conventions. Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) contains his famous portrayal of the underground man who, afflicted by the "disease" of reflection, represents the modern face of nihilism, cynically rejecting all personal relations and programs for social improvement. Dostoevsky also gives a critical assessment of nihilism in his great novel known in English as *The Devils* or *The Possessed* (1872). His famous parable of "The Grand Inquisitor" from *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-80) explores the ability of human beings to act freely based on the Christian message. It too has also been read as raising the question of the meaning of human existence.

Nihilism thus has a clearly established place in the history of Western philosophy in the 19th century. However, the contribution of the tradition of Danish philosophy to this narrative has never been recognized. In the present article, I wish to argue that the theme of nihilism was an absolutely central element in what was widely perceived to be the cultural crisis of the period that we know today as the Danish Golden Age.¹ This fact often goes unrecognized since the various thinkers explored this issue under different names, for example, subjectivism, irony, autonomy, perspectivism, historicism, acosmism and even Buddhism. I wish to explore the understanding of this issue in some of the main figures of this time, including Søren Kierkegaard. With this analysis I hope to demonstrate that this issue was such a prevalent part of the academic agenda of so many different thinkers that it can fairly be said at least in part to characterize the period as a whole. Thus, the philosophers, theologians and writers of the Danish Golden Age should by all rights

¹ In a recent work, I have tried to point out the importance of the motif of a cultural crisis in Golden Age Denmark. See Jon Stewart, *The Cultural Crisis of the Danish Golden Age: Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2015 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 9). See also Jon Stewart, *Søren Kierkegaard: Subjectivity, Irony and the Crisis of Modernity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015.

be included in the great narratives about the development of nihilism in Western thinking.

Many cultural impulses in the Golden Age came from abroad, and the issue of nihilism is no exception.¹ The question was closely bound up with a little-recognized struggle for the legacy of Hegel. As is well-known, after Hegel's death in 1831, some of his students pursued projects that were perceived to be critical of the traditional dogmas of Christianity. It was feared that this would lead these students down the road to nihilism. Hegel's defenders were quick to point out that his philosophy of religion was intended explicitly to defend Christian dogma and that he should not be held responsible for the idiosyncrasies and excesses of his students. It was in the context of these debates that the schools of right and left Hegelianism arose.² At bottom, the question that was posed was whether Hegel's philosophy helped to resolve the problem of modern nihilism or was in part responsible for it.

In what follows I will sketch the origin and development of the discussion of nihilism in the Golden Age. Given the large number of texts and figures involved, this will amount to little more than a general overview that is intended simply to follow a single broad line of thought. Thus this article falls under the heading more of history of ideas than of textual exegesis. The goal is not to examine any of the individual works in great detail but rather to sketch a general issue that was treated by a number of thinkers in different ways.

Kierkegaard readers will be quick to complain that my treatment of his works is too hasty and superficial and that I have overlooked many useful textual examples that could illuminate his view on nihilism. Of course, much more can be said about Kierkegaard and nihilism, but this holds equally well for the other figures treated here. Again, the point

¹ For the rich history of the Danish Hegel reception, see Jon Stewart, *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark*, Tome I, *The Heiberg Period: 1824-1836* and *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).

² See William J. Brazill, *The Young Hegelians*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1970. John Edward Toews, *Hegelianism: The Path Toward Dialectical Humanism, 1805-1841*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1980. Jon Stewart, "Hegel's Philosophy of Religion and the Question of 'Right' and 'Left' Hegelianism," in *Politics, Religion and Art: Hegelian Debates*, ed. by Douglas Moggach, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2011, pp. 66-95.

is simply to establish that nihilism was a central topic that exercised the leading thinkers of the period, and for this reason it is impossible to dwell on this in any detail in the works of any one of the thinkers presented.

The hope is that this article will inspire readers to return to these texts and see for themselves the central role that the discussion about nihilism plays. The hope is that by providing the overview presented here my thesis that nihilism was formative for the culture of the Golden Age will be vindicated. This will add a new dimension to our understanding of the development of nihilism in Western thought since it will show that the rich intellectual tradition from Denmark in the 19th century must be included in this broader account.

I. The Historical Origins of Modern Nihilism

Although we tend today to associate nihilism and related views with modern existentialism, in fact this basic idea goes back to some of the earliest philosophical texts and reappears throughout the history of philosophy. Indeed, forms of nihilism and relativism have existed since antiquity. Some of the surviving fragments of the Presocratic thinkers, such as Heraclitus and Xenophanes, evidence a form of relativism or nihilism.¹ The Greek historian Herodotus observes the relativity of custom and tradition and concludes: “Such, then, is how custom operates; and how right Pindar is, it seems to me, when he declares in his poetry that ‘Custom is the King of all.’”² Similarly, the question of relativism or nihilism is often a central issue in Plato’s portrayal of

¹ *A PreSocratic Reader*, ed. by Patricia Curd, trans. by Richard D. McKirahan Jr., Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett 1995. Heraclitus: “The sea is the purest and most polluted water: to fishes drinkable and bringing safety, to humans undrinkable and destructive” p. 33. “Pigs rejoice in mud more than pure water” (p. 35). “Pigs wash themselves in mud, birds in dust or ash” (p. 35). Xenophanes: “Ethiopians say that their gods are flat-nosed and dark, Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired” (p. 26). “If oxen and horses and lions had hands and were able to draw...horses would draw the shapes of gods to look like horses and oxen to look like oxen, and each would make the gods’ bodies have the same shape as they themselves had” (p. 26).

² Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. by Tom Holland, with notes by Paul Cartledge, London: Penguin 2013, Book III, Chapter 38, p. 207.

Socrates' struggle with the Sophists. For example, in the *Gorgias* Callicles argues that laws and traditions are simply the artificial constructs of the weak that are intended to keep down those who are stronger by nature.¹ In Book I of the *Republic*, Socrates tries to answer a similar argument from Thrasymachus.² Cicero perceives the looming danger of nihilism if a general skepticism comes to undermine traditional religious beliefs:

Piety like any other virtue cannot long endure in the guise of a mere convention and pretense. When piety goes, religion and sanctity go with it. And when these are gone, there is anarchy and complete confusion in our way of life. Indeed I do not know whether, if our reverence of the gods were lost, we should not also see the end of good faith, of human brotherhood, and even of justice itself, which is the keystone of all the virtues.³

Cicero thus anticipates a central motif in the modern discussion by connecting ethics and values with religious belief. In any case, from these examples, it should be clear that the question of relativism was an important issue from the earliest times of ancient philosophy.

The origins of modern nihilism lie in the radical changes in religious life that took place in the wake of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Specifically, with the rise of modern science, the central authority of the Church in all elements of life began to be eroded, and faith in traditional institutions and beliefs gradually became a matter of doubt. Rationalism and naturalism had rendered traditional belief no longer possible, and there seemed to be nothing else to replace it with. This situation led to a sense of disorientation, which raised the specter of nihilism, relativism and a dismissal of religion altogether.

With Kant's so-called Copernican turn, there was a shift from the realm of objects to that of how individuals determined objectivity by means of their cognitive apparatus. The focus was for the first time firmly placed on the individual subject and not on God, the Church, or some

¹ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. by Walter Hamilton and Chris Emlyn-Jones, London: Penguin 2004, p. 67, 483b-c.

² *The Republic of Plato*, trans. by Allan Bloom, New York: Basic Books 1968, Book I, pp. 13-34, 336b-354c.

³ Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. by Horace C.P. McGregor, with an Introduction by J.M. Ross, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1972, p. 70.

external, objective sphere of truth. Kant's claim that God and things in themselves could not be known since they were not objects of possible experience opened the door to skepticism, despite his best efforts to avoid this consequence. While it was clearly not his intention, his emphasis on the subject led to various forms of relativism, which claimed that each individual subject is the absolute standard of truth. This line of thought was pursued by Fichte, who took Kant's basic framework and developed a more radical theory of subjectivity. For Fichte, the subject in a sense produced itself and the world of appearances. There was thus nothing radically transcendent or outside the sphere of the subject. The theories of Kant and Fichte ushered in a host of pressing questions: Are there any absolute values or truths? What is the role of the subject in the determination of truth? How can belief be justified? What is the relation of religious belief to scientific knowing? How are we to think of the different conceptions of the divine that can be found in different cultures at different historical periods? Is religious faith ultimately a personal matter for which no discursive justification can be offered? What is the meaning of human existence? Is life worth living? Is there a transcendent meaning in the universe?

One of the most important of the 19th-century discussions about this issue is Hegel's criticism of the different forms of relativism that he saw arising in the context of German Romanticism—a criticism issued in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), the *Philosophy of Right* (1821) and the posthumously published *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1833-36). While the first two works explore the conceptual structure of different forms of relativism,¹ his *Lectures* examine this as a historical phenomenon, which Hegel sees as resulting from a misapplication of

¹ See Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977, "The Law of the Heart," pp. 221-228, "Virtue and the Way of the World," pp. 228-235, "The Spiritual Animal Kingdom," pp. 236-252, "Dissemblance or Duplicity," pp. 374-383, "The Beautiful Soul," pp. 384-409. Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vols. 1-20, ed. by Hermann Glockner, Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag 1928-41, vol. 2, pp. 283-292, pp. 292-301, pp. 303-322, pp. 471-484, pp. 484-516. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. by H.B. Nisbet, ed. by Allen Wood, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 1991, "The Forms of Subjectivism," § 140, pp. 170-184. *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 7, pp. 204-223.

Fichte's philosophy of subjectivity.¹ In this context his favorite target is what he perceives as the relativism of Friedrich von Schlegel and his followers. While the ancient world denied the validity of the individual subject and saw the truth as dwelling in the objective world which was divinely ordained, in the modern world the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. The modern world tends to regard the individual as the sole source of truth independent of the external sphere. According to Hegel, relativism and nihilism are thus characteristic of the excesses of the modern world-view. Hegel's plea is to restore the proper balance between subjective and objective. The truth rests not in the one or the other exclusively, but in the dialectical relation between them.

One of the basic ideas behind modern nihilism seems to be the feeling of meaninglessness and abandonment that follows the realization that God, as guarantor of truth and meaning, does not exist. Given this, human beings are thus obliged to create their own truth and meaning, but this seems hopelessly impoverished and hollow in comparison to the former divine standard. The concern is that this loss of the divine grounding of ethics will lead to chaos and mayhem. While some people will not have the moral strength to create their own values, others will take this realization opportunistically to justify all kinds of wicked actions that they believe will further their own ends. This is summed up in Ivan Karamazov's famous statement that if God does not exist, then "everything is allowed."²

While this passage from *The Brothers Karamazov* is often quoted in this kind of context, the idea is much older. In the 17th century Descartes was aware of the importance of God for promoting moral behavior. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, when describing one of his motivations for writing the work, he comments, "since in this life the rewards offered to vice are often greater than the rewards of virtue, few people would prefer what is right to what is expedient if they did not fear God or

¹ See Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vols. 1-3, trans. by E.S. Haldane, London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner 1892-96; Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 1995, vol. 3, pp. 479-512; Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 19, pp. 611-646.

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, vols. 1-2, trans. by David Magarshack, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1958, vol. 2, p. 691.

have the expectation of an after-life.”¹ Similarly, in 1769 Voltaire directly argued, in *God and Human Beings*, that the idea of morality comes from the idea of God, which plays a beneficial role in preventing people from committing crimes when no one is around to see them.² The all-watching eye of God inhibits people from acting on their worse impulses since they know that even if they manage to escape human justice, they will never be able to escape that of the divine. Further, a similar thought is expressed by Kant in his *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*:

the dogmatic atheist...directly denies the existence of a God and...declares it impossible that there is a God at all. Either there never have been such dogmatic atheists, or they have been the most evil of human beings. In them all the incentives of morality have broken down; and it is to these atheists that moral theism stands opposed.³

This explains why Kant regularly refers to atheists as moral scoundrels.⁴ Later Feuerbach makes the same observation about the suspicion of atheists in his own day: “Atheism was supposed, and is even now supposed to be the negation of all moral principle, of all moral foundations and bonds: if God is not, all distinction between good and bad, virtue and vice, is abolished.”⁵

Once the belief in God had become dubious, any kind of ethics or system of morality based on religion seemed to be built on a very unstable foundation. Given this, people of the modern age found themselves in a crisis, since they were deprived of meaningful or persuasive reasons

¹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. by John Cottingham with an Introduction by Bernard Williams, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986, p. 3.

² Voltaire, *God and Human Beings*, trans. by Michael Shreve, Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books 2010, pp. 17-21. See also p. 157: “If the state’s law punishes known crimes, let us proclaim a God who punishes the unknown crimes.”

³ Kant, *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, in *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion in Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 1996, p. 355.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 407: “Hence without God I would have to be either a visionary or a scoundrel [sc. with regard to ethics].” *Ibid.*, p. 415: “...anyone who denies [the postulate of God] would have to be a scoundrel.”

⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by George Eliot, New York: Harper & Row 1957, p. 202. See also p. 274.

for acting morally. Without the eye of God observing one's actions, the door seemed to be open for wicked people to do whatever they wanted with no fear of punishment or even scruple of conscience. This I take to be the background for modern nihilism that has been so widespread in secular culture.

II. Heiberg's Diagnosis of the Problem

In 1824 Johan Ludvig Heiberg attended Hegel's lectures in Berlin. There he heard Hegel talk about the troubling "discordant note" of the time.¹ Heiberg then takes up this cultural criticism a decade later in his work *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age* (1833). There he talks about the crisis of the age in terms of the contemporary problem of relativism, subjectivism, and nihilism. He describes how people have ceased to believe in traditional values, religion, culture, etc. Heiberg's dramatic claim is that Hegel's philosophy can provide the grounding that has been lost and thus resolve the problem.² Heiberg identifies three cultural spheres where the crisis is acute: religion, art, and philosophy.

¹ See Jon Stewart, "La 'nota discordante' de Hegel: La crisis cultural y la inspiración detrás de *Sobre la importancia de la filosofía para la época presente* de Heiberg," *Estudios Kierkegaardianos. Revista de filosofía*, vol. 4, 2018, pp. 25-44. See *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vols. 1-3, trans. by E.B. Speirs and J. Burdon Sanderson, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: The Humanities Press 1962, vol. 3, pp. 149f. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion. Nebst einer Schrift über die Beweise vom Daseyn Gottes*, I-II, ed. by Philipp Marheineke, vols. 11-12 [1832], 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: Verlag von Duncker und Humblot 1832-45, vol. 12, p. 354 (*Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 16, p. 354): "But ought we to speak here of destruction when the Kingdom of God is founded eternally, when the Holy Spirit as such lives eternally in its Spiritual Community, and when the Gates of Hell are not to prevail against the Church? To speak of the Spiritual Community passing away is to end with a discordant note."

² Johan Ludvig Heiberg, *Om Philosophiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1833, p. 49. (In English in *Heiberg's On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age and Other Texts*, ed. and trans. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2005 (*Texts from Golden Age Denmark*, vol. 1), pp. 115f.)

With respect to the first of these, he seems to claim that religion has lost its grip on educated people, who can no longer in good faith believe in it. As a result, the educated simply go through the motions and pretend to believe, and religion falls to the lot of the uneducated. Heiberg laments, "It is of no use to hide or gloss over the truth; we must confess that religion in our age is for the most part a matter for the uncultured, while for the cultured it belongs to the past, to the road already traveled."¹ People follow Kant's view that God cannot be known, and this leads them to reduce religion to the realm of inwardness and subjectivity, but this deprives God of any objective truth. Heiberg believes that Hegel's philosophy can reestablish religion in its former position as bearer of truth. This is very much in line with Hegel's own stated goals in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*.²

A second element of the crisis is to be found in art. Heiberg believes that people in his age have become alienated from the traditional forms of art and are in need of something new. The forms of art that are presented fail to speak to their audience in any meaningful way and thus leave people dissatisfied. Art is then relegated to being a leisure time activity or "a simple recreation" with no deeper meaning.³ In the modern world it has lost its role as a fundamental part of the spiritual life of human beings. Heiberg writes, "But when the cultured world has discarded religion, one cannot expect its sisters to carry much weight. In this case art and poetry can at most be merely a pleasant luxury."⁴

For Heiberg, art, like religion, can be saved by means of Hegel's philosophy. Goethe has shown us the way forward with his works, which Heiberg dubs "speculative poetry."⁵ The goal of the poet should

¹ Heiberg, *Om Philosophiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, p. 16. (*Heiberg's On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, p. 95.)

² See, for example, Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vols. 1-3, ed. by Peter C. Hodgson, trans. by Robert F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson and J.M. Stewart with the assistance of H.S. Harris, Berkeley et al.: University of California Press 1984-87, vol. 1, pp. 156ff.; *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, Parts 1-3, ed. by Walter Jaeschke, Hamburg: Felix Meiner 1983-85, 1993-95, Part 1, pp. 66ff.

³ Heiberg, *Om Philosophiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, p. 21. (*Heiberg's On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, p. 98.)

⁴ Heiberg, *Om Philosophiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, p. 20. (*Heiberg's On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, p. 97.)

⁵ Heiberg, *Om Philosophiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, p. 43. (*Heiberg's On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, p. 112.) See Jon Stewart, "Heiberg's

be to portray the larger speculative truth of the world that stands above the individual finite things. According to Heiberg, Goethe does this effectively by shifting perspectives quickly. First, he dwells on the individual details of the finite sphere and then suddenly steps back and sees these in a wider perspective. One thus sees that while the individual details contain not truth in themselves, they do constitute a part of a much larger general context of truth and meaning. Heiberg is optimistic about the redeeming effects of aesthetics or poetry, although they are not entirely on a par with philosophy. Speculative poetry can help the age out of the current crisis just as speculative philosophy can. Heiberg goes through a list of different writers and poets, sorting out the ones that he believes to be working in the right direction. He mentions, for example, figures such as Tieck and Schlegel as striving towards speculative poetry.¹ In Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony*, these same figures are mentioned critically as examples of Romantic irony.²

Finally, Heiberg sees the field of philosophy as being in a state of crisis. Under the influence of the development of the sciences, philosophers have lapsed into a cold materialism. They only believe what they can see and touch in immediate perception. Everything else is dismissed as antiquated superstition. Given this view, it is no wonder that such thinkers are the victims of relativism and nihilism since they in effect have abandoned any deeper sense of truth. Heiberg thus regularly criticizes the materialists and points to Hegel's speculative philosophy as the solution to the problem.³ Only Hegelian idealism can help the age out of its sluggish adherence to materialism and naturalism, which are

Conception of Speculative Drama and the Crisis of the Age: Martensen's Analysis of *Fata Morgana*" in *The Heibergs and the Theater: Between Vaudeville, Romantic Comedy and National Drama*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2012 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 7), pp. 139-160.

¹ Heiberg, *Om Philosophiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, p. 45. (Heiberg's *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, p. 113.)

² See Kierkegaard, *SKS*, 1, 321-352 / *CI*, 286-323.

³ See, for example, Johan Ludvig Heiberg, "Til Læserne," *Perseus, Journal for den speculative Idee*, no. 1, 1837, pp. v-xvi. (In English as Heiberg, "To the Readers" in *Heiberg's Perseus and Other Texts*, ed. and trans. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2011 (*Texts from Golden Age Denmark*, vol. 6), pp. 75-79.) See Stewart, *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark*, Tome II, *The Martensen Period: 1837-1842*, pp. 61-69.

focused solely on what is transitory and ephemeral but have no sense of a deeper truth that is eternal.

Heiberg offers a series of arguments in order to refute the relativism of his day. He claims that philosophy will resolve the contemporary crisis, and then he imagines a critic who raises the objection, “there are so many philosophies; the one system contradicts and negates the other; in which of these can one find the truth?”¹ This objection expresses the same kind of relativism that was seen in his diagnosis of the lapse of religion and art in the modern world. His response to this is that in the end there is only one philosophy which contains all the rest. The reason for this is that there is only one truth. He argues as follows:

To this one can answer that the different philosophical systems—assuming that they really are philosophical, i.e., that they are penetrated by the speculative Idea, for otherwise they cannot be considered—all contain the same philosophy, only seen from different levels of culture in the development of humanity, just as the different religions all contain the same God, viewed from different standpoints in the religious Idea, and just as the different works of art contain the same beauty in changing forms, and the different forms of poetry contain the same poetry under different conditions. All differences are grounded in unity; they are only moments in it, i.e., they are the necessary stages in the unity’s own development. The truth is not so empty or abstract that it could not, without damage to itself, take up the conflicting moments and keep them in the common womb. They contradict, they sublimate each other; for just this reason it is absurd to ask, “in which of them is the truth?” It is in none of them, but they are all in it.²

With respect to religion Heiberg draws on Hegel’s understanding of religion from two perspectives. First, the religions of the world can be conceived as specific “determinate religions,” such as Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Greek polytheism.³ Each of these has its own

¹ Heiberg, *Om Filosofiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, p. 6. (Heiberg’s *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, pp. 88f.)

² Heiberg, *Om Filosofiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, p. 6. (Heiberg’s *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, p. 89.)

³ See Jon Stewart, *Hegel’s Interpretation of the Religions of the World: The Logic of the Gods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018, pp. 22-26.

gods and forms of worship. In this sense the religions are understood individually, and a form of religious relativism is possible. But they can also be seen as steps in the broader development of the concept of the divine that runs through all of the different religions. In this sense the relativism is overcome, and the individual religions can be judged on the basis of how well their concept matches up to the fully developed one.

So also with philosophy, he claims: “The different philosophical systems represent different forms under which the unchangeable substance is presented.”¹ It might appear that there are a plurality of different, contradictory philosophical systems in the history of philosophy, and this precludes any firm statement about the truth. However, these different systems and philosophical positions can all be regarded as one single overarching philosophy that encompasses them all.

Likewise with art, there are many artists and schools of art, all producing a variety of different works. This at first glance gives rise to a sense of relativism with respect to what is good and what is not. This sentiment is often heard in our own day when people lament the loss of specific criteria for the judgment of art. Heiberg, however, notes that there is a single concept—beauty—that runs through the entire history of art, despite the many different artists and art works. This is what unites all of them as that towards which they all strive.

Following Hegel again,² Heiberg claims that the early Roman Empire was in a state of spiritual crisis. The old gods and religious traditions appeared hollow, and the people longed for something that would fulfill their deeper spiritual needs. Regarding the mundane world as meaningless and transitory, they thus wallowed in a form of nihilism. He describes this condition as follows: “This material was the culture of the Roman Empire, which haunted the living like a ghost from past

¹ Heiberg, *Om Filosofiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, p. 8. (Heiberg’s *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, p. 90.)

² See Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte: Berlin 1822–1823*, ed. by Karl Heinz Ilting, Karl Brehmer and Hoo Nam Seelmann, Hamburg: Felix Meiner 1996, pp. 413–438. (This corresponds to vol. 12 in the edition, Hegel, *Vorlesungen. Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte*, vols. 1–17, Hamburg: Meiner 1983–2008.) (English translation: *The Philosophy of World History*, vol. 1, *Manuscripts of the Introduction and the Lectures of 1822–3*, trans. by Robert F. Brown and Peter C. Hodgson with the assistance of William G. Geuss, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011, pp. 442–460.)

ages, which had lost all meaning in the present, thus demonstrating that it belonged with the dead. The Roman religion, by idolizing the finite, little by little set it apart from the infinite and set the divine apart from the human. The Idea, reason and truth became a land which lay beyond.”¹

This conception implied a radical division or separation of the individual from the divine and from the truth. This is the same crisis that Heiberg sees in his own time. People are so obsessed with their own views and subjectivity that they have abandoned any sense of a deeper more fulfilling truth. He explains,

The hopeless demand which resulted from this was that one was supposed to recognize that everything finite and human amounted to nothing since it was separated from the divine, that is, one was supposed to give up the finite without ever receiving the infinite as a replacement. One can say that under such conditions there was an inner necessity that things had to be different, for the described condition had become what was called above the “absence of a condition,” “a crisis,” “a becoming,” i.e., a suspension between being and nothing, that is, a contradiction, which, like every other contradiction, must be sublated and must pass over to an actual condition. [There was a] violent separation of the divine from the human—this crisis, in which man felt abandoned by all gods....²

He thus describes a condition known from Nietzsche as the death of God. Heiberg believes that the key to resolving the crisis is to see that, instead of dwelling in some unreachable beyond or not existing at all, the truth can in fact be found in the realm of finite things.³ This is Hegel’s idea of the Concept, which unites the universal with the particular, thus elevating the particular from the abyss of relativism. Thus, although the word “nihilism” does not appear explicitly in Heiberg’s treatise, it is an absolutely central concept for his assessment of the spiritual crisis of the age.

¹ Heiberg, *Om Filosofiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, p. 9. (Heiberg’s *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, p. 90.)

² Heiberg, *Om Filosofiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, p. 9. (Heiberg’s *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, pp. 90f.)

³ For Heiberg’s treatment of the finite and the infinite, see Jon Stewart, “The Finite and the Infinite: Johan Ludvig Heiberg’s Enigmatic Relation to Hegelianism,” *Filosofiske Studier*, ed. by Finn Collin and Jan Riis Flor (special issue, *Festskrift tilegnet Carl Henrik Koch*), 2008, pp. 267–280.

III. Martensen's Criticism of Autonomy

In his dissertation, *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology* (1837),¹ the Danish theologian Hans Lassen Martensen takes up the issue of relativism and nihilism, albeit under a different name. The work criticizes both modern philosophy (Kant) and modern theology (Schleiermacher) for falling victim to what he calls the principle of “autonomy” in the sense of self-sufficiency, which he believes characterizes post-Enlightenment Europe. The principle puts the focus exclusively on the individual and denies any higher standard. Against this view, Martensen argues that human beings can only know the truth with the help of the divine and are thus not genuinely autonomous.

He traces the principle of autonomy in modern philosophy back to Descartes. As is well known, in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes decides to begin with a method of universal doubt. Nothing will be accepted as true until it has been subject to the most rigorous of tests. This is, for Martensen, the key move in the development of autonomy since it says that the subject is key for the determination of truth. Only when the subject gives his or her consent can something be regarded as true. Martensen explains,

Consequently, since [Descartes] had in principle shown the identity of thought and being, he taught that everything which is to have truth and certainty in itself is only to be sought in thinking itself. This doctrine was then taken up and gradually developed further by the philosophers who followed him. That is to say, when thinking involves being, or, in other words, when there is no given reality, no being *outside* of thinking—even if there were something *on the other side* of thought, it would be impossible to think it—; when further we may say that the *truth's* own concept lies

¹ Hans Lassen Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae in theologiam dogmaticam nostri temporis introducta*, Copenhagen: I.D. Quist 1837. (Danish translation: *Den menneskelige Selvebevistheds Autonomie i vor Tids dogmatiske Theologie*, trans. by L.V. Petersen, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1841. English translation: *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology* in *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard: Hans L. Martensen's Philosophy of Religion*, trans. by Curtis L. Thompson and David J. Kangas, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1997, pp. 73-147.) See Robert Leslie Horn, *Positivity and Dialectic: A Study of the Theological Method of Hans Lassen Martensen*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2007 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 2).

in this identity of thought and being, then *self-consciousness*, which is the absolute for this identity, must be recognized as the source of all truth and certainty; it must be able to decide out of *itself* what is true and false and by this lead the human into all truth. The spirit which thinks or the ideal self-consciousness then sees in objective existence nothing except its own essence—namely, the law of thinking—and is thus itself both true and certain. In this way is formed the concept of self-consciousness' *autarchy*, or the quality that in an absolute way it is *self-sufficient* and has the ability to *prescribe its law itself (autonomy)*; self-consciousness thus does not stand under any authority because it is itself the highest court of appeal.¹

Martensen ascribes to Descartes an idealism, by which what appear to be objects in the world are in the end objects of thought. There can be no objectivity unless it is thought by the human subject. The idea of extension is a thought, and thus when we see extended objects in the world, we recognize a part of ourselves in them. Martensen claims that this is the fundamental principle of modern philosophy.

The question of autonomy is also a question of authority. We want to recognize ourselves as self-sufficient and not in need of assistance from some other source. There arises from this a sense of arrogance that one finds in the German Romantics, who are confident in their own abilities, so to speak, to create the world.² But Martensen believes that this sense of self-certainty is fundamentally misguided since humans are created beings and are always dependent on God as a higher power. When we explore the world around us, we should therefore be concerned with the theological underpinnings of human existence as created by God. Martensen explains, "It is an investigation not only of the relations between the finite and infinite, but between the created and uncreated spirit. Without regarding this positive character of the human spirit, the greatest philosophers from Descartes right down to Hegel...have followed the one-sided metaphysical mode of reflection."³ Martensen

¹ Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 5, pp. 19f.; *Den menneskelige Selvevidstheds Autonomie*, p. 17; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness*, pp. 85f.

² See Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, pp. 479-512; *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 19, pp. 611-646.

³ Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 5, p. 22; *Den menneskelige Selvevidstheds Autonomie*, p. 19; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness*, p. 87. For more detail on Martensen's contribution to the debate on Hegel's philosophy of

thus thinks that the common feature of modern philosophy is that it ascribes the principle of autonomy to each person in the belief that the individual has the ability to know the truth on his or her own. He believes that this is a distortion that fails to take into account the true nature of human beings as finite, created and prone to error.

Martensen examines Kant's philosophy in some detail and claims that it developed the principle of autonomy in a way that was influential for subsequent thinking. From a footnote, it is clear that the source of this interpretation is in fact Hegel.¹ Martensen quotes from the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* as follows:

The main effect of Kant's philosophy has been that it has revived the consciousness of this absolute inwardness. Although, because of its abstraction, this inwardness cannot develop itself into anything, and cannot produce by its own means any determinations, either cognitions or moral laws, still it altogether refuses to allow something that has the character of *outwardness* to have full play in it, and be valid for it. From now on the principle of the *independence of reason*, of its absolute inward autonomy, must be regarded as the universal principle of philosophy, and as one of the assumptions of our times.²

Hegel traces the development of inwardness and what he calls "subjective freedom" in the development of history and human thought. Here Hegel himself refers to this as "inward autonomy." Although this is the term that Martensen seizes upon, it is clearly the same idea that Hegel

religion see Peter Šajda, "Does Hegelian Philosophy of Religion Distort Christian Dogmatics and Ethics? (The Debate on Speculative Mysticism)," *Acta Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 4, 2009, pp. 64-83; Peter Šajda, "Martensen's Treatise *Mester Eckart* and the Contemporary Philosophical-Theological Debate on Speculative Mysticism in Germany," in *Hans Lassen Martensen: Theologian, Philosopher and Social Critic*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2012 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 6), pp. 47-72.

¹ Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 5, p. 23n; *Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, p. 19n and f.; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness*, p. 87n.

² Hegel, *Encyclopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, Zweite Ausgabe, Heidelberg: August Oßwald 1827, § 60, p. 71. (*The Encyclopaedia Logic. Part One of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. by T.F. Gerats, W.A. Suchting, H.S. Harris, Indianapolis: Hackett 1991, § 60, p. 107; *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 8, p. 161.)

talks about under the rubric subjective freedom. The difference is that while Hegel regards this idea as something positive since it allows the individual to escape the tyranny of custom and tradition, Martensen, by contrast, regards it as something dangerous and impious. It should be noted, however, that Hegel too saw the potential dangers involved in this principle when it was taken too far. This is an important part of his polemical criticism of Friedrich von Schlegel and the German Romantics.¹

Again following Hegel on this point, Martensen claims that this principle from modern philosophy can lead to egoism, subjectivism and relativism since the individual rejects any other authority beyond himself. This thus degenerates into a form of nihilism. He describes this way of thinking as follows:

Human self-consciousness, which sees itself in the shape of this spiritual autonomy, prescribes laws not merely for itself but for the universe, for the world of objective things. For, on the one hand, since it is able to determine what is true and false or good and evil, and does not recognize any inner authority, because it is itself all truth and certainty, it must consequently also reject every outer authority. It finds in nature and history, then, only its own laws, and what reality is to be conferred on this or that object depends on its rational character or its agreement with the speculative self-consciousness; for this speculative self-consciousness stands as a prototype for and as judge over everything and by its authority shall sanction everything which is to have the name of truth.²

According to Martensen, the issue of autonomy is not a neutral one, as Kant seemed to believe. On the contrary, it leads to an impious attitude that denies any form of higher authority. Martensen clearly believes that God is required for a stable concept of truth. When this is rejected in favor of human reason, the door is open to nihilism. Like Heiberg, he takes this to be characteristic of the crisis of the present age.

¹ See Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, "The Forms of Subjectivism," § 140, pp. 170-184. *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 7, pp. 204-223.

² Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 6, pp. 23f.; *Den menneskelige Selvevidstbeds Autonomie*, p. 20; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness*, pp. 87f.

Martensen returns to this theme some years later. In his article “The Present Religious Crisis” from 1842 he also talks about the religious confusion of the day, without identifying it specifically as relativism or nihilism.¹ In his late work *Christian Ethics* (1871-78), he revisits this theme yet again and, following Hegel’s analysis, criticizes different forms of contemporary relativism and nihilism.² Thus, the topic of nihilism continues to be an issue for him for several decades.

IV. Møller’s Treatment of Nihilism

Another important work in the Danish discussion of nihilism was Poul Martin Møller’s article “Thoughts on the Possibility of Proofs of Human Immortality with Regard to the Latest Literature on the Subject” from 1837.³ In this text Møller reviews some of the then recent works in the German literature about the issue of whether Hegel’s philosophy contained a theory of immortality.⁴ Møller takes this to be an absolutely

¹ Hans Lassen Martensen, “Nutidens religiøse Crisis,” *Intelligensblade*, vol. 1, no. 3, April 15, 1842, pp. 53-73. (English translation: Jon Stewart, “Hans Lassen Martensen’s ‘The Present Religious Crisis,’” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2017, pp. 423-438.)

² Hans Lassen Martensen, “Syndens Udviklingstrin og Tilstande” in *Den christelige Ethik. Den specielle Deel. Første Afdeling: Den individuelle Ethik*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1878, pp. 122-158. (English translation: “Steps of Development and States of the Life of Sin,” in *Christian Ethics. Special Part. First Division: Individual Ethics*, trans. by William Affleck. Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark [1881], pp. 99-130.)

³ Poul Martin Møller, “Tanker over Muligheden af Beviser for Menneskets Udødelighed, med Hensyn til den nyeste derhen hørende Literatur,” *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, vol. 17, 1837, pp. 1-72, pp. 422-453. See Jon Stewart, *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark*, Tome II, *The Martensen Period: 1837-1842*, pp. 37-53. Jørgen K. Bukdahl, “Poul Martin Møllers opgør med ‘nihilismen,’” *Dansk Udsyn*, vol. 45, 1965, pp. 266-290. K. Brian Söderquist, “The Closed Self: Kierkegaard and Poul Martin Møller on the Hubris of Romantic Irony,” in *Kierkegaard and the Word(s). Essays on Hermeneutics and Communication*, ed. by Poul Houe and Gordon D. Marino, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2003, pp. 204-214.

⁴ For the Danish discussions of the issue, see the outstanding work of István Czakó: *Geist und Unsterblichkeit: Grundprobleme der Religionsphilosophie und Eschatologie im Denken Søren Kierkegaards*, Berlin, Munich and Boston: Walter de Gruyter 2014 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 29). István Czakó, “Heiberg and the Immortality Debate: A Historical Overview,” in *Johan Ludvig Heiberg: Philosopher, Litterateur, Dramaturge, and Political Thinker*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2008 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 5), pp. 95-138. István Czakó, “Unsterblichkeitsfurcht. Ein christlicher Beitrag zu einer zeitgenössischen Debatte in Søren Kierkegaards

essential question since if Hegel is lacking such a theory, as some critics claim, then he cannot properly be said to support a Christian point of view. Moreover, without a theory of immortality, Hegel's philosophy could not possibly be the solution to the crisis of the age, as Heiberg had argued. In contrast to Heiberg and Martensen, Møller identifies this issue explicitly with the term "nihilism."

Møller finds that in fact the charges are justified, and there is no meaningful theory of immortality in Hegel. But Møller's criticism, however, cuts even deeper than this. Not only does Hegel's philosophy not have a theory of immortality, but, absent such a theory, it leads to nihilism. This is at face value not immediately evident. Hegel's philosophy is couched in the form of a dogmatic system, and, indeed, this has traditionally been a point of criticism. So the question is why does Møller believe that Hegel's thought leads to nihilism, despite the fact that it abounds in positive, dogmatic statements and thus represents a system of doctrines.

As noted, Dostoevsky argued that without God, there would be no ethical standard and everything would be permitted, thus predicating ethics on the existence of God. Without God, there would be no right and wrong and no meaning in the world. This is a well-known version of nihilism. Møller makes a similar argument with respect to the doctrine of immortality. He refers to the denial of immortality as "the doctrine of annihilation,"¹ that is, the belief that the individual is destroyed or annihilated with death. He argues that only if humans are immortal or believe that they are immortal will they take life seriously and be motivated to act in rational ways. But if humans truly believe that their existence is finite and contingent, then they will be robbed of all motivation for doing anything whatsoever. They will wallow in a nihilism with no solution. He writes, "When a human being, convinced of the transitoriness of his individual life, properly arranges his realm of

'Gedanken, die hinterrücks verwunden – zur Erbauung,'" *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2007, pp. 227-54. István Czakó, "Becoming Immortal: The Historical Context of Kierkegaard's Concept of Immortality," in *Acta Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 3, *Kierkegaard and Christianity*, Toronto: Kierkegaard Circle, Trinity College and Šala: Kierkegaard Society in Slovakia 2008, pp. 59-71.

¹ Møller, "Tanker over Muligheden af Beviser for Menneskets Udødelighed," pp. 47ff.

consciousness, his life loses every essential meaning.”¹ He argues that the belief in immortality is essential for any meaningful self-relation, and without it, there could be no self-respect or self-love.² Møller believes that truly to value oneself as an individual, one must believe that one’s individuality is eternal.

Just as no meaningful sense of oneself as individual is possible without the idea of immortality, so also no meaningful conception of other people is possible. Møller argues,

no true social interest can have permanence when human beings are assumed to be mere temporary beings that constantly come into existence and disappear from existence forever. All striving for human welfare and for the organization of states will necessarily cease if human beings, convinced of each other’s absolute transitoriness, properly think over the inanity of their plans.³

If everything is regarded as merely contingent and finite, people would have no interest in improving society, creating civil institutions or establishing states. There would be no point in this if people were convinced that in the end everyone would die and perish forever.

A further negative consequence of the denial of immortality is the desire for suicide. Without the hope offered by immortality, people lapse into despair, and this can in extreme cases lead to suicide. Møller claims, “A life-view that leads to practical nihilism easily passes over to a positive striving for self-annihilation.”⁴ The thought of mortality deprives life of its meaning, and in the absence of this meaning people lose their desire to live. He offers a few historical examples, which he believes testify to the truth of this claim.

Møller argues that all science, art, and religion would be impossible without a belief in immortality. He begins his account of the consequences for art.⁵ Møller claims that art or true beauty is a representation of the immortal sphere, or in his words, “True art is an anticipation of the

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-57.

blessed life.”¹ (This idea is also taken up by Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Anxiety*.²) The claim is that if there were no view of immortality, then it would be impossible for artists to create beautiful works. Artistic creations cannot be simply the representation of finite, transitory objects. Instead, they must reveal something higher. But when people no longer believe that there is anything higher, then art would simply disappear: “When faith in immortality has completely left an age, true art will disappear more and more, and the feeble artistic production that remains behind will largely attach itself to the ruins of the works of earlier times.”³ This is very much in line with Heiberg’s warnings about the crisis in poetry and art of the day. Møller criticizes poets such as Heinrich Heine and those associated with the Young Germany movement for celebrating the finite and abandoning anything beyond the immediate world of sense. Despite their celebration of the senses and the flesh, they nonetheless remain in a “secret melancholy.”⁴ They cannot escape nihilism. This analysis anticipates Kierkegaard’s account of the inevitability of despair without Christianity in *The Sickness unto Death*.

Møller now turns to the consequences of nihilism for science.⁵ He is critical of the view that all knowledge is found in the immanent sphere since it is an object of consciousness. As is well known, Hegel rejects any idea of the transcendent in the sense of something beyond consciousness. Møller criticizes the conception of science that results from this view. In short, he claims that in any simple description of the empirical, there is always something missing, and complete knowledge can never be achieved by the human mind in the mundane sphere. Absolute knowing is impossible since it lies in the nature of science constantly to develop new schemes and laws that make sense of the different phenomena as

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 53ff.

² Kierkegaard, *SKS* 4, 452; *CA*, 153: “This conception has found definite expression in the statement: Art is an anticipation of eternal life, because poetry and art are the reconciliation only of the imagination, and they may well have the *Sinnigkeit* of intuition but by no means the *Innigkeit* of earnestness.” See also Johan Ludvig Heiberg, “Om Malerkunsten i dens Forhold til de andre skjønnne Kunster,” *Perseus, Journal for den speculative Idee*, no. 2, 1838, p. 121. (Reprinted in *Prosaiske Skrifter*, vols. 1-11, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1861-62, vol. 2, p. 274.)

³ Møller, “Tanker over Muligheden af Beviser for Menneskets Udødelighed,” p. 55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 57. See also Kierkegaard’s references to the Young Germany movement in *The Concept of Irony*, p. 275n, p. 286, p. 290; *SKS*, vol. 1, p. 311n, p. 321, p. 325.

⁵ Møller, “Tanker over Muligheden af Beviser for Menneskets Udødelighed,” pp. 57-60.

they appear. Science is always working to incorporate the individual objects of the empirical sphere in new and better conceptual systems. So, for Møller, it is absurd to think that this process would ever be complete.¹ If one can talk about a complete system of knowledge, then this can only refer to the abstract conceptual structures. But it can never refer to the individual empirical objects, which are the subject matter of these structures, since the understanding of such objects is always changing. Møller argues,

But all *a priori* or, if one prefers, immanent thinking that is to elucidate the fundamental relations of existence (by which I mean God's relation to the universe) must proceed from an obscure intuition of these fundamental relations and strive toward a clearer, immediate knowledge of them. However, inasmuch as no one can attain an adequate intuition of all things in the present order of things, no scientific thinking under any conditions known to us can lead to the completion of knowledge.²

What is at stake is the status of the empirical as such. For Hegel and the immanent view, since the empirical is ultimately transitory, it cannot be true in the end. Therefore, if there are some empirical things that humans have never perceived, then this does not matter since the truth is always conceived as conceptual. Humans can still have absolute knowing without having knowledge of every particular entity in the universe. But Møller objects that it is absurd to deny that these objects can have any truth value.³ He argues that science must be able to grasp the empirical particulars as such for science to claim to be complete. He writes,

There must be a third and higher knowledge which is neither restricted to the region of pure concepts nor confined to the abstractions of empirical thought, but in which the universal, in a sense that surpasses human concepts, is known in such a way that the particular (the single) does not disappear in it. Such knowledge would be an intellectual intuition in the true sense of

¹ Ibid., p. 58.

² Ibid., p. 59.

³ Ibid., pp. 59f.

the term, but this true "*tertium cognitionis genus*" is unattainable under the conditions of present life.¹

This kind of knowledge can only be conceived if humans are immortal and can enter a blessed state after death. Therefore, without this presupposition, science would disappear since it would have to give up the claim of ever attaining complete truth.

Møller finally turns to religion.² Although it hardly requires any argument, he points out the obvious: that nihilism destroys religion. He associates nihilism directly with pantheism, and claims that this undermines any sense of a personal God. The divine must be conceived not just as an idea in the minds of individuals with no continuity; rather, God must be a single, self-conscious entity. Moreover, the nihilistic view eliminates any lasting sense of truth which only a personal God can guarantee. He calls this view that he wishes to criticize an "oriental fable" and a "mythology," which he believes the majority of scholars in his time subscribe to.³ The reference to the Orient is made clear when he goes on to mention Schopenhauer, whose philosophy was largely inspired by Hinduism. Møller points out that Schopenhauer explicitly embraces atheism and "endorses greatly the Brahminic doctrine of the abode of the blessed after death because it is spoken of as '*Niban*,' which actually meaning 'nothing.'"⁴ Thus this Hindu doctrine becomes associated with nihilism.

Møller thus surveys the different spheres of human life and activity and shows how the denial of the idea of immortality undermines them all. In a sense his claim can be regarded as an enhanced version of Dostoevsky's line quoted above about everything being allowed without God.⁵ For Dostoevsky, ethics and the moral sphere are undermined if God does not exist. But, for Møller, the consequences are much more serious if the idea of immortality is denied. In this case, all art, science, and religion are undermined. Truth itself must be abandoned. Thus, for Møller, the matter of reinstating the doctrine of immortality is an urgent one.

¹ Ibid., p. 60.

² Ibid., pp. 60-63.

³ Ibid., p. 61, p. 62.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 62f.

⁵ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, vol. 2, p. 691.

V. Sibbern's Assessment

In 1838 the philosopher Frederik Christian Sibbern published a work, *Remarks and Investigations Primarily Concerning Hegel's Philosophy with Regard to Our Age*,¹ which began as a part of a review of Heiberg's philosophical and literary journal *Perseus*. As the title indicates, this text treats key issues in Hegel's philosophy and Heiberg's optimistic assessment of its value with regard to resolving the crisis of the age. Sibbern tries to argue that Hegel's philosophy does not live up to the high claims that Heiberg has made about it. Much of *Remarks and Investigations* thus amounts to a detailed criticism of different aspects of Hegel's system.

What is important for the present purposes is that Sibbern follows Møller in his criticism that Hegel's philosophy leads to a form of nihilism. He writes,

I have been concerned not with Hegel in and for himself, but with Hegel in relation to our age and in relation to the world-view which should satisfy us. I have in mind also the entire spirit of the age and the manner of thinking among so many people, this Buddhism, if I may call it so, which has spread so far in certain circles among us in Denmark as to have become almost self-sustaining and firm. I cannot see anything other than that this simultaneously fulfilling and enervating view of life finds nourishment and support in Hegelianism.²

Sibbern states clearly that nihilism is a widespread phenomenon in the Danish cultural life of the age. Instead of Hegel's philosophy being the *solution* to the problem of relativism and nihilism as Heiberg had claimed, it is the *cause* of the problem. While it is not clear whether or not Sibbern believes that Hegel himself is responsible for this, he

¹ Frederik Christian Sibbern, *Bemærkninger og Undersøgelser, fornemmelig betreffende Hegels Philosophie, betragtet i Forhold til vor Tid*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1838. (In English as *Sibbern's Remarks and Investigations Primarily Concerning Hegel's Philosophy*, ed. and trans. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2018 (*Texts from Golden Age Denmark*, vol. 7).)

² See Sibbern, *Bemærkninger og Undersøgelser*, pp. 76f. (*Remarks and Investigations*, p. 128.)

seems convinced in any case that this is one of the negative results of the reception of his philosophy at the time.

It is noteworthy that Sibbern uses the term “Buddhism” to describe the problem of the age. Here he picks up on Møller’s reference to Schopenhauer’s use of Asian philosophy. In this usage, both Sibbern and Møller were following a long tradition of the European reception of Asian religion. The attempt of the Buddhists to eliminate the passions and to focus on nothing, became associated with nihilism and conceived as the worship of nothingness. This was coupled with the lack of a god in Buddhism, which was also taken to be a part of the nihilist view. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel explains, “The negative form of this elevation is the concentration of spirit to the infinite, and must first present itself under theological conditions.... It is contained in the fundamental dogma, that nothingness is the principle of all things—that all proceeded from and returns to nothingness.”¹ Hegel himself was drawing on earlier accounts from the 18th century, which characterize Buddhism as a religion of nihilism.²

In this discussion, it is easy to overlook the key points about the nature of nihilism during the Danish Golden Age since this is characterized under the rubric of Buddhism. In any case, Sibbern shared Møller’s concern about Hegel’s philosophy and the cultural state of the time. The two men were thus clearly allied against Heiberg in this regard, although Møller had previously been associated with Heiberg’s Hegelian campaign. But all three men seem to agree on the nature of the current cultural crisis: the period is suffering from an increasing feeling of nihilism. Where they differ is in their assessment of its origins and solutions.

¹ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. by Eduard Gans, vol. 9 (1837), in *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s Werke. Vollständige Ausgabe*, p. 140. (*The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree, New York: Willey Book Co. 1944, p. 168; *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 11, pp. 228f.)

² See *Allgemeine Historie der Reisen zu Wasser und zu Lande; oder Sammlung aller Reisebeschreibungen*, vols. 1-21, Leipzig: Heinrich Merkus 1747-74, vol. 6, p. 360. Joseph de Guignes, *Histoire générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols, et des autres Tartares occidentaux*, vols. 1-4, Paris: Desaint & Saillant 1756-58, vol. 1, Part 2, p. 224, p. 226. Jean-Baptiste Alexandre Grosier, *Description générale de la Chine, ou Tableau de l’état actuel de cet empire*, vols. 1-2, Paris: Moutard 1785-87, vol. 1, pp. 581-582. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, vols. 1-4, Riga and Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch 1784-91, vol. 3, p. 28. See also Stewart, *Hegel’s Interpretation of the Religions of the World: The Logic of the Gods*, pp. 95-103.

VI. Kierkegaard and Nihilism

Søren Kierkegaard examines the problem of relativism and nihilism in a number of different texts.¹ It is impossible here to do justice to these treatments fully. I will instead simply point out a few of the main analyses of the issue in Kierkegaard's *corpus* and try to connect them with the ongoing discussion about nihilism in Denmark that we have been following.

The Concept of Irony is an important early statement of his views. The different forms of Romantic irony that he explores in the second part of that work are all forms of modern relativism. Like Socratic irony, this modern irony is a negative force which undermines the legitimacy of current institutions, customs and beliefs. Here Kierkegaard makes use of Hegel's analyses and offers his own criticism of the form of relativism which he refers to as "irony." His use of this term, instead of nihilism, has been misleading for readers who understand irony primarily as a literary device. But there can be no doubt from the content of his discussion that he intends this term to reflect a certain way of life that we would today associate with nihilism or relativism.

The problem is that the relativists or nihilists offer nothing positive after they have eliminated all truths, customs and values with their

¹ For the issue of Kierkegaard and nihilism, see K. Brian Soderquist, *The Isolated Self: Irony as Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard's On the Concept of Irony*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2007 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 1). K. Brian Söderquist, "Kierkegaard's Nihilistic Socrates in *The Concept of Irony*," in *Tänkarens mångfald. Nutida perspektiv på Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. by Lone Koldtoft, Jon Stewart and Jan Holmgaard, Göteborg and Stockholm: Makadam Förlag 2005, pp. 213-243. Karsten Harries, *Between Nihilism and Faith: A Commentary on Either/Or*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 2010 (*Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series*, vol. 21). Hubert Dreyfus and Jane Rubin, "Kierkegaard on the Nihilism of the Present Age: The Case of Commitment as Addiction," *Synthese*, vol. 98, 1994, pp. 3-19. George Pattison, "Nihilism and the Novel: Kierkegaard's Literary Reviews," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 26, 1986, pp. 161-171. Jane Louise Rubin, "Narcissism and Nihilism: Kohut and Kierkegaard on the Modern Self," in *Self Psychology: Comparisons and Contrasts*, ed. by Douglas W. Detrick and Susan P. Detrick, Hillsdale and London: Analytic Press 1989, pp. 131-150. Heiko Schulz, "Aesthetic Nihilism: The Dialectic of Repetition and Non-Repetition in Nietzsche and Kierkegaard," in *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* (Special Issue: *Fourth International Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas*), vol. 2, 1997, pp. 627-634. George J. Stack, "Kierkegaard and Nihilism," *Philosophy Today*, vol. 14, 1970, pp. 274-292.

negative critique. The nihilist view leads to an unbounded freedom that loses touch with actuality, since the world of actuality is not thought to have any validity. This fits well with the artistic disposition, which believes that it can create the world itself. The individual is thus free to imagine himself in different roles and present different views of himself in accordance with whatever mood strikes him. Irony comes in when the individual takes a critical stance towards the customs, traditions and ways of life that the majority of people live by. Irony is used as a critical tool to undermine the truth of these things. The denial of the truth and validity of the world of actuality leads to relativism.

Kierkegaard believes that irony can perform a beneficial function of undermining traditions which are corrupt, hypocritical, and contradictory. But the mistake that the Romantics make is to universalize the use of irony so that it is employed not just against such things but against the entire sphere of actuality. In the end Kierkegaard believes that this relativism or irony needs to be selective in the targets of its critique. He argues that it should be controlled so that it can perform its negative and destructive work without leading to a complete negation of everything. Thus, in *The Concept of Irony*, he proposes the concept of controlled irony as the solution.¹

This criticism also appears in a more literary form in Kierkegaard's first pseudonymous work, *Either/Or* (1843). In both the "Diapsalmata"

¹ See Jon Stewart, "Heiberg's Speculative Poetry as a Model for Kierkegaard's Concept of Controlled Irony," in *Johan Ludvig Heiberg: Philosopher, Littérateur, Dramaturge, and Political Thinker*, ed. by Jon Stewart, pp. 195-216. Richard M. Summers, "'Controlled Irony' and the Emergence of the Self in Kierkegaard's Dissertation," in *The Concept of Irony*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins. Macon Georgia: Mercer University Press 2001 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 2), pp. 289-315. Oscar Parceró Oubiña, "'Controlled Irony'...Are you Serious? Reading Kierkegaard's Irony Ironically," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2006, pp. 241-260. Anders Moe Rasmussen, "Gives der en 'behersket Ironi'?" *Kredsen*, vol. 61, no. 1, 1995, pp. 71-86. Eivind Tjønneland, "Beherrschte Ironie als Vermittlungsbegriff," in his *Ironie als Symptom. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit Søren Kierkegaards Über den Begriff der Ironie*, Frankfurt am Main, et al.: Peter Lang 2004, pp. 263-288. Andrew Cross, "Neither either nor or: The Perils of Reflexive Irony," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, New York: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 125-153. Henri-Bernard Vergote, "L'ironie maîtrisée," in his *Sens et répétition. Essai sur l'ironie kierkegaardienne*, vols. 1-2, Paris: Cerf/Orante 1982, vol. 1, pp. 178-181. Bo Kampmann Walter, "Den beherskede ironi," in his *Øjeblik og tavshed. Læsninger i Søren Kierkegaards forfatterskab*, Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag 2002, pp. 69-73.

and “Crop Rotation,” he gives a penetrating psychological analysis of the romantic relativist. It is clear that Kierkegaard, like his predecessors, wants to combat nihilism with some kind of Christian view. In the “Diapsalmata,” he gives us a portrait of the modern nihilist. So also in “The Unhappiest One” and “The Crop Rotation” this same issue is addressed: what is the point of life if all traditional meaning has been undermined? Are we all doomed to be forever unhappy and despairing? Likewise, with “The Diary of a Seducer” the reader is presented with a character sketch of a person who is wholly self-indulgent and morally irresponsible. Johannes the Seducer has long since ceased to believe in traditional ethics which he seems to regard as silly bourgeois trivialities or platitudes based on outdated sentimentality. He has no moral scruples at all about manipulating and seducing his naïve young victim.

Kierkegaard’s understanding of the aesthetic sphere is largely critical. The point of his character sketch of the esthete A or the seducer is that we are to find these characters repugnant. The seducer is a negative example of the results of nihilism. However, there is a truth in these characters, namely, they serve a negative function of calling us to reflection and of rightly criticizing bourgeois culture and complacency. Both Kierkegaard and Heiberg are critical of bourgeois philistinism, and the two praise the aesthetic realm as a criticism of this. But they are acutely aware of the extremes which the aesthetic view can reach if it is allowed to go its way without any impediment. In order to overcome this problem, one needs religion. Specifically, one needs Christian faith as Kierkegaard understands it. The aesthetic sphere can help us attain this by purging us of our naïve and uncritical views of faith.

In the essay “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama,” a comparison is made between the “process of disintegration” that was taking place in Greece at the time of Aristophanes and the present age. Then the author asks, “Has not the bond that in the political sense held the states together, invisibly, and spiritually, dissolved; has not the power in religion that insisted upon the invisible been weakened and destroyed; do not our statesmen and clergymen have this in common, that they, like the augurs of old, cannot look at one another without smiling?”¹ This seems to be an echo of Heiberg’s

¹ *SKS* 2, 141 / *EOI*, 141f.

assessment that religion has ceased to have any hold on the educated who can no longer believe in it in good conscience. Kierkegaard then continues the comparison, "A feature in which our age certainly excels that age in Greece is that our age is more depressed and therefore deeper in despair."¹ Thus, the lapse in traditional belief has led to the despair associated with nihilism.

This same idea is taken up again in Part Two of the work. There Judge William also refers to the lapse of tradition in the ancient Greek world:

Our age reminds one very much of the disintegration of the Greek state; everything continues, and yet there is no one who believes in it. The invisible spiritual bond that gives it validity has vanished, and thus the whole age is simultaneously comic and tragic, tragic because it is perishing, comic because it continues, for it is still always the incorruptible that bears the corruptible, the intellectual-spiritual that bears the physical, and if it were possible to imagine that an inanimate body could still perform the usual functions for a little while, it would be comic and tragic in the same way.²

The reference to Greek comedy again clearly refers to Aristophanes and his role in the criticism of traditional values and religion. In both passages there is talk of an "invisible bond" which when lost leads to nihilism.

The Christian dimension of Kierkegaard's thought comes out clearly in *The Sickness unto Death*. In this work he traces a series of stages of despair, which can be regarded as different forms of atheism, relativism and nihilism.³ Once again, these are all intended in part as a kind of diagnosis of the age, which has ceased to believe, an age in despair. The series of forms of despair can only be halted by embracing Christianity. But the way to Christianity via the different forms of despair is not in vain since there is a learning process that takes place by means of the experience of despair. This then leads to Kierkegaard's demanding conception of Christianity. Here again it is easy to overlook the importance of this work for the ongoing discussions about nihilism since

¹ *SKS* 2, 141 / *EOI*, 142.

² *SKS* 3, 28 / *EO2*, 19.

³ See Geoffrey Clive, "The Sickness unto Death in the Underworld: A Study of Nihilism," *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 51, 1958, pp. 135-167.

Kierkegaard talks about despair and not nihilism as such. But from the nature of the analyses, it is clear that these are closely related phenomena. It should also be noted that in his early journals Kierkegaard explores various figures and motifs to capture different elements of the idea of despair, such as Faust and the wandering Jew.¹ This was thus a topic that clearly exercised him throughout his life.

It can be said that Kierkegaard develops Heiberg's analysis of the crisis of the contemporary age in vivid colors in different ways throughout his authorship. Moreover, Kierkegaard seems to be wholly in agreement with Heiberg's diagnosis. The age is in a crisis, and this concerns a lack of belief in traditional values and religion. Thus, one can say that Kierkegaard takes from Heiberg the very point of departure for a substantial part of his academic project. As we have seen, Heiberg's solution to the problem is of course that philosophy, i.e., Hegel's philosophy, will lift us out of the current crisis of relativism, nihilism and atheism, and will restore truth to its proper place. When we understand Hegel's philosophy, we realize that despite the changes of history and culture, there is nonetheless a deeper, enduring truth. In other words, while the nihilist sees merely finite things in this world, ripe for criticism and destruction, the philosopher sees that these finite relative things necessarily imply an infinite absolute truth.

Thus while there have been different religions in world history, this is not to be conceived as an argument that no religion is true. On the contrary, there is a necessary development in the history of the different conceptions of the divine that one finds in the different world-historical religions. The truth of religion is that the divine is revealing itself to humans through the course of history, and humans gradually come to realize that the divine is human. Thus the alienation with the divine is overcome. But this requires one to take a philosopher's wide view of

¹ See Leonardo F. Lisi, "Faust: The Seduction of Doubt," in *Kierkegaard's Literary Figures and Motifs*, Tome I, *Agamemnon to Guadalquivir*, ed. by Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate 2014 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 16), pp. 209–228. Joseph Ballan, "The Wandering Jew: Kierkegaard and the Figuration of Death in Life," in *Kierkegaard's Literary Figures and Motifs*, Tome II, *Gulliver to Zerlina*, ed. by Katalin Nun and Jon Stewart, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate 2015 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 16), pp. 235–247.

history and to understand the development of the different conceptions of the divine as a conceptual development.

The reason that people do not believe today is that they understand belief to be something based on emotions or the immediacy of sense.¹ But now in the post-Enlightenment world, this kind of belief is no longer plausible. We must accept the advances of rationality and critical reasoning. Thus, we must incorporate these into a new religious faith in order to put it on solid footing again. If we fail to do so, then we risk losing religion forever.

While Kierkegaard whole-heartedly agrees with Heiberg's diagnosis, he radically objects to his proposed solution. According to Kierkegaard, with this argument Heiberg has essentially reduced religion to philosophy. In other words, the truth of religion is only to be found in a philosophical understanding of religion. Thus, religion today needs philosophy to provide its support. Without the help of philosophy, religion would be lost forever in modern atheism and nihilism. Heiberg explains this himself as follows: "In an age which is not religious, religion then comes into the...dangerous position, which actually is a dichotomy: namely, either to exist in this distinction from philosophy, which means destruction, or to eliminate the difference, which is to eliminate itself."² According to this view, religion needs philosophy to provide its grounding. If it cannot find a grounding in philosophy, then it is doomed. This is the view that Kierkegaard protests against. He is keen to develop a sphere of religion that is separate from philosophy. He tries to conceive of a notion of faith that will not be subject to the criticisms of philosophy and the sciences.

Thus, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard argues repeatedly for a sharp and definitive division between, on the one hand, philosophy and all rational thinking and science associated with it, which he calls "objective thinking," and, on the other hand, religion or specifically Christianity, which he calls "subjective thinking." Kierkegaard claims that Christianity is radically different from philosophy and science. It concerns things such as the passion of the individual, inwardness, offense, and faith by virtue of the absurd. Thus,

¹ Heiberg, *Om Filosofiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, p. 30. (Heiberg's *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, p. 103.)

² Heiberg, *Om Filosofiens Betydning for den nuværende Tid*, p. 39. (Heiberg's *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age*, p. 109.)

Kierkegaard objects that Heiberg's solution to rescue Christianity from the modern crisis effectively destroys Christianity by transforming it into something that it is not, i.e., philosophy. Kierkegaard thinks that there is a better way to defend Christianity, namely, to claim that the religious sphere is something entirely separate from that of science, philosophy and discursive reason. It is a sphere that these modern intuitions cannot encroach on.

He is most outraged by the claim that Heiberg's (right-Hegelian) philosophical understanding of religion will save Christianity. Kierkegaard is worried that this claim will mislead Christians into thinking that an abstract philosophical analysis is Christianity. In his view, it is far better simply to reject Christianity outright and even criticize it explicitly. But to claim to defend it and even to rescue it by means of philosophical analysis is, he thinks, grotesquely misleading.

In his work *A Literary Review*, Kierkegaard offers some critical reflections on his own age. He could see the social changes that were taking place around him at an accelerating pace and was alarmed by this. In many ways a conservative thinker, Kierkegaard was concerned about movements such as democracy and socialism which would erode the old class system and undermine the power of the monarchy. He described this tendency as a form of leveling. In other words, distinctions are no longer regarded as valid, and everything is regarded as being on the same level and put in the same category. This can be regarded as a kind of nihilism in the sense that it rejects the traditional value system which created a society with classes, ranks, etc. What comes to replace this system is a superficial form of equality that leaves people confused and disoriented. This social and historical shift sets people off on a mad rush to discover themselves since they no longer have any meaningful points of reference to go by. The process of leveling leads to both conformity and confusion.

There is much more that can be said about Kierkegaard and nihilism, but this should suffice to demonstrate that it is an important dimension in his thought. It is among his earliest of interests, and he returns to it again and again throughout his life. He is clearly engaged in the discussions about it that were going on Prussia and the German states as well as his native Denmark. His work and that of Heiberg, Martensen, Møller and Sibbern vindicate the claim that the Danish discussions

about nihilism should be included with the accounts of the development of the discussions of nihilism in Western thought. Their thinking is deeply engaged in those better-known discussions that were going on in the Germanophone world.

VII. Critical Evaluation

Given the foregoing overview, there can be no doubt that the issue of nihilism was an important one in the discussions concerning philosophy and religion in Golden Age Denmark. The leading cultural figures all felt the need to weigh in, and the discussion extended to different fields and spheres of culture. The background of this issue as arising from the discussions concerning Hegel's philosophy helps to explain Kierkegaard's motivation in his polemics against the Hegelians, Heiberg and Martensen,¹ and his need to separate religion from philosophy.² It is useful to see Kierkegaard's famous analyses of, for example, irony and despair in the context of these discussions that were going on during the period.

As noted at the outset, the philosophical discussions about nihilism, of course, continued into the 20th century. I would like to close by offering some reflections about the varying intuitions that the concept of nihilism evoked in thinkers from this later period and how these compare to intuitions of the thinkers in the Danish Golden Age. First, I will explore a point of similarity between the two groups of thinkers and then a point of difference.

¹ See Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2003. Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1980. Niels Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*, trans. by George L. Stengren, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980.

² See Hermann Deuser, "Philosophie und Christentum lassen sich doch niemals vereinen"—Kierkegaards theologische Ambivalenzen im *Journal AA/BB* (1835-37)," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2003, pp. 1-19. Jon Stewart, "Philosophy and Christianity can never be united": The Role of Sibbern and Martensen in Kierkegaard's Reception of Schleiermacher," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2017, pp. 291-312.

A. *The Crisis*

The existentialists and the Danish thinkers are in agreement about the importance and gravity of the issue, and the term “crisis” is frequently used. Both groups believe that the collapse of traditional religious belief and the rise of secularism will bring about major consequences for European culture. As we have seen, this was a central motif in the cultural criticism of the Danish thinkers such as Heiberg, Martensen and Kierkegaard.

Nietzsche is probably the thinker who is best known for his dramatic prophecy of the age of nihilism. In the notebooks from the late 1880s, which were posthumously published under the title *The Will to Power* he foresees an age of great conflict and radical change. The story he tells is one full of drama and pathos. He writes seemingly prophetically:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. The future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect.¹

He identifies the origin of this coming crisis in the collapse of Christianity and Christian morality. While he admits that several interpretations of the origin of this crisis are possible, he claims, “it is in one particular interpretation, the Christian-moral one, that nihilism is rooted.”² The problem lies in the once absolute nature of the Christian value system and world-view. He continues, “Skepticism regarding morality is what is decisive.”³ Once one realizes that Christian values no longer have the transcendent grounding that they were always thought to have, they

¹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and by R.J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage 1967, § 2, p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, § 1, p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, § 1, p. 7.

seem to fall into a relativism with all other finite values: “‘Everything lacks meaning’ (the untenability of one interpretation of the world, upon which a tremendous amount of energy has been lavished, awakens the suspicion that all interpretations of the world are false).”¹ When the Christian value system loses its plausibility, then it is not just a matter of replacing it with another viable candidate. Instead, the reasons for the crisis of belief in Christianity are equally valid for other world-views. Thus, the crisis of nihilism is not a local one, finding application solely to Christianity, but rather it is universal, drawing into its destructive whirlpool all other values and belief systems as well.

It will be noted here that Nietzsche glides back and forth easily between his account of the grand world-historical crisis of nihilism and its dramatic repercussions for the individual. As Rorty notes, he talks about Europe as a kind of incarnate “big person.”² It is as if the entire continent were undergoing a personal crisis. But what gives Nietzsche’s account the somber, prophetic ring to it is the fact that he is presenting the crisis from the grand, global perspective. If he were to discuss the crisis only of specific individuals, it would be far less interesting and alarming. But the fact that he presents this as a ill-boding historical movement which will descend on everyone seems to make his message more urgent and important. It makes the situation far more dramatic since it implies a radical shift in history, where everything from the past must be rejected and things must be initiated anew from the ground up. The bomb of nihilism will leave behind precious few things that can be salvaged and used as the basis to create a new age.

Nietzsche poses the question, “What does nihilism mean?”³ and offers the following definition: “*That the highest values devalue themselves.* The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.”⁴ Those values which were once thought to be the highest or to have transcendent grounding are now seen to be naked and barren, lacking this grounding. He continues, explaining that radical nihilism is “the realization that we lack the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things that might

¹ Ibid., § 1, p. 7.

² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989, p. 100.

³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 2, p. 9.

⁴ Ibid., § 2, p. 9.

be ‘divine’ or morality incarnate.”¹ Nihilism is thus accompanied by a sense of helplessness. One has suffered a great loss by the elimination of transcendent values, but there is nothing that one can do on one’s own strength to correct the situation. One cannot return to a belief in the divine which has become implausible, and one cannot, of one’s own will, create a new truth or value system that can even come close to having the same authority and validity of the lost divine one. One thus senses an impotency in the face of the loss that leads to despair.

Like Ivan Karamazov, Nietzsche recognizes the social value of a belief in God and a divinely mandated system of ethics.² He writes,

The supreme values in whose service man *should* live, especially when they were very hard on him and exacted a high price—these *social values* were erected over man to strengthen their voice, as if they were commands of God, as “reality,” as the “true” world, as a hope and *future* world. Now that the shabby origin of these values is becoming clear, the universe seems to have lost value, seems “meaningless”—but that is only a transitional stage.³

Again, the crisis comes once the origin of this purportedly divine value system is exposed as being a human creation. The different religions of the world were created in order to give human beings a sense of meaning and purpose in the universe. With nihilism, this is suddenly taken away:

The feeling of valuelessness was reached with the realization that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of “aim,” the concept of “unity,” or the concept of “truth.” Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking: the character of existence is not “true,” is *false*. One simply lacks any reason for convincing oneself that there is a *true* world. Briefly: the categories “aim,” “unity,” “being” which we used to project some value into the world—we *pull out* again; so the world looks *valueless*.⁴

¹ Ibid., § 3, p. 9.

² Ibid., § 4, pp. 9f.

³ Ibid., § 7, pp. 10f.

⁴ Ibid., § 12, p. 13.

This realization causes people to give up not only on the value of the universe as such but also on the value of these very categories, which themselves now appear illusory.

Nietzsche clearly ascribes to Christianity the responsibility for the present nihilistic age:

The time has come when we have to pay for having been Christians for two thousand years; we are losing the center of gravity by virtue of which we lived; we are lost for a while. Abruptly we plunge into the opposite valuations, with all the energy that such an extreme overvaluation of man has generated in man. Now everything is false through and through, mere “words,” chaotic, weak, or extravagant....¹

Again Nietzsche speaks in dramatic terms, and this has a certain rhetorical effect, but is this diagnosis really true? Does one “abruptly” “plunge into the opposite valuations”? Here he has in mind contemporary movements such as naturalism, socialism, utilitarianism, etc.

Nietzsche seems to say that following the death of God, people need to start from scratch. Everything that had been believed about truth, meaning and value must be erased and reevaluated. All values will have to be reconsidered in the age of nihilism. In this context he writes,

For one should make no mistake about the meaning of the title that this gospel of the future wants to bear, “*The Will to Power: Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values*”—in this formulation a countermovement finds expression, regarding both principle and task; a movement that in some future will take the place of this perfect nihilism—but presupposes it, logically and psychologically, and certainly can come only after and out of it.²

Nietzsche thus regards the need to create new values as the urgent consequence of the realization of nihilism.

Nietzsche’s model for the new human being in the post-nihilist age is the overman (*Übermensch*). The overman is the strong human being who is able to rise from the ashes of the Christian value system and

¹ Ibid., § 30, p. 20.

² Ibid., § 4, pp. 3f.

create something entirely new. No longer dependent on God or any transcendent authority to ground ethics and values, the overman boldly posits his own ethics based on his own value system. For Nietzsche this value system relies on strength and the affirmation of life in contrast to the Christian value system which, he believes, rests on weakness and which makes those people who have strength weak by giving them a guilty conscience. But Nietzsche's conception of the overman is just one version of the existential hero who laughs in the face of lost values and a meaningless world.

However, one might ask whether the results of "the death of God" are really as dramatic as Nietzsche and the existentialists portray them to be. I wish to call some of these assumptions into question in an effort to reevaluate the nature of this crisis of modern nihilism. While there can be no doubt that religion has generally lost its long held central place in Western culture, and societies have become more and more secular, the question remains whether or not this actually leads to the cataclysmic consequences that the existentialist thinkers forecast.

B. The Existentialist Hero

Existentialist literature is full of colorful portrayals of the modern hero, fighting the lonely battle with nihilism: Kierkegaard's aesthete, Dostoevsky's underground man, Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdröckh, Camus' Meursault, and Sartre's Roquentin. These characters have much in common. They tend to be loners, isolated and alienated from mainstream society. They are cynical about traditional values and beliefs. They are portrayed with a mixture of something comic and something serious. At times, they appear to be brave and brutally honest in their rejection of society and their acceptance of a meaningless world.

In this context, one of the standard motifs of existentialism is that of rebellion. Camus explores this idea in great depth in his work *The Rebel*. There he uses as his model the heroes of Greek tragedy, who are destined for a tragic fall. He thus speaks of figures like Prometheus at some length.¹

¹ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. by Sir Herbert Read, New York: Vintage Books 1956, pp. 26ff.

In his famous essay, he portrays Sisyphus as an existentialist hero, who, instead of capitulating, rebels against the meaninglessness of the world.¹ He dares to give it a meaning of his own. Camus' use of Greek mythology is significant here. While these figures are in some way sympathetic to human beings, they are in conflict with the gods or, read in a secular fashion, with the universe. They are portrayed as truly heroic figures since they do not struggle with mere humans but rather with the divine. Their revolt is not against a contingent social or political situation that lies in the hands of mundane forces, but rather against the basic facts of existence as determined by the gods. Their struggle thus takes on epic proportions, and their personal sacrifice makes them admirable in the eyes of human beings.

Sartre also explores this motif of the existential hero in connection with his famous theory of radical freedom.² The true existential hero is the one who can boldly face the abyss of nihilism and not lapse into different forms of bad faith. Indeed, the phenomenon of bad faith is the attempt to posit some absolute or pregiven truth or value which transcends the individual's will and choice. Human beings feel anxious and uncomfortable with the notion that they are wholly responsible for themselves and, according to Sartre, for their world. They thus try to escape to facticity and pretend that the world is something given, over which they have no control. They are created with a specific essence that they have not chosen or the world presents a certain situation which they cannot change. For Sartre, the true existential hero is the one who wholly and unflinchingly accepts the fact of radical freedom and does not flee to excuses.

¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. by Justin O'Brien, New York: Random House 1975.

² See Jean-Paul Sartre, "Sartre par Sartre," *Situations, LX*, Paris: Gallimard 1972, pp. 100-101: "What the drama of the war gave me, as it did everyone who participated in it, was the experience of heroism. Not my own, of course—all I did was a few errands. But the militant in the Resistance who was caught and tortured became a myth for us. Such militants existed, of course, but they represented a sort of personal myth as well. Would we be able to hold out against torture too? The problem then was solely that of physical endurance—it was not the ruses of history or the paths of alienation. A man tortured: what will he do? He either speaks or refuses to speak. This is what I mean by the experience of heroism, which is a false experience."

In his play *The Flies*, Sartre, like Camus, returns to ancient Greek tragedy for his motif. He takes Aeschylus' Orestes and transforms him into a model for heroic action in the face of tyranny. The key to Orestes' heroism is the transformation that occurs when he suddenly realizes that he is free. From this moment onwards, he becomes a different person and no longer fears anything. His immediate concern is the mundane forces, upon which he has sworn vengeance for the murder of his father, namely, his mother Clytemnestra and her usurping lover, Aegistheus. This struggle gives him a degree of heroism, but it is ultimately his defiance of the king of the gods Jupiter that gives him the true status of an epic existential hero. Jupiter tries to reason with Orestes to get him to accept the conditions of existence that have been laid down, but Orestes defies him with appeal to his freedom. Like Nietzsche, these later French existentialists portray the crisis and the struggle with it in very dramatic terms. Apparently there are no banal forms of rebellion or no everyday heroes. Instead, the struggle with nihilism is always an epic, world-historical event that inspires awe.

C. Criticism

The crisis of nihilism and the existential hero seem largely fictional. When one observes people today who openly declare themselves to be atheists or agnostics, one rarely has the sense that they are in the midst of some deep crisis with regard to ethics. Nor are they languishing in a state of despair, as Kierkegaard outlined. Nor are they scoundrels and rogues as Kant maintained. Admittedly, there are probably individual cases of this, but when one looks at the vast majority of people in our broadly secular society who have ceased to be believers, one can hardly say that they are the source of a serious moral erosion of our civilization.

The rise of critical reflection that leads to nihilism is also usually portrayed in dramatic terms. But it remains to be seen whether this is an accurate picture of a real social phenomenon or just a striking literary motif. Are people so completely devastated by nihilism that they immediately give up absolutely everything of their former value system, every belief, every value? This seems impossible even for the most consistent, insisting intellect. Even if at some intellectual level, one is

consigned to the death of God and the non-transcendent origin of value, this does not necessarily compel one to change anything about one's personal values. One will still have the same likes, dislikes, proclivities and prejudices. These have been built up over a lifetime of experience, and very few of them will ever be jettisoned in an instant regardless of how pressing the cause.

What the existentialists seem to have overestimated is the cognitive philosophical element, and what they have underestimated is the simple force of habit. With the latter I mean that people are raised in societies and taught suitable forms of behavior as a natural part of the socialization process. By the time they reach the age when issues such as the existence of God become important, they have already internalized the social norms and mores of their society. These unconsciously govern most of their daily life. It is quite implausible to believe that some rather abstract idea can cause a crisis in this day-to-day behavior, which by the time of adulthood is virtually preprogrammed. Here Hegel's conception of the beliefs and values of a person being determined by the *Volksgeist* of his or her culture is considerably more persuasive.

By the "cognitive philosophical element" I mean that most people do not dwell endlessly on the abstract reflection of the meaninglessness of the universe in the absence of God. These are quite simply not issues that most people spend a long time contemplating and continually revisiting. Most people probably allow thoughts like this to cross their minds briefly, but apart from professional philosophers, priests or theologians, who have the leisure to dwell on such matters at length, the vast majority of people have their lives to get on with. Unless there is some serious personal crisis, such as the illness or death of a close friend or family member, considerations of this kind are simply shelved, and people continue their lives more or less just as before.

Just as the crisis of nihilism has been portrayed in an overly dramatic manner, so also the idea of the existentialist hero in rebellion is an exaggeration. While it might make for good literature, it is a poor analysis of the actual situation. We do not need to be heroes to create meaning; we do it every day even unconsciously. To get out of bed in the morning and to go about one's business during the day does not mean that one has to consciously face the abyss of nihilism every day. One does not have to enter into an epic battle with the gods to affirm one's personal

values. One just does so in the concrete situations and contexts where this is required, and that is all there is to it. Most people recognize that at some level their value systems are contingent and in some cases even inconsistent. But this does not prevent them from using these systems to guide their lives. Most people tire of arguing about the matter when they are asked to justify their belief and values, and they abandon the attempt long before they abandon their values.

I remember hearing a university instructor in a course on existentialism going on at length about how alienated we in the modern world are from our culture, our state, our traditions, our religions, etc. In short, this was purportedly the terrible consequence of the age of nihilism that Nietzsche had predicted. This lecture took place at the time of the wars of succession in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and I remember thinking how absurd these claims seemed to be. Those conflicts that were taking place at that time were about large masses of people *affirming* their culture, traditions, religion, national identity, etc. There in the late 20th century people in Europe seemed to be every bit as fixed on traditional beliefs and values as in times past. These people, who were ready to go to war for these things like culture, religion and national identity, were certainly not suffering from any acute sense of alienation from them. They were not the victims of a crisis of nihilism. On the contrary, it appeared that such ideas had never filtered down to them but had remained the province of highly educated scholars, like the one I heard. When Simone de Beauvoir discusses the phenomenon of nihilism, it is striking that all of the examples that she refers to come from avant-garde art,¹ that is, a highly intellectual movement, which can hardly be taken as generally representative for humanity at large. Given this, one might argue that the so-called problem of nihilism is in fact only one that exists in the lecture hall or the intellectual café but not in the real world.

What are we to conclude from this? This analysis seems to show that ethics and morals are not a matter of abstract principles, laws or ideas. Such abstractions are ultimately secondary and academic. The true nature of our moral life lies in the way we live every day, usually without thinking much about it. We all have certain basic ethical intuitions about

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman, New York: Citadel Press 1948, pp. 53-58. She refers to Dadism and surrealism.

how one should treat others. We all have a certain ethical character in some sense. This is what fundamentally constitutes our family, social and professional life. This is certainly in no danger of falling into a crisis from one day to the next. The awareness that such values are contingent is not nearly as disturbing as the Golden Age thinkers and the existentialists want to make it out to be. The idea of a crisis seems to overstate the issue.

In addition to this point of similarity, there is an important point of contrast in the assessment of the issue of nihilism between the two groups of thinkers. As we have seen, for Møller, the absence of a belief in God meant that everything was meaningless since no enduring value could be ascribed to finite, transitory things. This was, for Møller, something that was disastrous for the individual and for culture in general, and his Danish contemporaries all seem to agree with him on this point. However, this is just the opposite of the well-known arguments of the existentialists, most all of whom greet the rise of nihilism as a form of liberation. Here one might recall Nietzsche's idea of the *Übermensch*, who is able to shrug off the repressive ethics of Christianity and create his own system of values based only on his own authority and will to power. Similarly, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus claims that it is just because human existence is finite that it takes on its infinite value, just like the scarcity of a commodity or resource drives up its market price. Along the same lines, in a short story, the Argentine author Borges tries to show that the very premise of immortality or an eternal life would rob it of all meaning.¹ Given the inevitability of death, people are zealous to pursue projects and organize their lives in such a way that they have the time to accomplish the things that they want to do, while they are still able to do so. But, according to Borges, with an eternity of time, people would lose their motivation to do anything. There would be no need to rush to get a degree or make a great career since one would always have time for this tomorrow. Far from saving people from nihilism, the idea of immortality would instead lead them to it. The logic of Borges' story is that nihilism would end in indifference and lethargy. If one could live forever, there would be no point in doing anything today.

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Immortal," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, New York: New Directions 1962, pp. 109-121. See also Jon Stewart, *The Unity of Content and Form in Philosophical Writing: The Perils of Conformity*, London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney: Bloomsbury 2013, pp. 133-141.

Perhaps the difference between the Golden Age thinkers and the existentialists can be best captured by the observation that the threat of nihilism leads the former to try to hold firmly to some version of traditional values and beliefs since the alternative seems so disastrous. By contrast, the existentialists are keen to move on and regard the retreat to traditional belief as inauthentic. Here one recalls Camus' criticism of Kierkegaard for seeing the truth of nihilism but nonetheless, due to psychological weakness, lapsing back into a form of what Camus dubs metaphysical "comfort."¹ While Kierkegaard portrays despair as a sickness, his ultimate goal, according to Camus, is to be cured of it.² For Camus, the goal should be to embrace the absurdity of nihilism. It should be noted in Kierkegaard's defense that his notion of Christian faith is by no means traditional but rather one that tries to take into account the challenges of critical reason. Kierkegaard uses the same terms as Camus, "absurdity" or "the absurd," to capture the contradictory nature of Christian faith from the perspective of rationality. Thus, his goal is clearly not to return to traditional faith. Along the same lines, Heiberg's proposal to restore the truth of Christianity by means of a philosophical understanding of it along the lines of Hegel's philosophy cannot be understood as a reversion to the past. But in any case, these Danish thinkers clearly would object to the idea of wallowing in nihilism. They see nihilism as a major threat to every sphere of culture and would presumably be astonished to see thinkers in the 20th century trying to find ways to affirm and welcome it as a liberation.

¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, p. 50. See his analysis of Kierkegaard, pp. 37-41, pp. 49-50.

² *Ibid.*, p. 38.