

## KIERKEGAARD'S ETHICAL STAGE IN HEGEL'S LOGICAL CATEGORIES: ACTUAL POSSIBILITY, REALITY AND NECESSITY

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**ABSTRACT:** During decades, the history of philosophy has kept Kierkegaard's and Hegel's thought apart, and their long-standing opposition has swept through the speculative greatness of Kierkegaardian existentialism and the existential power of Hegelian philosophy. In contrast to such unfortunate misinterpretation, this article aims at showing the deep convergence that relates interiorly the Kierkegaardian ethical stage with the most important Hegelian logic categories. Kierkegaard and Hegel conceive of the idea as the real power of subjective becoming, and the existence as the actual concretion of the ideal. To both of them, the pure *enérgeia* of freedom, which starts in the abstract and aesthetical possibility of the subjective immediacy, realizes itself as the actual concretion of finitude, assuming time and contingency by the eternal and necessary force of duty. The Kierkegaardian repetition is nothing but this powerful idea, mediating the flux of finite differences in the eternal identity of subject. However, for Kierkegaard as well as for Hegel there is an absolute contradiction, which promotes the overcoming of ethics.

**KEYWORDS:** Kierkegaard; Hegel; Ethics; Idea; Possibility; Subjectivity; Decision; Duty

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Søren Kierkegaard has interpreted singular existence through the scheme of a triadic dialectic, represented by the three stages of existence: aesthetical, ethical and religious. Each of these stages represents an ascent in subjective becoming verified by a growing differentiation and unification of the self with the world, with itself, and finally with God. Along this ascent, the preceding stage subsists in the following one through a sort of transfiguration or transubstantiation that transcends it without destroying it. More precisely, each of the stages manifests the truth contained *an-sich* in the preceding one around a circular return to the origin, where the point of departure presupposes the totality of development and the arrival point confirms what is eternally stated.

According to this interpretation, the ethical stage represents an intermediary between the aesthetic and the religious ones. This intermediate position has been defined in *Journals and Papers* as 'the dialectical' (Pap I A 239/JP2 1676)<sup>1</sup> between the quiet im-

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1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Papirer*, P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr and E. Torsting (eds.), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 20 vols., København, Gyldendalske Boghandel Nordisk Forlag, 1909-1948 (henceforth Pap, superscript

mediacy of the aesthetics and the reconciling unity of the religious stage. However, the limits and characteristics of this triadic schema may often seem ambiguous and even equivocal. As a matter of fact, Kierkegaard occasionally mentions four stages, and sometimes only two; at times, he opposes ethicalness to religiousness, and at other times he unifies them into a unique ethical-religious stage. According to this ambiguity, we should mention not just one but several meanings of ethics. We nevertheless believe that, if we maintain the triadic structure from which Kierkegaard has interpreted singular existence and we assume the mediating position of ethics, we will be able to reach the speculative core that defines that stage and places it within the schema as a properly dialectical instance of subjective becoming.

G.W.F. Hegel's philosophy also describes a spiritual ascent, dialectically deployed through differentiation and reunification of an absolute subject. As in Kierkegaard, Hegelian thought is founded on an actual inward deepening process, progressing through the reflection of the spirit and ending in self-affirmation, mediated by absolute otherness. In both cases, the self-consciousness must experience its own inner negation, the rending of its inwardness, in order to reach its essential identity.

The following paragraphs aim at showing some logical coincidences between Kierkegaard's existential thought and Hegel's speculative philosophy. In this case, they will circumscribe themselves to Kierkegaard's ethical stage, trying to detect in it the concepts shared with the systematic German philosopher. In this way, I intend to show how 'Hegel has represented one of Kierkegaard's most important sources of inspiration in the development of the stage theory'<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. ACTUAL IDEALITY AND POSSIBILITY: INTRINSIC BECOMING OF THE SELF

The second part of *Either/Or* is doubtless an exemplary text for the study of Kierkegaard's ethical stage. Ethical subjectivity is generally defined in it as the absolute affirmation of the self by itself through the action of its freedom. While the aesthete maintains his subjectivity in the abstraction of a formally ideal possibility, the ethicist states his possible idea as the effective actuality of a self, at the same time eternal and temporal, finite and infinite. He thus becomes a concrete subject, whose temporal course becomes history and whose factual externality becomes his own intimacy.

From a metaphysical point of view, the becoming of the merely formal or abstract idea into actual or effective ideality indicates an intensification or potentiation of the possible, through which the full actuality of the spirit becomes manifest. Ever since his dissertation, Kierkegaard believed that the idea is concrete in itself, then it is necessary for it to become constantly concrete and thus for him 'in the highest sense motion is the movement of the ideal' (Pap X<sup>3</sup> A 524/JP2 1790). In opposition to the abstract being of immediacy and to the arbitrary becoming of the aesthete is true ideal becoming,

indicates the sub-volume). cf. also *Journals and Papers*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols., Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1967-78 (henceforth JP).

2. Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 231.

through which the essential concretion of the self is revealed.

The intrinsic concretion of the idea constitutes its latent actuality, which necessarily becomes manifest in the finite and the temporal as the intelligible power of the self or as the powerful intelligibility of facts. Because the idea is concrete, its possibility is in itself an *infinitum actu* or an *enérgeia*, capable of deploying the whole concrete content of subjective actuality. The *Concept of Anxiety* refers to this when it states that ‘possibility is to be able’ (SV<sup>2</sup> IV 354/KW VIII 49)<sup>3</sup> not mere passiveness or privation but, on the contrary, the intensive vitality and the *nisus formativus* of the actual. Through this ‘idea-strength’ (Pap XI<sup>1</sup> A 337/JP<sub>2</sub> 1806), subjectivity reaches existence as a free and conscious development of its ideal essence and the essence exists as deployed concretion. This synthesis of ideality and actuality allows Kierkegaard to state that, in the ethical domain, ‘the true ideal is always the actual’ (SV<sup>2</sup> II 227/KW IV 210), because it exercises its power over the finite by revealing itself in it as an essential foundation.

Human action is then the action of the ideal, in which the spirit’s eternal power reveals itself through the temporal and contingent particularity contained in it as its own identity. What is reached by the aesthete as an abstract and formally possible infinitude, full of fantasies but impotent, is stated by the ethicist as a power of actuality, permeated with content. Hence for Kierkegaard, ‘the more significant an individual is, the easier he will find actuality to be, the more difficult he will find possibility. This is the expression of an ethical view’ (Pap IV A 35/JP<sub>3</sub> 3340). The huge weight of the possible is due to its actual potency, through which the spirit supports the entire universe. The aesthetic possibility is much lighter in comparison, because it does not bear the weight of the actual.

In synthesis, the effective manifestation of the ideal constitutes the ethical task, whose necessity is not extrinsically imposed onto the self but urges it inwardly, as becoming for itself of what is already in itself. The central determination of ethics lies in this conversion of the ideal into the actual that is equally the conversion of the actual into the ideal. Hence Kierkegaard’s answer to the question: ‘what is then actuality? It is ideality’ (SV<sup>2</sup> VII 313/KW XII 325). But for the ideal and the actual to converge into the one and the same, subjectivity must achieve its potentiation, its own intensification able to deploy the intimacy of facts as well as to deploy itself in factual externality.

The becoming of the ideal into the actual, of the possible into power, describes thus an immanent and circular dynamism, in which what is stated is presupposed in its own positing, and in which the positing resumes the original and eternal foundation of the self. Ethical subjectivity rests wholly upon this immanent and circular dynamism having in itself its own teleology, that is to say, the law of a movement inwardly oriented as a return to a foundation affirmed by it. The ethical is then the affirmation of the self by itself, and the self is thus the absolute, as a result of a process that goes back to itself. Be-

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3. cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Samlede Værker*, A. B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg and H. O. Lange (eds.), 15 vols., Gyldendalske Boghandel Nordisk Forlag, København, 1920-1936 (henceforth SV, superscript indicatinon the edition). cf. Also Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 24 vols., Princeton University Press, 1978-98 (henceforth KW).

cause ‘every step forward toward the ideal is a backward step’ (Pap X<sup>3</sup> A 509/JP2 1789), ethical subjectivity goes back to the origin.

According to Hegel, the idea also presents itself as ‘the absolutely active and at the same time actual’ (EL § 142)<sup>4</sup>, on which the subject’s intimate constitution depends. Precisely because the idea is in-itself *potentia, infinitum actu*, it contains the moment of its own actuality as the necessary return of the possible to the intrinsic unity of the absolute. The possibility of the ideal—that on the merely formal level represents an empty and tautological abstraction—is really affirmed as potency in actual effectiveness, through which it mediates with itself.

From a logical point of view, this reintegration of the idea to its own power is expressed in the category of the *essence* as an identity that is self-reflected by the effective manifestation or externalization of itself. What Hegel calls actuality, effectiveness or reality (*Wirklichkeit*) consists in the revealing process of the same and only ideal act that presupposes itself, is mediated in the other, and finally reconciles essence and existence, reflection and immediacy, the inner and the external, in its original unity. The actual is for Hegel this effectualness or realization, operated through an essential *enérgeia* deployed as posited being. The generating core of this essential process resides in the idea of power determining the substance as the ultimate unity of essence and being. Substance is the essence affirmed as absolute potency and creative potency, reflected in itself to return from its own positing.

What in logical terms is defined as the return of essence on itself, is expressed in Hegel’s philosophy of the mind as the becoming of freedom seeking recognition and having itself as subject and object, form and content of its action. When consciousness reaches authentic freedom, ‘it is itself this actual idea in itself’ (PR § 22)<sup>5</sup>. Free subjectivity, affirmed in the infinite actuality of the idea, discovers its substance as both the cause and the foundation of its immanent intelligibility.

Whereas immediate aesthetic individuality is determined by an arbitrary and extrinsic content, concrete ethical subjectivity is determined by ‘the activity of developing the idea and positing the content as existence, which insofar as it is existence of the idea is actuality’ (EL § 482). Concrete existence thus contains the idea as its own fulfilling becoming and, in it, arbitrary will is subordinated to a superior dynamism. The development of the idea, that is in truth the development of existence itself, traces the perfect circularity of a road that goes back on itself with each step forward.

In sum, both Hegel and Kierkegaard believe that from the possible to the actual there is a reflexive internalization process, through which the ideal communicates its power to what exists and what exists manifests the absolute actuality that supports it. This intrinsic becoming of the self is in both cases the work of freedom seeking itself. Ethical subjectivity guarantees the concretion of what the idea is in itself and its own

4. G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus (eds.), vols. 8-10, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969 (henceforth EL).

5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus (eds.), vol. 7, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969 (henceforth PR).

actuality is guaranteed in the idea. This process being a free one, the strength of its actuality lies in decision.

### 3. RESOLUTION AS AFFIRMATION OF IDENTITY

When the Stages on Life's Way states that 'a person's total ideality lies first and last in resolution' (SV<sup>2</sup> VI 119/KW XI 108), they are expressing the intelligible power of freedom, revealed in the concrete action of the self. Resolution concentrates or intensifies to the infinite its own spiritual energy, so that the idea exists there as an actual effectiveness of finitude and the finite exists in it as fulfilled subjectivity. Resolution or decision is thus the primordial category of the ethical stage, as it determines the ideal as the actual and affirms the possible as effective power. In this sense, we must not confuse ethical decision with the aesthete's arbitrary elections determined by finite and temporal objects. On the contrary, the object of resolution is the subject itself, who turns reflectively back on itself to be asserted in its eternal and infinite validity through the mediation of the finite and temporal.

For ethical subjectivity there is only one possibility: its own self, externalized in its concrete situation and at the same time internalized in it. It chooses itself such as it is and in accordance to the conditions of its existence. Its freedom does not oscillate between abstract alternatives but is totally concentrated on the reflexive assumption of its being and its circumstances as the unique possibility of reconciliation. Kierkegaard states clearly that through decision 'the spirit becomes integrated as spirit and now has purely spiritual powers. It perhaps looked easier in possibility, but it has in fact become easier in actuality, because the spirit now is in essential, complete unity with itself' (Pap X<sup>1</sup> A 417/JP<sub>4</sub> 4326). The subject's inner unity coincides with the totality of what exists, so that its power transforms the huge weight of aesthetic abstraction into the light equality of a reconciled self.

Ethical decision should not be mistaken for the choice between good and evil, as an *aut-ant* excluding two objective and abstract terms. On the contrary, resolution is the assumption of the difference between good and evil affirmed by and in itself. The identity of the self contains and overcomes this affirmed opposition, so that freedom is the force of contradiction precisely because it is the force of unity, through a sort of dialectical transcending in which the self maintains and annuls the difference. It is then not a question of subjectivity choosing either good or evil but of reaching the foundation of its contraposition.

Choosing oneself is for Kierkegaard an 'absolute choice' or a 'primordial choice' (SV<sup>2</sup> II 236/KW IV 219), because it reflexively relates the self to its own essence, submerges it in its original identity and there it possesses itself as an eternally presupposed actuality effectively posited by itself; eternally produced and at the same time producing itself. The fact that 'the self is a relation that relates itself to itself' (SV<sup>2</sup> XI 143/KW XIX 13) indicates the absolute and constitutive character of the relation, whose substantial identity emerges from its own mediation as cause and effect of itself.

When the spirit asserts itself in its essential unity, all its possibilities become a unique power and all representations converge into the only actual ideality, in such a way that then subject is compelled to say: 'I cannot do otherwise; I do it for the sake of the idea, for the sake of meaning, for I cannot live without an idea' (SV<sup>2</sup> VI 267/KW XI 253). As a matter of fact—and in the strictest sense of the word—the idea determines the only possible way of existence, outside which the spirit is powerless and in which its power is necessary, because it has power over itself.

In this sense, decision is necessary and Kierkegaard admonishes: 'you shall choose the only one thing needful, but in such a way that there must be no question of any choice [...] The very fact there is no choice expresses the tremendous passion or intensity with which one chooses' (Pap X<sup>2</sup> A 428/JP<sub>2</sub> 1261). This immense passion in choice is the huge power that chooses itself. And thus, in necessity, authentic freedom takes place, a freedom that turns the subject into the object itself chosen in an unconditional way. The transcending of formal and abstract freedom coincides in this way with the consciousness of the self as the only alternative.

Choosing oneself is necessary due to the identity of its object as well as to the infinite intensity of its power. But given the fact that in the chosen self multiple immediate, contingent or accidental realities converge, they should be synthesized with that necessity. It would be speculative clumsiness to understand this synthesis as the sum of two opposing things, necessity on the one hand and contingency on the other, the sum of which would result in a third mixed state, the actuality of the self. On the contrary, the synthesis indicates a reflexive and dynamic passage into spiritual identity, in which the contingency of immediacy is assumed and overcome by the necessity of its subjective foundation.

Whoever chooses himself asserts himself absolutely in the multiple, determined and continuous concretion that constitutes his own personal actuality. The ethical conscience freely assumes its external circumstances and its random fortune, and for this reason there is no destiny for it, or rather for it 'what you want to be is—fate' (SV<sup>2</sup> II 18/KW IV 15), to which we might add that fate is one's own willing, in which the self recognizes the subjective truth of facts. To assume destiny in one's own spiritual becoming does not mean to accept the extrinsic necessity of *fatum* in order not to be carried away by it, but rather to recognize oneself and to recognize it in its intrinsic freedom.

Contingence—the accidental aspect of being—is just as necessary as necessity itself, because it constitute the extrinsic manifestation of essential identity. In Kierkegaard's own terms, contingency is 'the final category, the essential category of transition from the sphere of the idea to actuality' (SV<sup>2</sup> I 245/KW III 238). As an authentic mediation, in the accidental aspect the idea is expressed as effective force and under its power it acknowledges itself as effect. The movement of decision acknowledges then the infinite subjectivity of finitude, the essential foundation of events, and thus remains in a continuous identification to its externality.

In this sense, the ethical actuality of the self constitutes for Kierkegaard an authentic 'inter-esse' (SV<sup>2</sup> VII 302/KW XII 314) in which factual existence and ideality, finitude and infinitude, time and eternity are reflected in an absolute way due to that 'essential



relation that has become identical to itself' (EL § 142). These are precisely the terms in which Hegel describes the return of the subject upon itself, a return that is the external manifestation and the inward process of the self. From Hegel's point of view, the essential relation is an absolute relation. It is the relation of the absolute with itself, in which effective actuality is resolved as the ultimate and substantial unity of essence and existence, infinitude and finitude, interior and exteriority. That relation expresses the substantial identity of the subject, in the actual revelation or reality of its ideal energy.

The return of the relationship to its identity expresses the deployment of the idea within itself, the reflection or mediation of the subject that, stating in it its own power, proceeds in a necessary way. According to Hegel, necessity 'is the essence that is one and identical to itself; but it is the essence that has a concrete content and that appears in the interior of itself' (EL § 149). Briefly stated, necessity is the work of identity, and it reveals itself both in the substantial potency of the absolute as in its ad extra actuality, through the only and the same movement that proceeds from itself and goes back to itself.

Identity is thus the only real alternative of the subject and, precisely because of this, its necessity is liberating. In necessity, the authentic freedom of a subjective destiny transparent to itself takes place. That 'the truth of necessity is freedom' (EL § 158) means that the penetrated and recognized identity determines the self as positing itself. Freedom is thus the positing by itself of the identity of the subject and the object, of the inner and the outward as the only effective power.

But, as the self integrates in its becoming the whole accidental and contingent content mediating its essentiality, contingency constitutes the immediate manifestation of the essential, presupposed by its own necessity and just as necessary. The immediate existence of the essential encompasses the multiple external conditions, circumstances, determinations, etc, that have to be assumed as moments of the same comprehensive process. In relation to them, necessity determines the instance in which contingency of becoming discovers its true form, the absolute power that moves it and the foundation of its actualization.

In this sense, the actual is for Hegel 'the unity of necessity and the accidental aspect of being' (W VI 213)<sup>6</sup>, not as an addition of two different things but as a subjective internal dynamism, which reverses the external inexorable character of facts in the becoming of the self. Through this dynamism, destiny loses its extrinsic compulsion and becomes integrated into the freedom of a subject that has been recovered in its essential identity. Through it, necessity also loses its static rigidity and transforms the temporal course into a same history that liberates the absolute.

If to repeat is to confirm the presupposed identity at the origin of becoming, the process through which the self recovers its essential identity constitutes the authentic repetition that Kierkegaard has so often dealt with. In repetition, one and the same freedom is stated both as subject and object, act and content, beginning and end of its inner reflection. Once the aesthete's immediate consciousness has failed in its attempt to

6. G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik, in Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus (eds.), vol. 6, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969 (henceforth W VI).

achieve subjectivity, repetition raises the ideal ‘to the second power’ (SV<sup>2</sup> III 291/KW VI 229), in order to see the spirit rise from its own mediation.

#### 4. THE INTRINSIC NECESSITY OF DUTY

Resolution is not an arbitrary option but a free necessity, and thus it assumes the form of duty as absolute and unconditional potency of any finite content. Duty for Kierkegaard designates ‘an internal relation; for that which is incumbent upon me, no as this individual with accidental characteristics but in accordance with my true being, certainly has the most intimate relation with myself’ (SV<sup>2</sup> II 275/KW IV 254). As a relation, it constitutes the essential identity of the subject, through restitution of accidental individuality to its foundation, hence the absolute and unconditional value of duty as eternity characterizing ethics.

Duty is the consciousness of an ideal infinitude that wants to be in the finite, and as every human being possesses it, it is therefore ‘the universal’ (SV<sup>2</sup> II 276/KW IV 255) assigned to each one as their own task. The universality of duty has two meanings. The first one, insofar as its exigency extends to all individuals and determines their essential equality, with themselves and with others. The second one, insofar as its content prescribes the common actions that constitute the social order. In both cases, perhaps the Kierkegaardian pseudonym *Johannes de Silentio* represents the best possible description of ethical universality.

The supreme exigency of duty resides in the substantial identity of the subject, emerging from its own necessity. Kierkegaard’s imperative consists thus in the decision itself, in order to grasp the eternal foundation of the self. And given that this power corresponds equally to everybody, Kierkegaard states that ‘humanness consists in this: that every human being is granted the capability of being spirit’ (Pap IX A 76/JP<sub>1</sub> 69). If you can, you must and if you must be it, it is because you have the power to achieve it. In this statement there is a conversion of the possible to duty, in which the intimate potentiation of the spirit becomes manifest.

The unconditional appropriation of this one and eternal essence of the self turns temporal becoming into a continuum, because in the face of the immediate fragmentation of phenomena, the ethicist discovers a ‘constancy in itself, and the energizing power in this constancy is the same as the law of motion’ (SV<sup>2</sup> II 108/KW IV 98). Hence, while the aesthete deals with the accidental aspect of events and in it loses his inner unity, ethical subjectivity asserts itself in the divine order of facts, in its immovable foundation that is basically the very origin of becoming, from which the insubstantial appearance of the world is referred to its own absolute inwardness.

As for its content—and precisely because subjective identity does not want to be abstract but concrete—what is due extends to every sphere of life, in order to unconditionally assume those tasks and activities that generally engage human existence. Marriage, work, friendship, vocation, daily occupations, etc. are the object of this due transformation, through which they receive the immovable firmness of a self that accomplishes



itself and accomplishes them through its subjectivity. Thus, from the aesthetical to the ethical life, there is no destruction of the former but a circular return—a transfigurative repetition—that discovers in the same the dynamism overcoming the eternal. Thus every particular action of the self is subject to its eternal dynamism, and in this way it becomes the absolute unity of the general and the singular.

These activities are common to all human beings and constitute the social order, and thus Kierkegaard's ethical stage is usually assimilated to a correct civic performance and associated to the Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*. As a matter of fact, ethical subjectivity must accomplish in the existing world the objective and universal order of the spirit, similarly to what Hegel expressed in the *Philosophy of Right*. Nevertheless, for Kierkegaard as well as for Hegel the accomplishment of this order is the manifestation and not the foundation of its ethics. For both of them, ethical life is supported by the universal character of human essence, which transcends individual free will through the reflexive becoming of subjectivity.

From Kierkegaard's point of view, the human being is neither only nor mainly the arbitrariness of its contingent being, but the necessity of a common nature, through which 'the man is *individuum* and as such simultaneously himself and the whole race, and in such a way that the whole race participates in the individual and the individual in the whole race' (SV<sup>2</sup> VII 332/KW VIII 28). Participation in the same spiritual nature justifies the objective and universal ethical order, because in it the individual recognizes its immovable substantiality, called upon to unify the contingent particularities of its existence as well as to establish the universal legal status of the social whole.

In an analogous way, Hegel conceives the passing from arbitrary consciousness to the consciousness of duty as the elevation of the spirit to its true content, that is to say, to its universal and necessary foundation, not extrinsic but immanent to subjectivity itself. The ethical constitutes the synthesis or concrete identity of particular individuality and its essential substantiality, an identity in which subjective contingency is transcended without being destroyed. On account of this universal nature, that is not an abstract representation but the very substance of the singular, it reaches its actuality. Through law, the individual elevates its immediate existence to the absolute power of an action that is both singular and general.

Duty is for Hegel subjective action itself, through whose willing and knowing the rational substantiality of the ethical life is stated as the foundation of individuality, while at the same time the individual is essentially encompassed and finds its subsistence in it. Thus the root of ethical life does not reside in the extrinsic determination of law but in 'the pure unconditioned self-determination of the will' (PR § 135), that is to say, in subjective freedom. Precisely because freedom is the necessity of itself, the subjective spirit's self-determination coincides with what is due and it has to become manifest in the objective actuality of ethics.

The *Science of Logic* coincides in that duty expresses the attempt of the finite to transcend itself, retrieving its essential ideality. In this sense, it contains both the limit and the transcending of the limit, and is thus determined as a relation between finitude and

infinitude, that is both split and attempt to achieve unity; externalization and reflection in itself. But precisely because free power is assumed as a duty, it always maintains a certain division between the essential and the finite that prevents total unification of the self. In other words, in duty, subjective power discovers an intrinsic difference that turns its possibility into impossibility and the finite into certain death. If ‘what has to be, is and is not at the same time’ (W III 143), then the forces of the possible are annulled in their own contradiction, and the result is that ‘you cannot, precisely because you must’ (W III 144-145). Duty does not achieve reconciliation of subjectivity and its failure becomes manifest—according to Hegel—in the bad infinitude of an interminable process.

The solid identity with which ethical life has apparently imposed itself thus far now manifests its intrinsic negativity and claims a transcending dynamism. In Hegel’s case, the collapse of subjective affirmation already anticipates the becoming of the concept and the transcending of ethical objectivity in religious and speculative subjectivity. In Kierkegaard’s case, the ethical stage confirms—with its collapse—its dialectical position, anticipating authentic reconciliation.

##### 5. GUILT AS NEGATION OF IDENTITY

If *Either-Or* starts by asserting decision as the identical power of the self, it ends with the edifying statement that ‘in relation to God we are always in the wrong’ (SV<sup>2</sup> II 366/KW IV 339), so that ‘the highest expression of an ethical view of life is repentance and I must always repent—but precisely this is a the self-contradiction of the ethical’ (Pap IV A 112/JP1 902). Choosing oneself absolutely means choosing oneself as guilty, and in guilt the dialectic of immanence is denied as an impossible self-contradiction. The positing of the self by itself reveals its impotence in repentance and the unity obtained relapses into division.

From a metaphysical point of view, reality of repentance unmask the constitutive negativity of subjectivity or its essential belonging to evil and to nothingness. Certainly, the self possesses in itself an absolute power and an infinite actuality that it must act, but at the same time it possesses non-being and impotence. We are dealing here with the dialectical constitution of the self, according to which ‘insofar as it has the positive aspect, it also has the negative one. Freedom never forgets this dialectical origin of freedom’ (Pap V A 90). In this context dialectic refers to a dynamic force whose affirmation is *eo ipso* negation and whose negation remits to a unity transcending difference in such a way that, if freedom has a dialectical origin, it has above all an origin to which it must return. The problem is whether it can achieve this by itself, as its power is annulled in its own contradiction.

The principle of dialectic completely structures subjective actuality and manifests its operative capacity in every sphere of its development. The spirit can never be asserted in a direct way in the case of the aesthete as well as of the ethical and the religious person, but a negation must always come first ‘and the more spirit, the more care is taken that the negation is the negation of the very opposite’ (Pap XI A 152/JP2 2226). In every

degree of spiritual intensification the fall and the force of contradiction become deeper. Destiny, guilt, despair, resignation and sin are all names for this negativity that corrodes subjective becoming while driving it forward.

In the ethical stage, dialectical negativity becomes manifest as guilt and repentance. Both reverse the immanent affirmation of the self by itself in impotence. In Kierkegaard's own words: 'the power which is given to a man (in possibility) is altogether dialectical, and the only true expression for a true understanding of himself in possibility is precisely the he has the power to destroy himself, because he, even though he be stronger than the entire world, he nevertheless is not stronger than himself' (Pap V A 16/JP1 46). The infinite power of freedom, precisely because it is possible and dialectical, is an impossibility that annihilates what is due in the contradiction that permeates it. This also means that the self will not reach by itself the positive synthesis of the finite and the infinite, of time and eternity, of being and duty, of relativity and absoluteness, but only through an Other.

Contradiction is evidently the driving force in Hegel's philosophy. It is well known that for Hegel every affirmation is a negation, and that negation is called upon to retrieve original identity. At this point it is much more interesting to confront the Hegelian description of the concept of guilt as a disintegration of ethics. Hegel certainly recognizes in ethical subjectivity an authentic character, which assumes in its singular pathos the universal force of the substantial and achieves in this way a balance with the totality of the actual. Nevertheless, its unity remains in the immediacy of the *an-sich* that has not achieved the *für-sich* of total reflection, and in this way maintains the division it intends to overcome.

Because its possibility is an impossible, when ethical conscience acts, it ipso facto states the duality between divine and human law, and in this separation it perishes, as Abraham's ethical conscience perished in the face of the sacrifice that was demanded of him. Inexorably, 'self-consciousness becomes guilt through action, as guilt is its operating, and operating is its innermost essence'<sup>7</sup>. Freedom manifests in guilt its potency of denial and thus the force of the idea annuls the singular by confronting it with a stranger Other, with a divine law that refutes what is human. The incessant perishing of decision, expressing on the one hand its negation in-itself, asserts on the other hand a transcending dynamism.

In the last resort, the failure of ethical consciousness resides in the immanent attempt of the self for itself, which seeks immediate unity to the absolute without the mediation of a Third, that is to say, without a unifying term that contains identity in its difference. If for Hegel the actual is always a syllogism and for Kierkegaard the division of unity always produces three, in both cases the identity of the I=I does not resist the test of the Other, that ignores contradiction. The perfect circularity of the subjectivity is therefore not closed in itself but in the Difference.

The ethical stage has attempted to assert the self-relationship that is the self to-

7. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus (eds.), vol. 3, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969, p. 346.

gether with the synthesis of finitude and infinitude, of time and eternity that it contains. But it has forgotten that 'the relation that relates itself to itself has been established by another, then the relation is indeed the third, but this relation, the third, is yet again a relation and relates itself to that which established the entire relation' (SV<sup>2</sup> XI 144/KW XIX 13). From a metaphysical point of view, dependency on a third is equivalent to the complete negation of the self and the annihilation of all its efforts. This does not mean that subjectivity is totally powerless, but only that it is powerful by Other and collapses in its recognition.

Ethical life has been lost. Do what it may, it will repent and will always be guilty. Do what it may, reconciliation is impossible for it. Its infinite power is annulled in its own contradiction and its concretion relapses into a new abstraction. However, all that has been lost will come back transfigured, because the power of the Idea is stronger than the self.

## 6. CONCLUSION

During decades, the history of philosophy has kept Kierkegaard and Hegel apart. I believe this has been sadly detrimental to both of them, as their long-standing opposition has swept through the speculative greatness of Kierkegaard's thought and the existential power of Hegel's.

On the one hand, Kierkegaard has been deemed the philosopher of a formally possible and abstract freedom, and in this way the necessary power that impels free action has been concealed. He has been accused of irrationalism, ignoring the central place of the idea as supreme source of intelligibility and sense. His resolution has been mistaken for arbitrary decisionism alien to the internal force of duty that produces it, and his individual for a social abstraction lacking the universal human nature that Kierkegaard attributes to it. Finally, the either/or has been considered the contrary to Hegelian mediation, when it is the infinite dynamism of freedom that presupposes, affirms and overcomes every opposition.

On the other hand, Hegel has been considered the philosopher of rigid abstract understanding, overlooking the fact that he was the first one to demolish the rigid abstractions of the intellect in order to safeguard a rational concreteness that grounds and reverses every opposition. It has been maintained that Hegelian thought has buried contingency, when for it the necessity of the idea is only in the accidental character of facts. The supposed abstraction of the idea only exists in the freedom of individual consciousness and the proclaimed objective order of the social sphere can only be sustained from the point of view of actual subjectivity, also called upon to be transcended by religious form of spirit. If Hegel's system is closed, it is closed in the same instant in which contradiction reappears.

These unfortunate interpretations clearly manifest a logical and existential confusion that this paper has attempted to dispel. In fact, I have tried to show how the internal logic of Kierkegaard's thought coincides with the fundamental dialectical dynamism

of Hegel's philosophy. Both of them state that the idea is the real power of subjective becoming, and the existence is the actual concretion of the ideal. The pure *enérgeia* of freedom, which starts as an abstract and aesthetical possibility, realizes itself as the actual concretion of finitude, in which time and contingency are assumed by the eternal and necessary force of duty. The Kierkegaardian repetition is nothing but this powerful idea, mediating the flux of finite differences in the eternal identity of subject.

Nevertheless, the ethics is just the objective form of the absolute in which subject has assumed the world and the divine, but it is not the own recognition of the Absolute. That is why the ethical subject falls in the contradiction of God. The task of the religious stages consists in the last and definitive mediation, capable of unifying God, individual and neighbour in the perfect syllogism of love. When the absolute difference appears, love will overcome it and the Third will support the circle of unity.

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