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KIERKEGAARD'S CRITICISM OF THE ABSENCE OF ETHICS IN HEGEL'S SYSTEM

Although Kierkegaard is often hailed as one of the greatest philosophers of the nineteenth century, he seemed, at least in the early part of his intellectual career, not to have understood the technical use of the concept of actuality or „Wirklichkeit“ in the German philosophical tradition. To be sure, he was not the only one to misunderstand this usage; there was considerable confusion surrounding Hegel's famous statement from the *Philosophy of Right* in 1821, „What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational.”¹ This had been given so many negative interpretations that Hegel felt himself obliged to explain it again when he published the second expanded edition of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* in 1827.² The formula was taken by some to be a straightforward defense of the social and political status quo and was thus seen as a justification of all forms of existing oppression.³ This is of course not what Hegel meant with this admittedly paradoxical formulation.

As an idealist, Hegel believes that it is the Idea which constitutes what is most real. The Idea, however, is not merely something that exists in our minds, but rather it is incarnated in different forms in the world, where it develops. This is Hegel's way of expressing the long-held philosophical view that is the very presupposition for the sciences, namely that there is a rational structure in the universe which the human mind can understand. Thus, the goal of philosophical knowing is to examine what exists in order to find the rational elements. When the issue is seen in this way, it is clear that

¹ Hegel, *PR*, Preface, p. 20; *Jub.*, vol. 7, p. 33. (*PR* = *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. by H.B. Nisbet, ed. by Allen Wood. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 1991. *Jub.* = *Sämtliche Werke*. Jubiläumsausgabe in 20 Bänden, ed. by Hermann Glockner. Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag 1928-41.)

² Hegel, *Encyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*. Heidelberg [1817] 1827, p. 8f. See *EL*, § 6; *Jub.*, vol. 8, p. 48. (*EL* = *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.)

³ See, for example, Rudolf Haym, *Hegel und seine Zeit. Vorlesungen über Entstehung und Entwicklung, Wesen und Werth der hegel'schen Philosophie*. Berlin 1857, pp. 357ff. See also Karl R. Popper, „What is Dialectic?” *Mind*, vol. 49, 1940, pp. 413ff. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy and its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1961, p. 702.

there is a distinction between, on the one hand, everything that exists, which includes the bad infinity of particularity, which may or may not display some rational element, and, on the other hand, genuine actuality, i.e., the elements in reality that are invested with some kind of logos. The latter is thus a subgroup of the former, and the two are not to be considered synonyms.

According to Hegel, for something to be *real*, it must display some element of the rational Idea. This is what Hegel means with the claim that the actual is the rational. If a thing does not show some such rationality, then it of course still exists, but it is simply not the object of scientific inquiry since the very goal of science is precisely to identify such rational elements. It is this Hegelian understanding of the concept of actuality that Kierkegaard seems not to have grasped. There are a couple of different anecdotes which illustrate this misunderstanding clearly.

Kierkegaard's dissertation advisor, the philosopher Frederik Christian Sibbern recalls how he met Kierkegaard one day in the street. This event presumably happened sometime during Kierkegaard's years as a student, although no exact date is given. Sibbern was one of Denmark's most distinguished philosophers at the time. He had met some of the most important figures in the German intellectual world, such as Schleiermacher, Fichte and Schelling, and thus he had an intimate familiarity with German philosophy. He can in many ways be seen as working within the general paradigm of German idealist thought, and thus to be using the term „actuality” in the manner of that tradition. In the anecdote in question, Sibbern recalls: „But I do remember, however, that once during his Hegelian period, he [Kierkegaard] met me at Gammeltovej [sc. the old market] and asked me what relationship obtained between philosophy and actuality [*Virkelighed*], which astonished me, because the gist of the whole of my philosophy was the study of life and actuality [*Virkelighed*].”⁴ For Sibbern it was an obvious point that philosophy is precisely a study of actuality, i.e., the rational elements of existence. But Kierkegaard's question seems to posit some kind of dichotomy, as if philosophy were concerned with abstractions that have nothing to do with the life and the world. Here Kierkegaard seems to understand „actuality” not in the technical philosophical sense but rather in the manner of common sense, i.e., simply as what exists, and this is why Sibbern does not understand the question.

A second anecdote comes from the time when Kierkegaard was in Berlin (from October 25, 1841 to March 6, 1842). As is well known, he made the trip, among other things, to attend Schelling's famous lectures. Letters to friends and family in Copenhagen indicate that the young Kierkegaard was fascinated by Schelling's initial lectures precisely because he intended to give an account of „actuality.” In one letter, he can hardly control his enthusiasm, writing,

I am so happy to have heard Schelling's second lecture--indescribably. I have been pining and thinking mournful thoughts long enough. The embryonic child of thought leapt within me...when he mentioned the word „actuality” in connection with the

⁴ H.P. Barfod (ed.), ”Indledende Notiser,” in his *Af Søren Kierkegaards Efterladte Papirer. 1833-1843*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag 1869, pp. lii-liii. In English in *Encounters with Kierkegaard. A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, trans. and ed. by Bruce H. Kirmmse. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, p. 217.

relation of philosophy to actuality. I remember almost every word he said after that. Here, perhaps, clarity can be achieved. This one word recalled all my philosophical pains and sufferings.⁵ This enthusiasm did not last long, and subsequent letters describe how Kierkegaard loses patience with both the lectures and Schelling himself. During the time when he was in Berlin attending these lectures, Kierkegaard was working on his first major pseudonymous work, *Either/Or*. In the first volume of that work, there is an interesting reference to the philosophical treatment of the term „actuality.” There one reads: „What philosophers say about actuality [*Virkelighed*] is often just as disappointing as it is when one reads on a sign in a second-hand shop: Pressing Done Here. If a person were to bring his clothes to be pressed, he would be duped, for the sign is merely for sale.”⁶ This statement lends itself to an autobiographical interpretation since Kierkegaard, who had such high hopes for Schelling and his promised treatment of actuality, felt quite disappointed or even cheated when that treatment was actually delivered.

It is odd that Kierkegaard, who was otherwise so interested in philosophy, failed to understand that the term „actuality” was a technical one in the idealist tradition. The question that I wish to raise in this essay is what do these misunderstandings tell us about Kierkegaard’s understanding of ethics? I ultimately wish to argue that they indicate that he has, even at a very early stage, a different conception of this category and subsequently of the relation of philosophy to life. I wish to argue that Kierkegaard does not share with Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and others the same general view of what ethics is. Whereas the tradition of German idealism understands philosophy as the analysis of abstract concepts and thus gives to epistemology a central position, Kierkegaard rejects this conception of philosophy as irrelevant and even obtuse. Kierkegaard rather follows the tradition of ancient philosophy conceived as *Lebensphilosophie*, which ascribes to ethics a role of centrality and conceives of it in a very specific manner.

I will try to argue that this difference between Kierkegaard and German idealism can be seen in many scattered passages from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), where it is claimed that the system, presumably Hegel’s philosophy, has no ethics.⁷ Kierkegaard has his pseudonyms make this criticism in a number of places, namely, in *Fear and Trembling* (1843),⁸ *Stages on Life’s Way* (1845),⁹ and in

⁵ Kierkegaard, *JP*, vol. 5, 5535; *SKS*, vol. 19, p. 235, Not8:33. (*JP* = *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, vols. 1-6, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press 1967-78. *SKS* = *Søren Kierkegaard’s Skrifter*, 28 text volumes and 28 commentary volumes, ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Jette Knudsen, Johnny Kondrup and Alastair McKinnon. Copenhagen: Gad Publishers 1997-.)

⁶ Kierkegaard, *EOI*, p. 32; *SKS*, vol. 2, p. 41. (*EOI* = *Either/Or 1*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987.)

⁷ Kierkegaard, *CUPI*, p. 119; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 115. *CUPI*, p. 121; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 116. *CUPI*, p. 133f.; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 125f. *CUPI*, p. 296fn.; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 270fn. *CUPI*, p. 307fn.; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 279fn. (*CUPI* = *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, vols. 1-2, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992, vol. 1.)

⁸ Kierkegaard, *FT*, p. 83; *SKS*, vol. 4, p. 173. (*FT* = *Fear and Trembling: Repetition*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1983.)

⁹ Kierkegaard, *SLW*, p. 231; *SKS*, vol. 6, p. 215. (*SLW* = *Stages on Life’s Way*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1988.)

the journals and notebooks.¹⁰ Further it appears in extended form in *The Book on Adler* (ca. 1846-47) where Kierkegaard criticizes Adler for mistakenly making use of Hegel's philosophy to guide his life morally.¹¹ The charge finds its most extended treatment in the *Postscript*, although even there, while the slogan that the system lacks an ethics appears with some frequency, there is very little by way of actual development of this criticism. Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Johannes Climacus does not develop this criticism in any detail, which makes it all the more enigmatic and in need of interpretation. I will argue that what lies behind this criticism is a specific conception of ethics which is at odds with that of Hegel and the rest of the nineteenth century.

I. HEGEL'S CONCEPTION OF ETHICS

Before the criticisms issued by Kierkegaard's pseudonyms can be properly evaluated, it will be necessary to come to terms in a very general way with Hegel's conception of ethics. According to Hegel, ideas about ethics and morality are not wholly random or irrational but rather they display a certain reason; thus, they are the proper object of scholarly investigation. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* from 1807 and the posthumously published *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel explores the different conceptions of ethics as they are manifested in specific historical communities, such as the Greeks and the Romans. In these works his understanding of ethics is primarily historical in the sense that he is interested in exploring how different ethical views arose, ran their course and later came to be rejected and disregarded. Hegel thus explores the inner contradictions of past societies in order to trace the course of the Idea through them. Seen in this fashion, his analysis aims to follow the development of the rational ideas of ethics as they evolved over the course of history in their connection with other elements of society, such as religion and government. For Hegel, these relations develop gradually and come to constitute the ethical life of a people. His thesis is that this development is dictated by the Idea of freedom which slowly emerges in human history. The goal of the philosopher is then to recognize the rational elements, which correspond to this idea, in existing reality. However, Hegel's conception of ethics is not a purely historical one.

The *Philosophy of Right* is Hegel's official statement about ethics. There he offers his own theory by means of a portrayal of the truly rational state. According to Hegel's holistic view, the ideas of ethics and morality that a people hold are necessarily bound up with a number of other beliefs and institutions. Thus, it is an error to attempt to understand ethics as an isolated element of a much larger whole. For this reason his

¹⁰ See *PF*, Supplement, p. 207; *Pap.* V B 41, p. 96. *JP*, vol. 2, 1611; *SKS*, vol. 20, p. 44, NB:42. *Pap.* VII-2 B 253, p. 162, p. 214f. *JP*, vol. 1, 654; *Pap.* VIII-2 B 86, p. 171f. (*PF* = *Philosophical Fragments; Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1985. *Pap.* = *Søren Kierkegaard's Papirer*, vols. 1-16, ed. by P.A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr and E. Torsting. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1909-48; supplemented by Niels Thulstrup. Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1968-78.)

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *A*, pp. 111-132; *Pap.* VII-2 B 235, pp. 198-217, passim. (*A* = *The Book on Adler*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998.)

Philosophy of Right is a theory not just about ethics, but also about the political order, work relations, familial relations, law, etc. In this work in contrast to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, he examines the idea of justice and „right” in a more abstract way, i.e., abstracted from the specific historical relations, which constitute the proper subject matter of the philosophy of history.

However, this is not to say that Hegel is building castles in the air or constructing some sort of utopia in the realm of the ideas. Hegel is himself highly critical of such attempts and insists that he is exploring the Idea in actuality, i.e., he is examining the rationality of existing ethical, political and legal relations. In fact, in both the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right*, he offers extended criticisms of Kant’s ethical theory as being overly abstract. He distinguished between *Sittlichkeit*, translated as „ethical life,” and *Moralität* in order to capture just this point. While Kant is concerned with *Moralität* in the abstract sense, apart from all other considerations, Hegel’s theory is one about *Sittlichkeit* since it takes into account the manifold of other relevant societal factors in its consideration of ethics.¹²

Thus, it seems that Hegel issued various statements about ethics in his philosophy, and, moreover, if one takes the *Philosophy of Right* to be his official view, then ethics clearly constitutes a part of his philosophical system, i.e., the section entitled „Objective Mind” from the *Encyclopaedia*. Hegel says this directly in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, where he writes, „This textbook is a more extensive, and in particular a more systematic, exposition of some of the basic concepts which, in relation to this part of philosophy, are already contained in a previous work designed to accompany my lectures, namely my *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (Heidelberg, 1817).”¹³ What Hegel means by this is clear when one examines the table of contents to the *Encyclopaedia*. The third part of that work, the „Philosophy of Spirit” or „Mind” is subdivided into three parts, namely „Subjective Mind,” „Objective Mind,” and „Absolute Mind.” The first part treats the fields of philosophical psychology and anthropology, and has as its subject matter the individual human being. The second part, „Objective Mind” corresponds to the material treated in the *Philosophy of Right*, the two works containing a virtually identical organization of the subject matter. Finally, the third part of the *Encyclopaedia* is dedicated to „Absolute Mind,” which contains a treatment of spirit in its highest forms: art, religion and philosophy. Given this, it is hard to make sense of the charge that Hegel has forgotten to include an ethics in his system, for indeed he has treated ethics once in the third volume of the *Encyclopaedia* and more extensively in the *Philosophy of Right*. Moreover, both treatments occupy a specific place and thereby play a substantive role in Hegel’s philosophical system as a whole.

¹² Hegel, *PR*, § 33, Remark; *Jub.*, vol. 7, p. 85: ” ’Morality’ [*Moralität*] and ’ethics’ [*Sittlichkeit*], which are usually regarded as roughly synonymous, are taken here in essentially distinct senses. Yet even representational thought seems to distinguish them; Kantian usage prefers the expression ’morality,’ as indeed the practical principles of Kant’s philosophy are confined throughout to this concept, even rendering the point of view of *ethics* impossible and in fact expressly infringing and destroying it.” Translation slightly modified.

¹³ Hegel, *PR*, Preface, p. 9; *Jub.*, vol. 7, p. 19.

II. THE CHARGE THAT THE SYSTEM LACKS AN ETHICS

The charge that Hegel's system lacks an ethics is one that appears in a handful of different works.

The criticism, if not the formulation itself, appears as early as *Either/Or*. There Kierkegaard has Judge Wilhelm say the following:

The philosopher declares: „This is the way it was up until now.” I ask: „What am I supposed to do if I do not want to be a philosopher,” for if I want to be a philosopher, I am well aware that I, like other philosophers, will have to mediate the past. For one thing, this is no answer to my question „What am I supposed to do?” for even if I had the most brilliant philosophic mind there ever was, there must be something more I have to do besides sitting and contemplating the past.¹⁴

This seems to contain a criticism of Hegel's philosophy since it seems to encourage people to meditate on the past in order to understand the development of the Idea in history. While this may be interesting and insightful with regard to one's understanding of the Greek or Roman world, it cannot offer any insight into the ethical problems that one faces today. Thus, the point of Judge Wilhelm's criticism seems to be that this historical approach to ethics is ultimately unsatisfying since it leaves the central ethical issues untouched. Moreover, it is pernicious since it deceptively gives young people the impression that they are concerned with ethical matters, whereas in fact it distracts them from genuine ethical considerations. Thus, while the formulation that Hegel's system lacks an ethics does not yet appear here, the idea nonetheless seems to be present.

The formulation itself appears for the first time in *Fear and Trembling*, although Hegel's name is not associated with it. There Kierkegaard has his pseudonym write the following: „Accordingly, this examination must constantly wander into the territory of ethics, while in order to be of consequence it must seize the problem with aesthetic fervor and desire. These days, ethics rarely involves itself with a question like this. The reason must be that the system has no room for it.”¹⁵ Instead of referring to Hegel directly, reference is made to philosophical investigations „these days,” at a time when Hegel's philosophy was still quite popular. The statement taken on its own is rather cryptic, but once again the general point seems to be that there is something fundamentally lacking in then current considerations of ethics. The last sentence about the system having no room for ethics seems to be ironic and critical. This criticism is not elaborated on in *Fear and Trembling*.

It does, however, appear again in *Stages on Life's Way*, where Kierkegaard writes, „Basically, it is easy enough except for someone who has been lent the helping hand...of the system and thereby in turn the beggar's staff. Only if one is so circumspect as to want

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *EO2*, p. 171; *SKS*, vol. 3, p. 167. Translation slightly modified. (*EO2* = *Either/Or 2*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987.)

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *FT*, p. 83; *SKS*, vol. 4, p. 173.

to construct a system without including ethics does it work; then one obtains a system in which one has everything, everything else, and has omitted the one thing needful.”¹⁶ Here the ironic criticism is repeated. One ostensibly receives help from the system, but the system does not provide what is most urgent, namely a satisfactory account of ethics. It forgets precisely what is the most important thing, while it nonetheless has the pretension to regard itself as a complete system.

The most detailed presentation of this criticism comes in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Here it is explicitly associated with Hegel himself. In one passage, Kierkegaard seems to allude to the comments of his previous pseudonym, either in *Fear and Trembling* or *Stages on Life's Way*. He writes, „certainly everyone will also perceive that what another author has observed regarding the Hegelian system is entirely in order: that through Hegel a system, the absolute system, was brought to completion--without having an ethics.”¹⁷ Here Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus ironically notes that Hegel had the presumption to set forth a complete philosophical system but yet forgot to include an ethics, one of the traditional fields of philosophical inquiry. The irony lies in the idea of a *completed* system which lacks such an essential element. Such an omission would seem to be an egregious oversight.

From here it is only a short step to the charge that Hegel and his followers are absentminded since they forgot ethics. Kierkegaard continues, „Whereas the Hegelian system in absentmindedness goes ahead and becomes a system of existence, and what is more, is finished--without having an ethics (the very home of existence), the other simpler philosophy, presented by an existing individual for existing individuals, is especially intent upon advancing the ethical.”¹⁸ Here Hegel's philosophy with its mistaken treatment of ethics is contrasted with another, unnamed philosophy which is genuinely concerned with the ethical. There are other passages in the *Postscript* where this criticism appears,¹⁹ but they do not really say much more than the ones presented here. Indeed, the criticism itself seems almost to be a formulaic one-liner and not a developed philosophical critique.

Nonetheless a serious problem remains. Why does Kierkegaard insist that Hegel had no ethics? Hegel apologists are quick to respond that Kierkegaard must have simply been misguided on this point since, as one can see from the very existence of the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel did indeed have an ethics, and moreover, it was a substantive part of his philosophical system. Thus, when Kierkegaard claims, to the contrary, that Hegel had no ethics or that he forgot to include ethics in the system, then he is quite simply wrong and must have been wholly ignorant of Hegel's writings. This response, however, does not solve any of the interpretive problems but rather makes them more acute. Indeed, we know that Kierkegaard knew of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and the account of

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *SLW*, p. 231; *SKS*, vol. 6, p. 216.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *CUPI*, p. 119; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 115.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *CUPI*, p. 121; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 116.

¹⁹ E.g. *CUPI*, p. 296fn.; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 270fn.: "Hegelian philosophy culminates in the thesis that the outer is the inner and the inner is the outer. With this, Hegel has finished. But this principle is essentially an aesthetic-metaphysical principle, and in this way Hegelian philosophy is happily and safely finished without having anything to do with the ethical and the religious." See *CUPI*, p. 307fn.; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 279fn.

ethics that appears there. In fact, he quotes from the *Philosophy of Right* directly in *The Concept of Irony*,²⁰ and he alludes to the section „The Good and Conscience” from it in *Fear and Trembling*²¹ and *Practice in Christianity*.²² Thus, given that he knew of this work, why does he nonetheless persist in claiming that Hegel has no ethics?

III. THE META-ETHICAL ISSUE

This discussion points to a much larger meta-ethical issue, which I wish to argue lies at the bottom of the criticism. The question seems to turn on what an ethical theory in general is and can reasonably be expected to do. On this point, it seems that Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms have a radically different view from most of his early nineteenth century contemporaries. For Kierkegaard, ethics seems to have something to do with the individual in a way that is not reducible to a scientific explanation.

One negative aspect of this conception of ethics as „existential” is the rejection of all attempts to ground ethical action in rationality. For Climacus, every attempt to justify a given action must necessarily fail since there is always a gap between the reasons and arguments given for an act and the demands of morality. This gap can only be spanned by a free decision of the individual. Climacus distinguishes between the realm of science, which he refers to as „objective thinking,” characterized by a concern for evidence, justification and discursive reason, and the realm of religious belief and ethics or „subjective thinking,” which is the sphere of individual choice. While objective thinking is appropriate for the subject matter of science, it is a misunderstanding to apply it to the objects of religious belief or ethics. No degree of rigorous logic or scientific knowledge can ever prove or disprove the existence of God to the individual. Likewise, no degree of objective knowledge can determine exactly what the morally correct action would be in the individual case. The objects of subjective thinking do not lend themselves to quantifiability or precision in the way that the former do. Objects of subjective thinking can never display a degree of certitude but remain a matter of individual disposition. The realm of objectivity is the realm of necessity, whereas that of subjectivity is the sphere of human freedom. Climacus’ main criticism seems to be of people who use the methods of objective thinking in order to justify their beliefs or actions, i.e., things which properly belong to the other sphere. He regards it as a misapplication and a straightforward illusion to make such attempts at justification.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *CI*, p. 162; *SKS*, vol. 1, p. 211f. *CI*, p. 227f.; *SKS*, vol. 1, p. 270f. (*CI* = *The Concept of Irony*; Schelling *Lecture Notes*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989.)

²¹ Kierkegaard, *FT*, p. 54; *SKS*, vol. 4, pp. 148-149: “If this is the case, then Hegel is right in ‘The Good and Conscience,’ where he defines man only as a ‘moral form of evil’ (see especially *The Philosophy of Right*), which must be annulled [*ophævet*] in the teleology of the moral in such a way that the single individual who remains in that stage either sins or is immersed in spiritual trial.” Translation slightly modified.

²² Kierkegaard, *PC*, p. 87; *SVI*, vol. 12, p. 83: “Why has Hegel made conscience and the state of conscience in the single individual ‘a form of evil’ (see *The Philosophy of Right*).” Translation slightly modified. (*PC* = *Practice in Christianity*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1991. *SVI* = *Samlede Værker*, first edition, vols. 1-14, ed. by A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg, and H.O. Lange. Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1901-1906.)

By distinguishing the realm of the objective from that of the subjective, and by rejecting the former with its appeal of rationality, Climacus simultaneously rejects Hegel's conception of ethics along with that of the rest of the tradition of ethical thought at the time; this is thus clear indication that he has a completely different conception of ethics. For Hegel, Kierkegaard's conception of being aware of one's existence may be valid in and of itself, but it is not and cannot be the object of scholarly inquiry or what Hegel calls „science.” Science in its different spheres attempts to examine the Idea which is universal, but it would be absurd to try to apply this to one's own existence or self-understanding, which by its very nature is particular. Thus, when Climacus says that Hegel has no ethics, he is not denying that Hegel had a theory of ethics in the *Philosophy of Right*, but instead he is indicating that Hegel did not give an account of the individual, *qua* individual, in that person's self-relation or existence. This, however, clearly falls outside the realm of science for Hegel.

There seem to be at least two identifiable strands of the criticism of Hegel's system for lacking an ethics. (1) The first strand is that Hegel is simply absentminded since he has forgotten to include ethics in his system. This seems to be the most straightforward interpretation. (2) The second strand is that Hegel is misguided since, so obsessed with tracing the Idea in history and thus understanding ethics as an historical phenomenon, he has forgotten what a true account of ethics amounts to. According to this interpretation, Hegel is guilty not because he fails to include ethics in his system but rather precisely because he *does* include ethics in the system and thus mistakenly applies an objective, scientific account to an object from the sphere of subjectivity. Thus, he distorts the nature of the subject matter and turns it into something different, which is fundamentally foreign to its nature.

With this way of understanding the criticism, Hegel is condemned if he does include ethics in the system and condemned if he does not. To include ethics in the system is to make ethics into something that it is not and to confuse the spheres of the subjective and the objective; but not to include ethics in the system would amount to simple absentmindedness. If it is in principle impossible for Hegel to escape these criticisms, regardless of how he could respond, then this can be taken as indication that there is something fundamentally wrong with the criticisms.

Indeed, the two interpretations or aspects of the criticism are in a sense incompatible. If the second interpretation is correct, then it contradicts the first one since if ethics is in fact something that belongs to the realm of subjectivity, then there would be no reason to expect Hegel or anyone else to include it in a philosophical system. Thus, if the system were lacking an ethics, then this would be a positive sign that the system had recognized its proper limits and remained within its province. This should then be made the object of praise and not criticism.

If we then reject the first interpretation of the criticism as untenable, then there remains the second interpretation, which seems to be Kierkegaard's stronger case. However, this understanding makes the criticism question-begging since it presupposes a certain conception of ethics, which it has not argued for. In other words, when it is claimed that Hegel's system has no ethics, the charge is that it has no ethics in Kierkegaard's sense. But what is Kierkegaard's conception of ethics?

IV. KIERKEGAARD'S ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTION OF ETHICS

This foregoing analysis has made quite clear the fact that Kierkegaard and Hegel have completely different conceptions of ethics generally. While Hegel conceives of ethics as a part of science and thus as a specific abstract subject matter which displays the Idea, Kierkegaard conceives of it in a much less academic sense as a kind of philosophy of life. I now want to try to sketch more precisely what Kierkegaard's conception of ethics as *Lebensphilosophie* amounts to. With this account, I in no way wish to imply that Kierkegaard had anything resembling what we might consider a fully developed ethical theory in the way that we would think of such a theory today. The various scattered remarks that he makes about ethics throughout his authorship might give some of the building blocks for a reconstruction of such a theory, but in themselves they remain scattered remarks. Instead of making any strong claim about Kierkegaard's ethical theory as such, I wish simply to identify one aspect of Kierkegaard's positive ethical view.

Kierkegaard's conception of philosophy resembles what is sometimes called *Lebensphilosophie* or philosophy of life. His conception has much in common with ancient philosophy, specifically the schools of Stoicism, Epicureanism and Skepticism. For these schools, a theoretical representation of external reality was always secondary or subordinate to what one might call the fundamental questions of the good life. While this conception of philosophy was characteristic for much of ancient Greek and Roman thought, it has generally disappeared from mainstream modern philosophy, where it has been replaced by conceptual analysis, which is interested in knowledge or a veridical picture of reality for its own sake. That Kierkegaard understands philosophy as *Lebensphilosophie* and thus has more in common with the ancients than with modern philosophers is evidenced by a number of things.

Kierkegaard's long fascination with the figure of Socrates provides clear evidence of a different conception of ethics than that found in the work of modern philosophers. As Himmelstrup's still standard study has demonstrated, Kierkegaard made use of Socrates in a number of different works and, moreover, seemed to use him as a personal model for his own life.²³ The clearest proof for this can be found in *The Moment* where Kierkegaard at the end of his life, writes the following about himself and Socrates: „The only analogy I have before me is Socrates; my task is a Socratic task, to audit the definition of what it is to be a Christian--I do not call myself a Christian (keeping the ideal free), but I can make it manifest that the others are even less so.”²⁴ Here he sees himself as the Socrates of Copenhagen, who rebukes the Christian sophists for their unreflective and misguided views of Christianity.

Further, Kierkegaard seems to have consciously tried to follow Socrates' practice of philosophizing on the streets with the common people. He was known by everyone in Copenhagen for his daily walks around the city, where he would often

²³ See Jens Himmelstrup, *Søren Kierkegaards Opfattelse af Sokrates*. Copenhagen: Arnold Busck 1924.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *M*, p. 341; *SVI*, vol. 14, p. 352. (*M* = *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998.)

be seen speaking at length with different people from all walks of life. In *Prefaces*, Kierkegaard has his pseudonym refer to this aspect of Socrates' life as follows:

The beautiful Greek scholarship...is so very beneficial to engage in... because it did not abandon people for the purpose of sounding like a voice from the clouds but remained on the earth, in the marketplace, among the occupations of people, something that was understood particularly by that man who gave up art, gave up the fathoming of physical things, and then began to philosophize in the workshops and in the marketplace.²⁵

The contrast here between Greek philosophy and the object of the criticism, namely modern philosophy, is what is important. Just as Socrates philosophized „in the workshops and in the marketplace,” so also ancient Greek philosophy in general kept focused on the true problems of existence and thereby philosophy. By contrast, modern philosophy has become something abstracted from life and as a result has come to treat pseudoproblems that have nothing to do with the things that are most important.

This provides the context for his frequent criticism of the professional philosopher or the *Privatdocent*. Kierkegaard constantly criticized those who held university positions and, to his mind, thereby betrayed the true nature of philosophy. By contrast, his model, Socrates, insisted that he never taught anyone anything and therefore never demanded a fee for teaching. The university philosophers are, for Kierkegaard, the modern sophists. When philosophy becomes a professional discipline, it becomes more and more specialized, taking on its own technical problems and vocabulary. But by doing so, philosophy comes to distance itself from daily life, and in a sense comes to deal with pseudoproblems of its own making instead of the real problems of life and existence. Thus, Kierkegaard criticizes abstract theories of ethics, which fail to treat the real ethical questions of the finite, sinful individual.

Another indication that Kierkegaard conceives of philosophy as a philosophy of life lies in his moralism. Like the ancient Stoics, Kierkegaard assumes a moral tone and exposes to public criticism individuals or generalized figures, who do not match up to his conception of New Testament Christianity. Perhaps the most obvious example is his denunciation of the corruption of the priesthood as public officials in his attack on the Church. In addition, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he also criticizes the teachers of Hegel's philosophy for playing tricks on people,²⁶ leading the youth astray and making them forget their true ethical obligations.²⁷ This kind of moralizing corresponds well to that of the ancients, who likewise presented idealized examples of vice for moral criticism. This kind of moralism or social satire differs markedly from a moral or ethical theory in the modern sense. While the goal of the ancients was to improve the moral character of the individual, the goal of the moderns is to come up with a consistent principle from which a reasoned theory of ethics will issue.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *P*, pp. 41-42; *SKS*, vol. 4, p. 503. See also *PF*, p. 11; *SKS*, vol. 4, p. 220. (*P* = *Prefaces*, trans. by Todd W. Nichol. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998.)

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *CUPI*, p. 113f.; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 110f.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *CUPI*, p. 118; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 114. *CUPI*, p. 134; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 125f.

Kierkegaard's conception of ethics is thus one that places him squarely in the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie*.

There are a couple of places where Kierkegaard makes explicit his preference for ancient Greek philosophy in contrast to modern philosophy. For example, in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* he writes, „If in our own day thinking had not become something strange, something second-hand, thinkers would indeed make a totally different impression on people, as was the case in Greece, where a thinker was also an ardent existing person impassioned by his thinking.”²⁸ Here one sees precisely the criticism that the modern philosopher has forgotten the most important issues of existence and has thereby lost all passion. By contrast, the ancient Greek philosophers, even if they were not Christian, nonetheless were focused on what was genuinely important. Kierkegaard lauds their authenticity in their ethical project, despite the fact that some of the ancient Greek philosophers portrayed by Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (which was one of Kierkegaard's favorite books), were rather odd and idiosyncratic characters. Despite the oddness of their doctrines and lives, they were passionate about the genuine issues of existence and were willing to live their lives in accordance with their beliefs. Again in contrast to modern philosophy, „In Greece, however, attention was paid to what it means to exist.”²⁹ By this, Kierkegaard seems to mean to keep in focus one's finitude and mortality, which modern philosophy, in his view, forgets.

Given all this, it seems undeniable that Kierkegaard wanted to emulate some aspects of ancient Greek thought with respect to ethics and that Socrates provided him with a model for this. It will be noted that this is less an academic enterprise than a question of living. Many of the ancient Greek philosophers never wrote anything. Their philosophy was conceived simply as a way of living. Although Kierkegaard was himself a prolific writer, he was nevertheless sympathetic to this view as is evidenced by his consistently critical comments about academic philosophy and their overly abstract or subtle concepts. This was already noted by one of Kierkegaard's contemporaries, Hans Friedrich Helweg. In an article from immediately after Kierkegaard's death in 1855, Helweg gives an account of the history of Danish Hegelianism, in which several pages are dedicated to Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony*. There Helweg astutely remarks that this was not an ordinary dissertation. It differed markedly from a standard academic work at the time. Helweg writes, „For the members of the Faculty of Philosophy, who were supposed to judge the work, hardly suspected that in this effort of a young author they had not so much a qualification for the degree of Magister but a program for life,

²⁸ Kierkegaard, *CUPI*, p. 308; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 280. Cf. also Kierkegaard, *CUPI*, p. 309; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 281. *CUPI*, p. 311; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 283: "Existing, if this is not to be understood as just any sort of existing, cannot be done without passion. Therefore, every Greek thinker was essentially also a passionate thinker."

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *CUPI*, p. 318; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 289. Cf. also *CUP*, p. 352; *SKS*, vol. 7, p. 322: "To understand oneself in existence was the Greek principle, and however little substance a Greek philosopher's teaching sometimes had, the philosopher had one advantage: he was never comic. I am well aware that if anyone nowadays were to live as a Greek philosopher, that is, would existentially express what he would have to call his life-view, be existentially absorbed in it, he would be regarded as lunatic. Be that as it may. But to be ingenious and more ingenious and extremely ingenious, and so ingenious that it never occurs to the most honored philosopher, who is nevertheless speculating upon existence-issues (for example, Christianity) to whom in all the world this could pertain, least of all as it pertains to himself--this I find to be ludicrous."

that here it was not a matter of giving a solution to an academic problem but of a *task of life*.³⁰ Helweg quotes from the *Concept of Irony* itself: „If our generation has any task at all, it must be to translate the achievement of scientific scholarship into personal life, to appropriate it personally.”³¹ Given this, it would probably be a mistake to expect Kierkegaard to provide an extended ethical theory as such.

When Kierkegaard criticizes Hegel for having no ethics, it is clear that he understands ethics as something different from Hegel and other modern ethical theorists such as Kant and Mill. He understands ethics rather as the ancients understood it, i.e., as a way of living. Seen in this manner, Kierkegaard appears as a reactionary or an anachronism in modern philosophy which he regards as being corrupt and having missed the point of what true philosophy is about, i.e., how to live one’s life. There is therefore something odd about Kierkegaard’s role in the history of nineteenth century ethics since he in fact is not interested in ethics in the way in which Hegel, Marx, Comte, Mill and others from the same period are.

One might find this view sympathetic in its criticism of overly abstract philosophical systems; however, upon closer examination, it is not clear that this view ultimately solves any of the philosophical problems. Any theory of ethics must have both a theoretical and a practical aspect. On the one hand, any given theory must lend itself to being applied in practice, and any theory that cannot be so applied can be rightly criticized as being overly abstract. On the other hand, however, any given ethical action must also be informed by some ostensible ethical principle. No one would accept someone committing outrageous crimes without so much as wasting a word to attempt to justify the actions theoretically. Thus, there is a dialectic of theory and practice in all ethical thought. To be sure, theory must be informed by practice and the real world, but so also practice must be informed by theory. It is not clear that Kierkegaard’s considerations have done much to resolve this dialectic if his rejection of Hegel’s ethical theory amounts to simply a rejection of all theory as such.

Let us now return to the two anecdotes that we began with about Kierkegaard’s misunderstanding of the category of actuality. This misunderstanding seems to indicate that Kierkegaard, already at an early stage, had developed a conception of philosophy fundamentally different from the one then reigning in Denmark and the German states at the time. His model for this conception comes primarily from Socrates and ancient Greek philosophy. He thus understands „actuality” as something immediately concerned with one’s own individual existence. But this is question-begging since it assumes a more common sense understanding of this term that is in accordance with a philosophy of life, and thus wholly forgets the philosophical tradition within which both Schelling and Hegel are working. While Schelling and Hegel are interested in the conceptual use of these terms in logic and metaphysics, Kierkegaard sees them above all in relation to life.

The misunderstanding lies simply in the fact that Kierkegaard had already

³⁰ Hans Friedrich Helweg ”Hegelianismen i Danmark,” *Dansk Kierketidende*, vol. 10, no. 51, December 16, 1855, p. 830.

³¹ Kierkegaard, *CI*, p. 328; *SKS*, vol. 1, p. 356.

presupposed a certain conception of the word „actuality,” which was key to his own existential project. He was then disappointed with the accounts of this term that philosophers gave since they turned this term into a technical one, which seemed in many ways to abstract it from the concrete facts of one’s individual existence. One can thus imagine the young Kierkegaard in Berlin attentively listening to Schelling’s lectures when he heard the word „actuality” mentioned. It was already then a key term for him, and he fully expected that Schelling would go on to develop it in his existential direction. When this did not happen, then Kierkegaard became disappointed. Likewise, when he found Sibbern’s philosophy too abstract and removed from daily life, he asked what the relation of that philosophy was to actuality. But Kierkegaard’s disappointment with both Sibbern and Schelling was predetermined by his own conception of the term and ultimately had little to do with their thought as such since they were both simply following the standard philosophical usage of the word at the time. Thus, these anecdotes can be explained in a way that makes Kierkegaard’s relation to the rest of the early nineteenth century more clear and at the same time much more problematic.