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# Who Is the Father of Existentialism? The Historical Context of Kierkegaard's Criticism of Hegel's Interpretation of Actuality

**Abstract:** In the 1830s and 1840s, there was a decisive conflict between the Danish followers of Hegel and his opponents. The latter criticized Hegel's philosophy for being overly abstract and having lost touch with reality. Kierkegaard is given credit for this criticism and for establishing a new philosophical direction that rejects abstraction and focuses on the concrete experience of the individual. The present article argues that there was nothing particularly new about Kierkegaard's rejection of abstract philosophy and his attempt to emphasize actuality and life. In fact, the conflict was wider and extended to many other Danish thinkers at the time who were critical of precisely this point in Hegel.

In Kierkegaard's generation, it was a common criticism of Hegel's philosophy that it was overly abstract and had lost touch with reality.<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard plays an especially important role in this context since he is given credit for establishing a new philosophical direction that rejects abstraction and focuses on the concrete experience of the individual. Kierkegaard readers are familiar with his many satirical criticisms of the Hegelians for forgetting actuality and becoming lost in the abstractions of thought. In the present article, I will defend the thesis that there was nothing particularly new about Kierkegaard's rejection of abstract philosophy and his attempt to focus on actuality and life.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an important motif in Jon Stewart, *Hegel's Century: Alienation and Recognition in a Time of Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2021.

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In a previous article, I demonstrated that the Danish philosopher Frederik Christian Sibbern anticipated Kierkegaard's criticism in important ways.<sup>2</sup> I would like to show now that he was not alone in this. When we examine the period in the 1830s when the young Kierkegaard was a student and was making his first steps in the academic world, we find that in fact there were many other Danish thinkers at the time who were critical of Hegel's abstract philosophy and conception of actuality. They anticipated Kierkegaard's attempt to draw the focus of philosophy away from abstract concepts to the actual problems of individuals in their lives. They too could equally be designated by labels, such as "critics of Hegelian abstraction" or "founders of existentialism," that are so often ascribed to Kierkegaard. When this issue is seen in its historical context, it makes good sense that Kierkegaard would take this position since it was indeed a quite popular one in Danish intellectual life of the day. The mistake is in seeing this as something new or original in Kierkegaard.

## I Martensen's *On the Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness*

In 1837, during the time when Kierkegaard was studying at the University of Copenhagen, the theologian Hans Martensen published his dissertation, which was written in Latin under the title, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae in theologiam dogmaticam nostri temporis introducta* or *On the Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*.<sup>3</sup> Four years later, it was translated into Danish by Martensen's student Lauritz Vilhelm Petersen as *Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie i vor Tids dogmatiske Theologie*.<sup>4</sup> While Martensen is known today as one of the leading Danish Hegelians in the

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<sup>2</sup> See "Sibbern's Anticipations of Kierkegaard's Polemic against the Hegelians: The Critique of Abstraction," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2021, pp. 353–370.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae, in theologiam dogmaticam nostri temporis introducta*, Copenhagen: I.D. Quist 1837.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Martensen, *Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie i vor Tids dogmatiske Theologie*, trans. by L.V. Petersen, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1841. This Danish translation has been translated into English as *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, in *Between Hegel and Kierkegaard: Hans L. Martensen's Philosophy of Religion*, ed. and trans. by Curtis L. Thompson and David J. Kangas, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1997, pp. 73–147.

late 1830s and 1840s, he makes an explicit note in his autobiography that his dissertation issued a serious criticism of Hegel,<sup>5</sup> a point which is often overlooked.

In the dissertation's second chapter, entitled "On the Religious Principle of Philosophy," Martensen formulates two questions which serve to define the main issue of the work as a whole. The first question is whether the human mind "can complete its theory" or discover the truth "by its own power and ability, or whether in this undertaking it also needs divine assistance."<sup>6</sup> Here he raises the question of autonomy. The issue turns on whether the individual can autonomously attain the truth or is in some way dependent on the divine. In the latter case one must follow a *theonomous* principle and not an *autonomous* one in the pursuit of truth. With the second question Martensen takes up the issue of what is primary or higher, philosophical knowledge or faith.<sup>7</sup>

The third chapter, "The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness as a Principle in Modern Philosophy," characterizes modern philosophy as determined by the notion of autonomy in the sense of self-sufficiency. Martensen ascribes to Descartes the role of the founder of the principle of modern autonomy. He sketches the basic movement in the initial chapters of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, describing the famous method of doubt with the slogan "*de omnibus dubitandum est*,"<sup>8</sup> which became a trademark of Kierkegaard's frequent criticisms, as is evinced by his satirical philosophical novel, *Johannes Climacus, Or De omnibus dubitandum est*. Martensen explains that since Descartes began with the thinking subject, he in a sense incorporated everything into the sphere of self-consciousness:

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 in this identity of thought and being, then *self-consciousness*, which is the absolute for this identity, must be recognized as the source

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5 See Hans Martensen, *Af mit Levnet. Meddelelser*, vols. 1–3, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1882–83, vol. 2, p. 2.

6 Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 3, p. 9. (*Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, p. 8; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, p. 80.)

7 Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 3, p. 10. (*Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, pp. 8–9; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, pp. 80–81.)

8 Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 5, p. 19. (*Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, p. 16; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, p. 85.)

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.<sup>9</sup>

This Cartesian principle then leads to a conception of self-sufficiency or autonomy that the later thinkers of German idealism adopted:

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.<sup>10</sup>

The Cartesian beginning with the *cogito* paved the way for later theories of immanence such as that of Hegel. This then led to the ascension of the principle of autonomy in modern philosophy.

The modern mind, following Descartes and Fichte, wants to find the truth within itself. It denies that there is any external authority which it needs or relies upon. Martensen seems to follow Hegel in the view that this conception of autonomy, which is found in the German Romantics, was developed from Fichte's theory of the self-positing "I."<sup>11</sup> The mistake is to think that human beings are self-sufficient and do not need divine aid to know the truth. In a passage that anticipates many of Kierkegaard's basic motifs, Martensen writes,

As such reason is the universal for everything, both for God and for the creature, but precisely because of this character of universality reason stands under that living and personal actuality which comprises not only the abstract forms of life but life itself. The investigation of the nature of self-consciousness must therefore be not merely a *logical*

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9 Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 5, pp. 19–20. (*Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, p. 17; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, p. 86.)

10 Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 5, p. 19. (*Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, p. 17; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, p. 86.)

11 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, I–III, ed. by Karl Ludwig Michelet, vols. 13–15 in *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Werke. Vollständige Ausgabe*, vols. 1–18, ed. by Ludwig Boumann, Friedrich Förster, Eduard Gans, Karl Hegel, Leopold von Henning, Heinrich Gustav Hotho, Philipp Marheineke, Karl Ludwig Michelet, Karl Rosenkranz, Johannes Schulze, Berlin: Duncker und Humblot 1832–45, vol. 15, pp. 611–646. (*Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vols. 1–3, trans. by E.S. Haldane, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 1995, vol. 3, pp. 479–512; *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe in 20 Bänden*, ed. by Hermann Glockner, Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag 1928–41, vol. 19, pp. 611–646.)

investigation but a *theological* and *anthropological* one; here must be asked not only questions of how self-consciousness is related to being and existence, but how it is related to *life* itself.<sup>12</sup>

Martensen thus rejects logical analyses in favor of what might be called an existential emphasis on actuality and life. Martensen, whom Kierkegaard was later to dismiss as a Hegelian, then continues by criticizing Hegel: “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.”<sup>13</sup> Hegel is thus put in the category of modern philosophers who follow the principle of autonomic reason at the expense of faith.

Chapter Four moves to theology and claims that the philosophical systems of autonomy have come to exercise a significant influence over theological thinking. Martensen here explores what he perceives to be the negative effects of the systems of Kant and Hegel on the field of dogmatics and specifically on the dogmas of the Creation and the Incarnation. He writes in criticism of Hegel,

To the objective system of autonomy corresponds a dogmatics which in religion certainly understands the *truth's* objective revelation; but since it considers the purely metaphysical concept as the absolute truth, the true loses its character. It posits a contradiction between *concept* and *representation*, and regards the philosophical concept as a higher form of truth than faith, which needs to be liberated from the wrappings of representation.<sup>14</sup>

Hegel's claim to respect and correctly understand the truth of religion is hollow since he subordinates it to conceptual knowing. The ultimate truth of the Trinity is, for Hegel, purely conceptual: the unity of universality, particularity, and individuality. This is different from the religious image of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. According to Martensen, a religious truth turned into a logical or metaphysical concept “loses its character”:

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<sup>12</sup> Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 5, p. 22. (*Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, pp. 18–19; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, pp. 86–87)

<sup>13</sup> Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 5, p. 22. (*Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, p. 19; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, p. 87)

<sup>14</sup> Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 7, p. 28. (*Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, p. 24; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, p. 90.)

But since dogma does not present to us a merely logical truth for thinking but a central truth for *life*, does not present to us the nature of God and the human in bare abstractions but in *positive* shapes, faith is here the solitary organ. That is to say, it lies in the concept of the positive, as that which cannot be produced and construed by mere reasoning, that it must *be received* as it is *delivered*.<sup>15</sup>

Martensen affirms his view that faith and truth are divine gifts, which cannot be reached by human reason alone. Like Kierkegaard after him, he emphasizes the distinction between abstract logic and existential faith. A merely logical account of the divine cannot be the final word.

In what follows Martensen goes on to explore in some detail the effects of the philosophical principle of autonomy on the dogmas of the Creation (§ 9) and the Incarnation (§ 10), which he regards as the two central dogmas in Christianity. With regard to the former, Martensen criticizes Hegel's account as follows:

The theology of speculative rationalism (which stems from Hegel) is related speculatively to the Creation dogma; but since it does not arrive at knowledge of the existence of a personal God, this dogma receives only a *symbolic* meaning as the designation for the continuous transition of the infinite into the finite, of ideality into reality. But the concept of personality is inseparable from the concept of creation; therefore, God also becomes in this system a Creator only in name (*nomine*) not in actuality (*non re*), and dogmatic nominalism thus also has a home here.<sup>16</sup>

Martensen again thinks that Hegel's purely conceptual understanding distorts the actual content of the doctrine. He explains his criticism in more detail as follows:

Objective rationalism urges, by contrast, God's *objectivity* and goes to work speculatively in the investigation of everything divine. It solves the riddle of existence...i.e., how there can be an *other* than God, how that which is *not* God has come to exist, by placing the *negative* into the very self of God; it grasps *negativity* as a moment in God Himself, as the eternal *Other* through which God mediates His continuous transition from possibility to actuality. The Creation thus becomes the expression of God's transition into difference, of the transition of the infinite into the finite; it is God's alteration, from which God wins back unity and restores Himself. *Insofar as the human spirit only reveals the Idea*, it is the point where God returns to Himself, or rather it is the returned-into-itself-God. This eternal Idea of the identity of God and the human is revealed in Christ. It thus appears that in this system

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<sup>15</sup> Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 7, p. 29. (*Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, p. 25; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, p. 90.)

<sup>16</sup> Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 9, pp. 37–38. (*Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, p. 31; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, p. 94.)

also the Incarnation sublates the Creation or God's original *difference*, as both are posited as moments in God's own development whose eternal life consists in this transition into difference and returning to unity.<sup>17</sup>

Hegel's account operates at a purely conceptual level with general principles and categories, such as negativity, idea, and actuality. While such an account may contain some truth, this is not, for Martensen, the personal God of Christianity.

This leads Martensen to develop the familiar charge of pantheism, although it should be noted that this critique is aimed at Kant's system as well as Hegel's:

pantheism is the system according to which God only exists *as* the world, *as* human consciousness, where consequently the history of the human race coincides with the history of God and becomes God's own process of development.... Since in this way there is in reality no other God in the world than the ideal I, and this is elaborated and developed through the empirical self-consciousness whereby God first passes over from possibility to actuality, the history of the human race becomes the history of God's development, the expression for God's progress from possibility to actuality. Even though the adherents of this theology certainly do not straightforwardly admit this, it yet follows consistently from the principle, for which reason subjective pantheism or semi-pantheism has dialectically passed over into objective pantheism.<sup>18</sup>

Martensen refers to Hegel's association of the development of the philosophical Idea in history with God. This criticism was common during Hegel's lifetime,<sup>19</sup> and thus Martensen is simply repeating an old charge without adding anything new. In any case, it is clear that Martensen anticipates many aspects of Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel for abstraction and for misunderstanding religious faith.

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<sup>17</sup> Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 11, p. 43. (*Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, p. 36; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, p. 97.)

<sup>18</sup> Martensen, *De autonomia conscientiae sui humanae*, § 11, pp. 45–46. (*Den menneskelige Selvbevidstheds Autonomie*, pp. 37–38; *The Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*, pp. 98–99.)

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, August Tholuck, *Blüthensammlung aus der Morganländischen Mystik nebst einer Einleitung über Mystik überhaupt und Morgenländische insbesondere*, Berlin: Ferdinand Dümmler 1825. August Tholuck, *Die Lehre von der Sünde und vom Versöhner; oder Die wahre Weihe des Zweiflers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Hamburg: Friedrich Perthes 1825 (1823). Anonymous, *Ueber die Hegelsche Lehre, oder: absolutes Wissen und moderner Pantheismus*, Leipzig: Christian Ernst Kollmann 1829.



## II Grundtvig

Another famous figure from the Danish Golden Age, N.F.S. Grundtvig, was consistently critical of Hegelianism.<sup>20</sup> Insight into Grundtvig's position can be found in Martensen's memoirs from many years after the fact. Martensen recalls the visit of the Hegelian Philipp Marheineke to Copenhagen in connection with the Reformation Jubilee in 1836. At the time the young Martensen played host to Marheineke, whom he had met in Berlin on his recent journey.<sup>21</sup> He explains that Marheineke asked to be introduced to Grundtvig, and although Martensen was not acquainted with him personally, he was happy to organize it. Martensen and Marheineke thus showed up at Grundtvig's home in Christianshavn near Frederik's Church (today Christian's Church). After some discussion of the jubilee festivities, Martensen recalls,

the discussion turned to speculation and speculative theology which Marheineke greatly commended as that of which the age stood in need. Grundtvig would have none of this and declared that he would be frightened to have any part in it. "Why would you be frightened?" asked Marheineke. Grundtvig replied, "I am frightened for myself. For me the chief contradiction is the opposition between life and death." That is, he wished to make it clear that life could be lost or suffer harm through this submission to speculation, to what he used to call fantasy [*Hjernespind*].<sup>22</sup>

Grundtvig is quite direct in his rejection of the speculative theology advocated by Marheineke. Martensen recalls how Marheineke took this in stride and how Grundtvig went on to make his criticism more specific:

Marheineke treated the matter jocularly and declared that the difference between life and death was indeed a considerable difference, but that one might perhaps get back to logical opposites here; he considered the chief opposition, from out of which one had to proceed, was the opposition between thinking and being. Grundtvig answered good-humoredly: "You great philosophers forget life in the construction of your intellectual edifices."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This is a topic that has not yet been adequately researched. See Tord Ehnevid, "The Dominant Peoples in History according to Grundtvig and Hegel," *Grundtvig-Studier*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1973, pp. 115–127.

<sup>21</sup> For Martensen's journey, see Jon Stewart, *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark*, Tome I, *The Heiberg Period: 1824–1836*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised and augmented edition, Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi 2024 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 13), pp. 562–578.

<sup>22</sup> Martensen, *Af mit Levnet. Meddelelser*, vol. 2, pp. 49–50. (This part of Martensen's autobiography is translated into English in *N.F.S. Grundtvig: A Life Recalled*, ed. and trans. by S.A.J. Bradley, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 2008, p. 249.)

<sup>23</sup> Martensen, *Af mit Levnet*, vol. 2, p. 50. (*N.F.S. Grundtvig: A Life Recalled*, p. 249.)

Grundtvig thus echoes the charges against Hegelian philosophy that had been issued before and anticipates Kierkegaard's criticism. Like Kierkegaard, Grundtvig believed that Hegel's philosophy traded only in abstract concepts but left out the key issue of life and actuality.

From June 20 to November 26, 1838, Grundtvig gave a series of public lectures for an audience primarily consisting of students from the University of Copenhagen. These lectures were published posthumously in 1877 under the title, *The Memory of Man 1788–1838: Lectures on the History of the Last Half Century, Delivered in 1838*.<sup>24</sup> This work was based on the manuscript that Grundtvig used in the lectures, which was then edited by his son Svend Grundtvig, whose name, however, is absent from the title page of the work.<sup>25</sup> Grundtvig had been forbidden from speaking publicly since being condemned for libel in 1826, and only at the end of 1837 was this prohibition lifted. These were thus the first public lectures that Grundtvig had given for a long time, and for this reason they represented an important event. The lectures were held at Borch's College but were not a part of the instruction at the University of Copenhagen since Grundtvig had no academic affiliation.

According to the editor of *The Memory of Man 1788–1838*, this series of lectures was very popular, and the auditorium was overflowing at every meeting.<sup>26</sup> Grundtvig's goal with the lectures was "to win over the students to his Nordic world-view of human life and existence."<sup>27</sup> At the time this would have been in direct opposition to Martensen's lectures which aimed to win over the same students to his version of speculative theology.

In the lectures Grundtvig mentions Hegel briefly in connection with German philosophy in general:

What still more complicates the question of freedom for us is, of course, the German philosophers, who do not care much how things are connected and work in the world of sense, but only ask what all things are, if not in themselves, at least in the idea, that is, in their own minds; and it is no use for the same philosophers to comfort us by saying that if their ideas will not fit the true world, we need not trouble ourselves about it at all, for they will rearrange the true world according to the ideas, when they first come to grips with them, —it is no use to us, gentlemen, for, despite everything, we can predict that we shall never

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24 N.F.S. Grundtvig, *Mands Minde 1788–1838. Foredrag over det sidste halve Aarhundredes Historie, holdte 1838*, Copenhagen: Karl Schönberg 1877.

25 The editor signs his introduction to the work only with the initials S.G.

26 Grundtvig, *Mands Minde 1788–1838*, p. VII.

27 *Ibid.*, p. XI.

live to see that day, for not only are Leibniz and Wolf dead, but also Kant has died, and Fichte has died, and Hegel has died, without coming to terms with this.<sup>28</sup>

Grundtvig thus condemns not only Hegel but the entire tradition of German philosophy. His point is that the German philosophers fail to appreciate the richness of the real world of perception. Instead, they are obsessed with abstract ideas which cannot be found in the world. His conclusion is that none of the German thinkers, with their penchant for abstraction, ever really reached a satisfying conclusion in this regard. They were unable to translate their abstractions into the real world that we all know so well.

### III Rasmus Nielsen

On June 22, 1840, the Danish philosopher and theologian Rasmus Nielsen defended his dissertation, a work in Latin entitled, *De speculativa historiae sacrae tractandae methodo commentatio* or *Treatise on the Speculative Method's Treatment of Sacred History*.<sup>29</sup> This work was translated into Danish two years later by Balthasar Christopher Bøggild.<sup>30</sup> A zealous tone is recognizable in the Preface to this translation when Bøggild describes Nielsen as “laboring for the speculative development of theology” and as “the organ for an almost wholly new consciousness in our fatherland.”<sup>31</sup> Further, he explains Nielsen’s objective with this work as a continuation of Martensen’s project in *On the Autonomy of Human Self-Consciousness in Modern Dogmatic Theology*. While Martensen polemicized against the forms of subjective rationalism or autonomy (i.e., Kant and Schleiermacher), Nielsen, in the second part of his work, polemicizes against objective rationalism. By this he means David Friedrich Strauss and what Nielsen calls “panlogism.”

Nielsen anticipates one of Kierkegaard’s criticisms regarding the immanent speculative method.<sup>32</sup> While this method makes use of dialectical opposites in order to move forward, these opposites are always conceptual. Therefore, the real opposite of thought, i.e., being or existence, is always left out. The speculative

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 69–70.

<sup>29</sup> Rasmus Nielsen, *De speculativa historiae sacrae tractandae methodo commentatio*, Copenhagen: Tegnagel 1840.

<sup>30</sup> Rasmus Nielsen, *Om den spekulative Methodes Anvendelse paa den hellige Historie*, trans. by B.C. Bøggild, Copenhagen: H.C. Klein 1842.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., [p. i] (the preface consists of two unnumbered pages).

<sup>32</sup> See *SKS* 7, 173–182 / *CUP1*, 189–199. *SKS* 7, 300–306 / *CUP1*, 329–335.

analysis concerns only the immanent sphere of concepts and never touches actuality. Nielsen explains,

The abstract ideality contains only an abstract identity with itself; its true opposite is kept out. Therefore, its moments inside its limits are everywhere lacking a true opposite; to be sure, the ideal seems to be limited by the ideal, negation by the negation, but this limitation does not really occur. Since the abstract ideality thus has its true negative outside itself, which strives against the nature of ideality, it disappears. Only the realm of the utmost negation, of empirical actuality, remains, built up on the ruins of ideality.<sup>33</sup>

The true opposite of thought or the concept is thus existence or life, which is entirely left out of the equation. When there is talk of God or Christ, we are of course concerned primarily with actuality and not merely with the idea or concept.

Nielsen hints at the continuity between his discussion and the previous debates by referring to Heiberg, Martensen, and Sibbern in two separate footnotes.<sup>34</sup> He criticizes speculative philosophy or “panlogism,” which he contrasts to Christian dogmatics. The first criticism is a familiar one: panlogism “has a false god.”<sup>35</sup> It reveres not the divine but human reason. Nielsen, of course, refers here to the identification of God with Spirit or the Concept in Hegel’s philosophy. While this sounds like a standard criticism, there is more to it than this. Here Nielsen takes up the issue, so central to the Danish discussions, about the priority of philosophy to theology, reason to faith, concepts to feelings. He sides with Martensen against Heiberg by arguing that what is most fundamental is God and not a concept: “it is a positive power of God which grounds the whole of real existence and thus puts the ontological forms immanently in all things.”<sup>36</sup> The divine is the necessary foundation from which existence and its abstract thought proceed.

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<sup>33</sup> Nielsen, *De speculativa historiae sacrae tractandae methodo commentatio*, § 21, p. 130. (*Om den spekulative Methodes Anvendelse paa den hellige Historie*, § 21, p. 138.)

<sup>34</sup> Nielsen, *De speculativa historiae sacrae tractandae methodo commentatio*, § 22, p. 138n. (*Om den spekulative Methodes Anvendelse paa den hellige Historie*, § 22, pp. 146–147n.) Note that § 22 is translated as “Return to the Church: Speculative Theology,” in *Heiberg’s Introductory Lecture to the Logic Course and Other Texts*, ed. and trans. by Jon Stewart, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 2007 (*Texts from Golden Age Denmark*, vol. 3), pp. 115–121; § 22, 119n.

<sup>35</sup> Nielsen, *De speculativa historiae sacrae tractandae methodo commentatio*, § 22, p. 136. (*Om den spekulative Methodes Anvendelse paa den hellige Historie*, § 22, p. 145; “Return to the Church: Speculative Theology,” p. 118.)

<sup>36</sup> Nielsen, *De speculativa historiae sacrae tractandae methodo commentatio*, § 22, p. 137. (*Om den spekulative Methodes Anvendelse paa den hellige Historie*, § 22, p. 145; “Return to the Church: Speculative Theology,” p. 118.)

Like his predecessors, Nielsen wants to argue that speculative philosophy and Christian faith are not mutually exclusive; they are united in Christian dogmatics. Dogmatics needs the concepts of speculative philosophy, while speculative philosophy needs the empirical element offered by faith:

It is thus of little use to appeal to the Revelation of Christ when arguing with a deist since he has a one-sided concept of God. Neither, for the same reason, should theology prove that it follows from God's threefold nature that Christ, with dialectical necessity, had to reveal himself at a particular place. But once Christ has revealed himself, theology should be able to grasp how this positive phenomenon of revelation is related to other positive phenomena. This revelation is, so to speak, a real thought, capable of being combined with other real thoughts. The absolutely necessary presupposition for conceptual thinking is therefore the richest possible faith. Far from being harmed by this totality of faith, science, on the contrary, requires its help for dialectical necessity and negation to penetrate all the elements of the system. Thus just as abstract logic passes over into the positive elements, so also must the positive elements, in turn, necessarily pass over into concrete metaphysics and speculative empiricism.<sup>37</sup>

Speculative philosophy cannot give an adequate account of the Revelation merely by appealing to a conceptual necessity. Perhaps inspired by Mynster's article, "On Religious Conviction,"<sup>38</sup> Nielsen argues that there is an important empirical element in the Revelation, which must be taken into account. Speculative thought thus ultimately needs and implicitly relies on the empirical.

As just noted, no true reconciliation is possible in panlogism since there is no true opposition, given that all the oppositions are merely oppositions of thought. By contrast, Christian dogmatics, since it contains a genuine empirical element, maintains the opposition between thought and actuality or life and can thus effect a genuine reconciliation between them. Nielsen argues that dogmatics maintains an "absolute opposition" between God and the world in the sense that the world is conceived as the empirical dimension, whereas God is conceived as the conceptual one:

Because the depth of the mutual opposition of the individual moments is far greater in Christian dogmatics than in panlogism, dogmatics is better prepared to lead the way to

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<sup>37</sup> Nielsen, *De speculativa historiae sacrae tractandae methodo commentatio*, § 22, pp. 137–138. (*Om den spekulative Methodes Anvendelse paa den hellige Historie*, § 22, p. 146; "Return to the Church: Speculative Theology," p. 119.)

<sup>38</sup> Jakob Peter Mynster, "Om den religiøse Overbeviisning," *Dansk Ugeskrift*, vol. 3, nos. 76 and 77, 1833, pp. 241–258. (Reprinted in Mynster's *Blandede Skrifter*, vols. 1–6, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1852–57, vol. 2, pp. 73–94; "On Religious Conviction," 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. 139–159.)

true identity and reconciliation. Panlogism is unable to reach this identity since it must divide existence into two abstract parts in order to come to immanence. Christian dogmatics, by comparison, posits an absolute opposition between God, who is truly trinitarian and perfect in Himself, and the created world. This basic opposition permits a true reconciliation between the peace of eternity and the struggles of temporality.<sup>39</sup>

With this argument Nielsen anticipates in some ways Kierkegaard's doctrine of absolute difference from the *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.<sup>40</sup> There must be a genuine, fundamental distinction between the divine and the human and not merely a conceptual or immanent one. Nielsen writes that, in contrast to panlogism, dogmatics "gives the most profound analysis of the nature of sin, and unshakably maintains the ethical distinction between God and human beings."<sup>41</sup> Once again Hegel's abstract account of actuality falls short.

## IV Clausen

Sometime in the fall of 1840 the professor of theology Henrik Nicolai Clausen published his *Hermeneutics of the New Testament*.<sup>42</sup> Clausen was one of Martensen's elder colleagues at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Copenhagen. On his study tour, Clausen stayed in Berlin from 1818 to 1819, where he attended

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<sup>39</sup> Nielsen, *De speculativa historiae sacrae tractandae methodo commentatio*, § 22, pp. 138–139. (*Om den spekulative Methodes Anvendelse paa den hellige Historie*, § 22, p. 147; "Return to the Church: Speculative Theology," p. 120.)

<sup>40</sup> See SKS 4, 249 / PF, 44–45. See also SKS 7, 374–375 / CUP1, 412: "But between God and a human being (let speculative thought just keep humankind to perform tricks with) there is an absolute difference; therefore, a person's absolute relationship with God must specifically express the absolute difference, and the direct likeness becomes impudence, conceited pretense, presumption, and the like."

<sup>41</sup> Nielsen, *De speculativa historiae sacrae tractandae methodo commentatio*, § 22, p. 139. (*Om den spekulative Methodes Anvendelse paa den hellige Historie*, § 22, p. 148; "Return to the Church: Speculative Theology," p. 120.)

<sup>42</sup> Henrik Nicolai Clausen, *Det Nye Testaments Hermeneutik*, Copenhagen: Jens Hostrup Schultz 1840. See Jørgen Larsen, *H.N. Clausen. Hans Liv og Gerning*, Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads 1945, pp. 320–337. Søren Holm, *H.N. Clausen. Bidrag til en Karakteristik*, Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads 1945, pp. 63–69. Clausen's work presumably appeared sometime fairly late in the year given that it was reviewed by the young theologian Johan Frederik Hagen in *Fædrelandet* on December 6, 1840: Johan Frederik Hagen, "Det Nye Testaments Hermeneutik, af Dr. Henrik Nikolai Clausen. Kbhvn. 1840. 562 S. 8," *Fædrelandet*, vol. 1, no. 364, December 6, 1840, columns 2933–2938.

Schleiermacher's lectures.<sup>43</sup> Upon his return to Copenhagen in 1821 he received a position as lecturer at the Faculty of Theology and a year later attained the position of full professor. Kierkegaard was one of his students for his lecture course on dogmatics in the 1830s.<sup>44</sup>

Clausen's theological standpoint is usually designated as rationalism, which made him the object of criticism of Grundtvig.<sup>45</sup> One would think that this would make him positively disposed towards Hegel's philosophy; however, this was not the case. From his memoirs,<sup>46</sup> it is clear that Clausen was critical of the new trend that Martensen was introducing. Although his work, *Hermeneutics of the New Testament*, is concerned with biblical hermeneutics and contains very little that would give occasion for a discussion of Hegel, Clausen cannot resist the temptation to polemicize against the new trend. Given the somewhat divisive climate surrounding Hegel's philosophy at the time, his few critical remarks were picked up on by the young students of theology who were under the influence of Martensen. As a result, a polemic ensued.

The first of these polemical passages comes right at the start in Clausen's Preface where he discusses the current state of the art in the field of biblical hermeneutics. Here Clausen laments that hermeneutics is on the decline and has been displaced from its once central role in theology. He mentions the much-discussed relation between philosophy and theology, which had become such an important flashpoint in the debates about Hegel's philosophy of religion:

For if theology is to draw the correct blessing from the link which connects it more inwardly than ever before with philosophy, then it should not allow itself to be overpowered by a speculation which thinks that the dialectical source of life...makes every other source superfluous; it should not, while it benevolently receives the theologizing guests, allow them to become masters of its house. Only when one has gone through a thorough theological

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<sup>43</sup> See Henrik Nicolai Clausen, *Optegnelser om mit Levneds og min Tids Historie*, Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad 1877, pp. 61–104. See Larsen, *H.N. Clausen. Hans Liv og Gerning*, pp. 79–109. Stewart, *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark*, Tome I, *The Heiberg Period: 1824–1836*, pp. 85–87.

<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard attended Clausen's course in Winter Semester 1833–34 and Summer Semester 1834. He took notes to this course in his *Notebook 1*. See SKS 19, Not1:1–8, 7–74 / KJN 3, 3–70. See David R. Law, *Kierkegaard's Kenotic Christology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, pp. 113–117.

<sup>45</sup> See N.F.S. Grundtvig, *Kirkens Gjenmæle imod Prof. Theol. Dr. H.N. Clausen*, Copenhagen: Wahl 1825. See Bruce H. Kirmmse, *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1990, pp. 211–212.

<sup>46</sup> See Clausen, *Optegnelser om mit Levneds og min Tids Historie*, pp. 210–213. See Jon Stewart, *A History of Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark*, Tome II, *The Martensen Period: 1837–1841*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised and augmented edition, Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi 2024 (*Danish Golden Age Studies*, vol. 14), pp. 2–5.

school, should one expect that the philosophical direction itself will constitute its correct limit and seek its task in philosophizing about the historically given Christianity, instead of bringing it forth philosophically by means of an *a priori* construction.<sup>47</sup>

Clausen implies that the young theologians following Martensen have allowed Hegelian philosophy to dominate their field. While it is important and useful to draw on information from other fields, such as philosophy, it is a mistake to allow those other fields to take over and masquerade as theology. Instead of understanding Christianity on its own terms, the new philosophical direction has created a mistaken model of it out of thought alone, which Clausen refers to as an “*a priori* construction,” using language from Fichte’s and Schelling’s philosophy. Thus, right away in his Preface Clausen somewhat needlessly makes this provocative statement about Hegel’s influence in theology, which otherwise plays no central role in his work as a whole.

The largest part of Clausen’s book consists in a long section entitled “Overview of the History of New Testament Hermeneutics,” in which he gives a systematic account of the development of the field through the ages. When he comes to the final chapter of this account, which covers the development of the field from the middle of the eighteenth century to the present, Clausen mentions Hegel’s philosophy briefly in a section entitled “Philosophizing and Allegorizing Interpretation.”<sup>48</sup> In his analysis, Clausen begins by noting that Hegel is not much interested in biblical hermeneutics:

In the *Hegelian* school the interpretation of the scripture has not so far been made the object of any special investigation or study. From the standpoint of absolute knowing, from the complete merging of subjective thinking with universal reason, where an appreciation of Christianity is limited to recognizing it as a historical means by which speculation had been brought to the apex, which it now occupies, after which its role for its esoteric observers must be assumed to have been played out, it thus does not seem that the document of the text can afford any particularly attractive or worthy object for study.<sup>49</sup>

Here Clausen gives a somewhat provocative caricature of Hegel’s understanding of Christianity as merely a tool by which spirit develops. While it is true that Hegel is interested in the historical development of Christianity and its relation to art, philosophy, and history in general, he also believes that Christianity contains a universal truth like philosophy. In any case, the critical point is simply that given Hegel’s primarily historical interest in Christianity, he has no particular

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<sup>47</sup> Clausen, *Det Nye Testaments Hermeneutik*, p. iv.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 364–387.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 370–371.



reason to take an interest in biblical hermeneutics. Clausen continues in a somewhat more reconciliatory tone:

However, insofar as this is the case, the dialectical strictness, which with the Hegelian philosophy comes into all activity of the mind, will undoubtedly, from one side, have a positive effect on the theory of the interpretation of the text and its study. But from another side, for the theological schools there will probably be reason and demand to watch out that this influence does not lead to the authorizing of a reinterpretation of the holy text instead of an interpretation, even if in another direction than that which happened previously with Kantianism.<sup>50</sup>

Clausen seems to acknowledge the merits of Hegel's dialectical method, but at the same time he is wary of the tendency, among some of Hegel's followers, to canonize his views as the final word on the matter. While Clausen is willing to see what fruitful results Hegel's method might bring, he thus warns against people using it in defense of some final interpretation of the scriptures.

Clausen then sketches a view about how a philosophy can work positively to improve the morals of those who study it by focusing not on the world of abstract thought but on that of experience. He then contrasts this to Hegel's philosophy:

A philosophy is different which places its followers at a standpoint from which all given actuality is presented as a dialectical process of development of the absolute infinity, which proceeds following a law of the inner necessity of thought, where thus calm contemplation of this necessity appears instead of the—both empty and presumptuous—endeavor to influence the course of things. The positive forms—in life, doctrine, and worship—thus do not on their own become the object of any determinate external veneration, but they win a heightened interest by means of the material, which is contained in them for the dialectical study, in order to show how these forms wholly fall into the *a priori* constructions. The positivity of the text, just like that of the doctrine of the church, dares therefore here...to count on recognition and adherence, however, only under the presupposition that it is willing to allow its concrete and factual content, as incomplete forms of representation, to be comprised by the operations of the dialectic in the pure sphere of the abstract concept.<sup>51</sup>

The objection here seems to be that Hegel's understanding of religion reduces everything to the Concept or to specific conceptual structures. It then demands that everything relevant to religion be understood in terms of these structures. The result is then that scholars become fixated on these conceptual structures and forget or neglect the other aspects since they are regarded as irrelevant.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 371.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 371–372.

## V Conclusion

Given the many critical discussions in Golden Age Denmark about the abstraction of Hegel's philosophy in contrast to actuality and existence, it is odd that in the history of philosophy it is Kierkegaard who gets the credit for this criticism and for introducing the existentialist movement. To be sure, while his development of this criticism is a part of his larger project, it is a significant part. Moreover, while he formulates the criticism in his own way, the basic point seems to be the same as that of the other thinkers treated above. One might be tempted to say that the movement away from idealism towards a more existentially based philosophy was already in the air at the time that Kierkegaard began to write his famous works. Many other largely forgotten Danish thinkers had prepared the way for him.