

# THE LEUVEN PHILOSOPHY NEWSLETTER

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# INTERVIEW WITH JON STEWART

*Professor Jon Stewart of the Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret in Copenhagen visited Leuven in May to give a Thursday Lecture entitled “Kierkegaard’s Critique of Hegel: A Reexamination”. Professor Stewart is responsible for the new comprehensive edition of Søren Kierkegaard’s writings (Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter) and has published widely in the area of German idealism and post-German idealist thought. He is editor of Hegel Myths and Legends (1996), The Phenomenology of Spirit Reader: Critical and Interpretive Essays (1997), and The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty (1998). Dr. Stewart has recently published an in-depth study of Kierkegaard and Hegel entitled Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered (2004).*

*To begin with, Professor Stewart, could you tell us a little bit about your own general academic background and your current areas of research?*

Well, my main areas of interest are basically nineteenth- and twentieth-century European philosophy. I wrote my dissertation on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* at the University of California, San Diego,<sup>1</sup> and, after that, I went to Europe and continued to work on Hegel and also on French Existentialism and Phenomenology; that is what I was doing here [in Brussels] in 1993/94. Since 1995 I’ve had a position at the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre, where I’ve been doing work on Kierkegaard studies and also nineteenth-century Danish philosophy.

<sup>1</sup> This was later published in expanded form as J. Stewart, *The Unity of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: A Systematic Interpretation*, Northwestern University Press, 2000.



This was a natural extension of the work I had been doing before; it was not a completely foreign area, since Danish philosophy has a number of close relations to the German philosophy of the time, and it was quite interesting to continue with that story.

*The issue of “myths and legends” has been one interest of yours<sup>2</sup>; do you think that the traditional reading of the Hegel-Kierkegaard conflict has given rise to its own myths and legends?*

Yes, I think it has. I think there are a number of myths surrounding the understanding of Kierkegaard’s relations to Hegel, and I think that there are people who want to tell the broad story of the history of philosophy, who, for one reason or another, like to have clear breaks and to put a full-stop where the old period ends and the new period begins. It seems to me that, specifically in the history of philosophy, things do

<sup>2</sup> J. Stewart, *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, Northwestern University Press, 1996.

not really work that way: there is a lot more continuity and overlapping, and there are no radical revolutionary breaks; people tend to make these up for their own ideological purposes. I am quite convinced that the understanding of Kierkegaard as a radical opponent of Hegel is the result of this kind of thinking, that is to say, people tend to make him more anti-Hegelian than he himself ever was, because it fits into a larger story *they* want to tell about the history of philosophy – that is, about the end of German Idealism and the beginning of Existentialism, and so it represents a convenient break for them; but really this goes far beyond anything that one could actually find in Kierkegaard's writings.

*Traditionally, Kierkegaard scholarship has drawn a sharp "either/or" between Kierkegaard and Hegel. In your work you try to suggest that there is more than just one standard relation between the two authors, and that Kierkegaard, in many respects, was positively influenced by Hegel's philosophy. Moreover, you come to the conclusion that there was never a direct criticism of Hegel's position, but that Kierkegaard's more violent attacks on Hegel's philosophy had, in fact, a different target. Could you tell us about your reading of Kierkegaard's reception of Hegel?*

I was very self-conscious about putting that word "relations" into the title of my book<sup>3</sup> – that is, the plural use of "relations", because the title itself plays on the title of an earlier book by Niels Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*; and also the "Reconsidered" part plays upon that title. The polemical point of that plural is that it's a mistake to comprehend this as a single uniform relation, in the way people very often do when talking about Kierkegaard and Hegel. In such a way it becomes very general – that is, as if Kierkegaard had just one general disposi-

tion towards Hegel, and that was the end of the story; but Kierkegaard is a much more nuanced thinker, a much richer thinker than that; his thought developed over a long period of time. He made use of Hegel in different ways, and so the conclusion I came to when I was working on the book is that one has to go, almost in an episodic fashion, to the individual book and the individual passage, and see exactly what he is using of Hegel, how he is using it and then, at the end of the book, look back and try to make sense of it all, and see if there is a larger pattern beyond that. What I found is that there are many different sorts of uses and criticisms and not just a single relation. The goal of the book is to make things a bit more complicated in that sense, instead of just giving a standard picture where people can say: "Ok, that is the end of the story: Kierkegaard was an opponent of Hegel and there is not much more to be said."

*So what about Kierkegaard's relationship to the Danish Hegelians? What are his specific critical targets and are there any specific passages or texts which were thought to be an attack on Hegel but in fact were aiming at someone else?*

This is something I discovered only after I went to Denmark. Actually, when I originally arrived I had in mind to write a rather different sort of a book than the one I ended up writing. When I sat down and tried to go through all these individual passages, about which people have said, "this is where the big polemic with Hegel is", I did not understand them. I came from Hegel studies, and yet I simply did not understand these criticisms. It was only when I started familiarizing myself with some of the more or less unknown or long since forgotten Danish texts, which were important for Hegel's reception in Denmark at the time, that some of

<sup>3</sup> J. Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

these pieces started to fit into place; only then one can see, in some cases very clearly, that the argument and the criticisms only make sense if they are understood to be directed against these other people. This is also part of where the mythologies come in, where it seems to me that many scholars of the past, instead of saying in a straightforward way “I do not understand that in Hegel”, try to make up stories to make it fit with Hegel, where there is often a much more banal explanation to it. One of the most straightforward examples of this is Kierkegaard’s polemic with the system which ends with actuality, that is, what he talks about in the beginning of *The Concept of Anxiety*. Here people just invariably say, “this is a criticism of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*” and then they make quite a lot of it, claiming “this is a big polemic, he does not think Hegel had understood actuality, this is the existential Kierkegaard, and so on”. But, of course, Hegel’s *Science of Logic* does not end with actuality, and so this criticism does not work at all as a criticism of Hegel. But, when you identify its true target of it, it turns out to be Adler, whom Kierkegaard later on criticized in the *Book on Adler*. Adler wrote a couple of books on Hegel’s philosophy and then was ordained a priest; Kierkegaard was quite upset about this contradiction: “how can a Hegelian become a practicing pastor in the Danish Church?” One of Adler’s books is a commentary on Hegel’s *Logic*, and in this book Adler gets only about half-way through, getting only to the category of actuality and then stopping; so it is very clear that this is the book Kierkegaard had in mind. In fact, if you look more closely, in the introduction of *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard actually quotes from the same book; thus there is no ambiguity.

*Given the fact that Kierkegaard never directly challenged the Hegelian position, for example with textual references or direct quotations, in your work you consider their opposition as a meta-level or meta-philosophical conflict. Is such a meta-level conflict to be taken seriously as a fruitful opposition, or is it to be seen as generating ambiguities and equivocal conclusions, being based on a mis-interpretation of Kierkegaard’s position?*

The point is to make things more difficult and to make Kierkegaard more interesting, and it is neither difficult nor interesting if it is just one straightforward negative relation; this would mean that he rejects everything. What makes it much more interesting to me, much more nuanced, is if one could see certain parts of Hegel that Kierkegaard wants to appropriate for his own purposes – however, putting them into a rather different philosophical context, one that is quite foreign to Hegel. Then one can step back and say, “what is his program, how does this relate to philosophy in a more traditional sense, in the sense of German Idealism?” I find that profoundly interesting, simply because it was in this period, the nineteenth century, that philosophy was becoming much more heterogeneous than it had ever been before. That is to say, there were different schools branching out, there were people breaking with some of the older paradigms and calling into question what philosophy was; that is why sometimes today we have a hard time classifying people like Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, or Nietzsche. To what degree are they philosophers and to what degree should we hold them accountable to philosophical standards, or to what degree were they theologians, literary writers, cultural critics, or what not? It’s not an obvious question, but I think it makes Kierkegaard much more interesting, and it is also truer to him as an author to evaluate him and to try to understand him in

terms of these other sorts of categories, because he is often criticized by philosophers who look at him, and at other philosophers from the tradition, in order to find clearly reasoned arguments in the way we are used to today. Then they are disappointed when they do not find them, and they simply conclude that he is a bad philosopher. Well, this is not fair to him; this is not what he had intended to do.

*You argue that the general idea that nineteenth-century philosophy has split into two mainstreams – that is, the Hegelians and the existential philosophers – is fundamentally incorrect, since Kierkegaard did not just programmatically oppose his thought to Hegel's philosophy. However, can one say, following your idea of the meta-level conflict, that there has been a split regarding the task attributed to philosophy and the object of philosophy itself?*

I agree that my characterization of that is a bit over-generalized, and I did that simply for didactical purposes more than anything else, but the point is that it's a mistake to think in hard and fast categories or time-periods in the history of philosophy, and this was the way that the Hegel-Kierkegaard relationship was understood, but it is correct to point out what we were just talking about: this is a period in which the very definition of the history of philosophy was called into question and people were rethinking that; this is clearly something that is in opposition to Hegel's conception of philosophy as a rigorous *Wissenschaft*, as a systematic enterprise. In that regard, then, one can say that Kierkegaard shares something in common with some of these other thinkers, although he is also doing other things that are quite different from them, so one could say that he is part of a certain spirit of an age, but, once again, to precisely pin that down is not an easy matter from the perspective of the history of philosophy.

*Kierkegaard is a very complex author, and his authorship is even more puzzling: how, in your opinion, should it be approached? Should the pseudonymous question be taken seriously, as Kierkegaard himself suggested, or should his corpus be read as a whole, using the signed writings to clarify and fill in the gaps of the pseudonymous texts? What are the current tendencies among Kierkegaard scholars?*

This is a difficult question that has engaged Kierkegaard research for a long time, as well as one of the big issues in the research today. It seems to be a bit of a mistake to come down hard and fast on the one side or the other, which is what invariably happens in these sorts of discussions: there are some people who say that the pseudonyms are the key to understanding everything, and one has strictly to distinguish what each pseudonymous author is doing in each text and how this text is radically different from the other texts; then you have other people, probably people from the older research, who say that it does not matter at all – that is, the pseudonyms are just window-dressing, and it is just Kierkegaard behind it all. That does not seem to be quite right either; he did write in pseudonyms and he did seem to be making a point with them. It appears to me that one does need to take into account the fact that he wrote in pseudonyms, but without seeing it as a hard and fast thing, without getting ideological about it. And that is simply because it seems to me that there is a tremendous amount of continuity amongst some of the pseudonyms: I have seen in my study that the same criticism of Hegel will come up in different texts, as if it is a one-liner that keeps returning. The criticism of Hegel for lacking an ethics is a good example, which is at work in many of the pseudonymous works actually; hence it would be a mistake to say this is unique to Johannes Climacus, or something like that.

*Speaking of ethics, in tonight's paper you suggest that for Kierkegaard philosophy and ethics are much closer to Ancient philosophy (i.e., Stoicism, Scepticism and Epicureanism), which is characterized by the question of the good life, instead of following the main interests of nineteenth-century philosophy. Why do you interpret Kierkegaard's position as going back to ancient philosophy, instead of suggesting that Kierkegaard is opening the way to a new understanding of what philosophy and ethics are all about? The introduction of the concept of existence, for instance, and the problems of choice, uncertainty, and the leap, cannot be simply reduced to the concept of the good life as we have it in ancient philosophy.*

Yes, I see, I agree with that. I didn't mean to suggest that he is doing something reactionary in that sense, that he is going back and remaining within an ancient paradigm of ethical thinking, but rather that he is using certain aspects of ancient ethical thinking as a model for his own thought. I was simply trying to do some brain-storming about this question of how to understand him in terms of the history of philosophy, generally speaking. We are all in agreement that he is trying to do something different; his programme is something different than, let's say, the programme of German Idealism, and also that he has a different conception of what philosophy is; maybe he would even say that what he is doing is not philosophy, that he is doing something else; then he is making use of certain models in what he is doing. So, if we want to characterize this, then it seems to me productive to compare what he is doing with some elements of ancient thought. I agree entirely, it is not *just* that; he is also adding some Christian elements to the pagan elements, and he is also adding what we might call existential elements that would clearly be forward-looking and not just backward-looking. The problem I wanted to leave people with is the question of

how he is to be understood: how exactly should we tease out these different strands of his ethical thinking? He is in fact a nineteenth-century thinker. Hence we cannot take him out of his period; we cannot put him into the ancient world in that sense. Yet what he is doing has some points of commonality with these other philosophical traditions, which he is trying to import into a nineteenth-century context to see how that looks, and this seems to me to be the interpretative challenge.

*Finally, Professor Stewart, considering Kierkegaard's criticism of the practice of philosophy in the nineteenth-century – that is, of its professorial status and of its speculative claim – would you still consider him a philosopher and, if so, what kind of philosopher?*

This is a vexing question. I have to say, I go back and forth on this myself. Sometimes I am a bit frustrated with him as a philosopher because I can see what he wants to say, and I can see some general motivation for why he wants to say it; but then, when I go to his text and I try to find the arguments for it like a good philosopher should, I cannot find the arguments. To that degree, he is probably better for the theologians or for literary people, who are not as hung-up on arguments as philosophers are, and so if that is one's criterion, then he is probably not a philosopher, at least not a good one. But this is not to take a dismissive tone and say philosophers should not read him because he is not interesting for philosophers. On the contrary, he is constantly using philosophical motifs and ideas and trying to think, in some ways, along the lines of other philosophers. I guess, ultimately, the conclusion I came to is: what really hangs on the label? I am not invested in the question of whether one can hang one label or another on him, because the main question is whether

or not one can read him with interest in a productive fashion, such that he can shed light on things, and it seems to me that answering the question, “is he a philosopher? Yes or no?”, does not matter at all, for it is independent of the bigger issue of whether or not he can be fruitful to philosophical thinking. And there can certainly be no doubt about that.

*Are there any passages where Kierkegaard calls himself a philosopher? For he is somehow in line with Romanticism, trying to blur the borders between literature and philosophy, even theology, for they were dreaming of a new mythology. I think it has to be considered in that context as well.*

On the contrary, most of the time he goes out of his way to say that he is *not* a philosopher and distances himself from it. That is also the beauty of him, his reception: unlike many other thinkers from that period who are only studied in philosophy, theology or literature, today Kierkegaard is taken in by all different fields. He is genuinely interdisciplinary.

Interviewed by Margherita Tonon

