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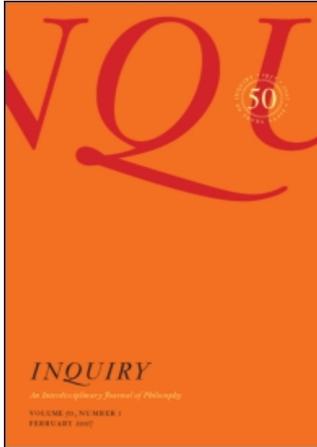
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The Paradox of Beginning: Hegel, Kierkegaard and Philosophical Inquiry

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ABSTRACT *This paper reconsiders certain of Kierkegaard's criticisms of Hegel's theoretical philosophy in the light of recent interpretations of the latter. The paper seeks to show how these criticisms, far from being merely parochial or rhetorical, turn on central issues concerning the nature of thought and what it is to think. I begin by introducing Hegel's conception of "pure thought" as this is distinguished by his commitment to certain general requirements on a properly philosophical form of inquiry. I then outline Hegel's strategy for resolving a crucial problem he takes himself to face. For his account of the nature of thought depends upon the idea of a form of inquiry in which nothing whatsoever is presupposed; but this idea appears basically paradoxical inasmuch as the mere act of beginning to inquire in a certain way embodies an assumption about how it is appropriate to begin. Turning to Kierkegaard, I consider a key objection to the effect that Hegel's strategy for resolving this paradox depends on the incoherent idea of a purely reflexive act of thinking. Finally, I draw out some central features of the alternative account of "situated" thought and inquiry which Kierkegaard presents as distinctively Socratic.*

"...for it might end, you know" said Alice to herself, "in my going out altogether like a candle. I wonder what I should be like then?" And she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle is like after it is blown out, for she could not remember ever having seen such a thing (Lewis Carroll).

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It is so difficult to find the *beginning*. Or, better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not to try to go further back (Ludwig Wittgenstein).

Some years ago, Karl Ameriks reported that “Hegel’s contribution to practical philosophy no longer requires rehabilitation”. Ameriks went on to observe that “Hegel’s theoretical philosophy, however, continues to be highly suspect”.¹ This latter finding will scarcely have surprised sympathetic readers of Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. For that work is deeply suspicious of what its pseudonymous author—one Johannes Climacus—calls the “one, two, three, hocus pocus” of Hegelian dialectics.² And Climacus’ relentless satire clearly played its part—along with similarly colourful attacks by critics as heterogeneous as Schopenhauer and Russell—in making necessary the kind of “rehabilitation” to which Ameriks refers. For it is to these critics that we owe the image of Hegel as an obtuse wind-bag whose speculations confused essence with existence, logic with history, predication with identity and himself with God.

Expository work on Hegel has therefore inherited the task of displacing these caricatures by defending his overall approach as a genuine alternative to more established frameworks. And many recent commentators have indeed set out to show that Hegel’s conception of “systematic” philosophy, far from betraying opaque metaphysical commitments or personal hubris, is determined by perfectly transparent and laudable *methodological* considerations.³ The hope is that, with these considerations clearly in view, Hegel’s project as a whole is less vulnerable to critical obloquy.

This paper seeks to show that at least one of Kierkegaard’s major lines of criticism survives any such attempt to rehabilitate Hegel’s project by appeal to its methodological virtues. We shall see that the renewed critical emphasis on Hegel’s conception of thought and inquiry serves, indeed, to bring into focus a central, underestimated and wide-ranging trajectory of Kierkegaard’s attack. And we shall see that this aspect of the clash between “existentialism” and “the System”, at least, turns on a matter of genuine philosophical interest and import—namely, the issue of what it is to *think*.⁴

I. Pure thoughts

A characteristic feature of Hegel’s lexicon is his contrast between ordinary thinking—as this is determined by the categories of our finite understanding—and the “purity” of philosophical thought.⁵ We need not immediately assume that this metaphor is supposed to capture a particular contrast between thinking badly and thinking well. For we may take it to mark a distinction, in the first instance, between whatever may be loosely called “thinking” in the sense of a compound or admixture that *includes* thinking, and whatever counts as thinking *simpliciter*. To the extent that an

alloy contains gold it may loosely be called “gold”—but this is not the eminent sense in which pure gold is gold. Analogously, Hegel’s metaphor of purity in this context is plausibly taken to express a certain view of what it is to think *simpliciter*; an account of what unalloyed thinking really is.

One thing is clear enough about this account: to have “pure” thoughts, in Hegel’s sense, just is to be undertaking an inquiry in a properly philosophical way. The substantive issue of what thoughts are and what it is to think is thus bound up with the methodological issue of what it is to conduct a philosophical inquiry. And Hegel is perhaps right to suppose there is at least a close tie up here, given the plausible assumptions that philosophy is thought-involving in a peculiarly constitutive way and that the nature of thought would therefore be exhibited in an especially perspicuous way in perfect philosophical inquiry.

Now, the issue of what counts for Hegel as a properly philosophical form of inquiry—and therefore what it means, in the eminent sense, to think—has come into prominence in recent debates in the critical literature. This is not least due to the ascendancy of so-called “category” or “non-metaphysical” readings, which emphasise certain peculiarities of Hegel’s approach, and especially its Kantian sources, in order to challenge any impression that his work comprises a metaphysical system in some straightforward or traditional sense.⁶ Whatever one makes of particular versions of this approach at the level of exegetical detail—and they are legion—it has no doubt served to bring into focus certain distinctive features of Hegel’s methodology. In particular, two *desiderata* of philosophical inquiry—more properly, two conditions of adequacy—have clearly emerged as central to any broadly Hegelian account. An inquiry counts as properly philosophical on this account just in case it is, namely, both *critical* and *reflexive*. I shall consider these in turn.

Firstly, an inquiry is *critical* in the required sense just to the extent that each and every aspect of the inquiry is treated as appropriate for discursive appraisal. The religious believer, by contrast, is uncritical to the extent that she takes a sacred text or papal edict or whatever to be a source of authority that lies beyond the remit of critical inquiry. Perhaps few philosophers would be inclined to deny that a critical inquiry is desirable in this sense.⁷ For Hegel, however, this requirement is far more demanding than it might at first appear. Following Kant, he believed that to take seriously the ideal of a critical inquiry means nothing less than a radical rethinking of philosophical methodology. For it requires the rejection not only of explicit appeals to religious dogma, but also of more modern and more insidious forms of uncritical thought.

A chief suspect for Hegel in this respect is methodological foundationalism, viz. any attempt to show that certain commitments are so obvious or inevitable that they are legitimately taken as the basis for what is in other respects a critical theory. For there are, of course, venerable traditions that

treat certain “self-evident ideas” or “immediate sense-data” as the proper termini of any justificatory chain of beliefs. For Hegel, however, this simply will not do. Insofar as propositions or experiences are appealed to as simply “given”, such appeals are uncritical and therefore undesirable. More specifically, they are undesirable in epistemology because, in John McDowell’s phrase, “the idea of the Given offers exculpations where we wanted justifications”⁸—that is, to invoke the idea of brute givens is to evade rather than to address the central demand of epistemology that our beliefs are rationally justified.

A no less subtle form of uncritical thought for Hegel is the practice of assuming the validity of our ordinary forms of thinking and understanding. Thus philosophers are liable to launch into a discussion of “subjects” and “objects”, for instance, without giving pause to whether even our initial grasp of these concepts is at all adequate. In fact, Hegel believed that our “prejudices” about subjects and objects in particular are wholly pernicious:

...These views on the relation of subject and object to each other express the determinations which constitute the nature of our ordinary, phenomenal consciousness; but when these prejudices are carried out into the sphere of reason as if the same relation obtained there, as if this relation were something true in its own self, then they are errors the refutation of which throughout every part of the spiritual and natural universe is *philosophy*, or rather, as they bar the entrance to philosophy, must be discarded at its portals.⁹

It is of course controversial how exactly Hegel does want us to view “the relation of subject and object to each other”. But the important point here is his insistence that we begin without prejudice in such arenas. For Hegel, a genuinely critical inquiry would be one that relied neither on “self-evident” truths nor on unexamined forms of thought.

Secondly, an inquiry is *reflexive* in the required sense just to the extent that it proceeds, at least in the first instance, by means of an investigation into whatever is necessarily implicated in the process of taking up and conducting a critical inquiry. The contrast here is with any inquiry that applies certain predetermined methods to a circumscribed domain; careful observation of the digestive processes of rattlesnakes, say. The process of scientific observation is evidently a very different topic to the digestive processes of rattlesnakes—and it is quite in order for a zoologist to take the latter as the arena of his research. By and large, natural scientists apply and refine but do not directly investigate scientific methodologies.¹⁰ But, whilst this is a perfectly appropriate way to proceed within the natural sciences, it is perhaps a serious mistake to construe philosophy on this model. For, whilst reflexivity is no doubt a less intuitive ideal than critical inquiry, at least part of its appeal derives from that value. This is because, in order to be

comprehensively critical, a theory must presumably be critical about its own methods and procedures. In a word, philosophy is, or ought to be, *self-critical*.

Yet there is an independent point to the criterion of reflexivity. For the idea is not merely that the process of searching is *included* within the domain of inquiry but that, in and through the very process of reflecting on itself, the inquiry uniquely *determines* its own domain as it proceeds. This means that the inquiry may not begin with any subject-matter other than itself (such as language, say, or the sensible world) but must rather determine its own subject-matter, whatever it is, in the course of inquiry. In this way, the criterion of reflexivity requires that, whatever a philosophical inquiry does investigate, this is itself discovered in and through the very process of searching. The motivation for this requirement is that, again unlike the natural sciences, the domain of philosophical inquiry cannot be uncontroversially stipulated. Whilst it is quite in order for the biologist to stipulate that his investigations concern the digestive system of rattlesnakes, the Platonist, for example, cannot simply stipulate that his inquiries concern super-sensible Ideas without begging the question against the naturalist. The promise of a system of thought whose subject-matter is the very process of critical inquiry, then, is that this might avoid arbitrary and controversial assumptions about what philosophical theories are theories *of* or *about*.

So, according to Hegel, it is distinctive and proper to philosophical inquiry that it is not only self-critical but also *self-determining*. The philosopher may assume neither what is to be evaluated in advance of the process of evaluation (such as language, say, or the sensible world) nor what means he has for evaluation (such as ordinary language, say, or the verification principle); for these will be “explicated only in the development of science and cannot be presupposed by it as known beforehand” (*EL* §1). There is, of course, a further, historical dimension here. For Hegel saw that in order to fill the vacuum left by the recent challenges on traditional sources of value and authority, “Reason” must somehow be shown to be worthy of taking their place. But it seemed this could only be achieved if Reason subjected herself to rational appraisal, if the very process of reasoning were to become the primary subject-matter of inquiry—in short, if philosophy were to assume a genuinely reflexive form.

Plausibly, then, it is considerations of this kind that lie behind Hegel’s characterisations of his philosophical project as “thought thinking itself”, or as a “science of self-determining determinacy”. According to Hegel, we must

combine in our process of inquiry the action of the forms of thought with a criticism of them. The forms of thought must be studied in their essential nature and complete development: they are at once the object of research and the action of that object (*EL* §41).

Even the bombastic claim of Hegel's *Logic* to have divined the thought of God before the creation of the world can be understood rather prosaically in these terms as a figure for a system of thought that is answerable, ultimately, only to itself. Hegel's sense of indebtedness to Kant is especially marked in this context. "It is an infinite merit of the Kantian philosophy", he declared, "to have given impetus to the restoration of logic and dialectic in the sense of the examination of the *determinations of thought in and for themselves*" (*SL*, p. 833). Where other philosophers took themselves to be investigating some domain—whether nature or the intelligible realm or whatever—that stood in an external relation to the process of inquiring about it, Hegel thus learnt from Kant to view philosophy as an immanent "critique of reason by reason itself". Indeed, Hegel's major quarrel with Kant in this respect is that, on the basis of an overly psychologistic conception of thought and reason, Kant continued to present reflexive critique merely as clearing the way for metaphysics proper.¹¹

Reflexivity is a more obviously problematic criterion than critical rationality. But it should at least be clear that neither requirement depends, as such, on any obscure metaphysical doctrine. On the contrary, William Maker, for one, identifies the distinctive virtue of Hegel's methodology in its capacity to accommodate both a modern faith in reason and a "postmodern" mistrust of metaphysics and foundationalism.¹² At any rate, the ideals of rationality and reflexivity are surely laudable. Even Hegel's most unforgiving critic acknowledged as much: "To turn Hegel into a rattlebrain", writes Johannes Climacus, "must be reserved for his admirers. An attacker will always know how to honour him for having willed something great and having failed to achieve it." (*CUP*, p. 109, fn.).¹³

II. Pure beginnings

Hegel's account of what it is to think *simpliciter* is thus distinguished by his conception of *Wissenschaft*, a fully rational and reflexive inquiry, and in just that sense a "systematic" approach in philosophy. Now one of the more pressing questions raised by this account, and one that Hegel was acutely aware of, is where and how to *begin*. For it is clearly a crucial feature of the idea of a systematic inquiry in this sense that the search does not assume anything that might turn out to be relevant to it. It is imperative, in other words, that nothing is prejudiced by the manner in which the inquiry begins. Indeed, as we have seen, resisting the temptation to begin with a conceptual or empirical "given" is part of Hegel's rationale for a systematic approach in the first place. But immediate issues arise concerning how a groundless inquiry is, as it were, to get off the ground.

To be sure, there is nothing especially paradoxical about the idea of systematicity as such. Many inquiries within the natural sciences, for instance, have some claim to be systematic in the sense of encompassing all

the relevant data within a unified methodology. But the problem arises with the notion of an *absolute* system in the sense of the projected outcome of a comprehensively critical and uniquely self-directing mode of inquiry. As we have seen, Hegel takes this to imply that philosophers cannot so much as prejudge the proper domain of their investigations. But to try to begin without taking anything as a suitable point of departure seems rather close to trying to begin without beginning. And that *does* appear paradoxical. Hegel formulates this problem concisely:

We can assume nothing and assert nothing dogmatically; nor can we accept the assertions and assumptions of others. And yet we must make a beginning: and a beginning, as primary and underived, makes an assumption or rather is an assumption. It seems as if it were impossible to make a beginning at all (*EL*, §1).

The worry here is that, even if a presuppositionless inquiry were possible in every other respect, the mere act of taking up such inquiry would itself constitute a kind of assumption; namely, I take it, that *this*—whatever it is—is an appropriate way to begin. But it appears that just that assumption is sufficient to scupper any pretensions to absolute systematicity. Hegel's "paradox of beginning", then, is simply this: any inquiry begins by making an assumption of some kind, and yet it is distinctive and proper to philosophical inquiry that it begins without making an assumption of any kind.

A full account of how Hegel sets about resolving this problem would require a deeply involved treatment of a large body of notoriously difficult work. Yet since, as we shall see, Kierkegaard's criticisms are of a rather general nature, a fairly schematic overview should suffice here. The important question, for our purposes, is how Hegel *conceives* a solution to his paradox, how he aims to resolve it, not whether he can in fact make good these ambitions. And the essential structure of what I shall present as a two-staged strategy is displayed by the following two procedural constraints on any inquiry which seeks an absolute beginning, and which Hegel seeks to respect:

- (1) The inquiry must begin with that which is immediate.
- (2) The inquiry must spontaneously establish its own beginning.

Whereas (1) applies to the content of inquiry—it constrains *what* the inquiry begins with—(2) applies to the form or method of inquiry and regulates *how* the beginning is to be established. And whereas (1) uses the verb "to begin" in the sense of treating something as primitive or prior, (2) uses the verbal noun "beginning" in the sense of an ultimate justification or ground or rationale (where "to establish" accordingly means to found or justify.) On the other hand, *immediacy* and *spontaneity* are of course closely related

concepts—in fact, for present purposes, these may be defined synonymously as freedom from external mediation or prior determination. So (1) requires that the inquiry begins with that which is free from the mediation of, or prior determination by, anything else; and (2) says that it must establish its own methodological foundations without the aid of any external or pre-determined method. Hegel combines these two procedural constraints as follows:

Thus the beginning must be an *absolute*, or what is synonymous here, an *abstract* beginning; and so it may not presuppose anything, must not be mediated by anything or have a ground; rather it is to be itself the ground of the entire science. Consequently, it must be purely and simply *an* immediacy, or rather immediacy itself (*SL*, p. 70).

The motivation for (1) and (2) should already be fairly clear.¹⁴ Whatever conceptual content the inquiry treats as primitive, this must not be determined by anything other than the inquiry itself—since the inquiry may not deploy any concepts it has not itself determined. And whatever methodological requirements are invoked, these must be justified in the course of the search—since no constraints may simply be assumed. Ostensibly, a procedure that satisfied both constraints would disarm the paradox of beginning.

The very formulation of constraints (1) and (2), however, brings to the surface a problem that seems only to deepen the sense of paradox. For these are, surely, *methodological* constraints: they show us how to proceed if we want to make an absolute beginning. But (2) says precisely that an absolute beginning must not presuppose any methodological constraints. It may appear therefore that (2) is self-stultifying, that it is a constraint against all constraints, a presupposition of presuppositionlessness.

Now, at the outset of his *Science of Logic*, Hegel tells us both that this work will begin entirely without presuppositions and that it presupposes the results of his earlier work, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.¹⁵ The apparent self-contradiction here is no doubt too apparent to be a slip and may well contain a clue to Hegel's strategy for avoiding the danger of self-stultification. For Hegel is surely inviting us to concur that, by the time of writing the *Logic*, he had already demonstrated by means of an entirely free-standing inquiry precisely the necessity of such searching. In that case, there would be no deep problem with his taking the results of the *Phenomenology* for granted as he begins the *Logic* whilst claiming, in the wider context, to have presupposed nothing whatsoever.

In broad outline, the plan at work here may be reconstructed as follows. Suppose it were shown that it is only on a misguided view of the nature of philosophical inquiry that it is so much as a genuine possibility that such inquiry could proceed *without* conforming to (1) and (2). Then it would have

been shown that we need not take (1) and (2) on trust, but will nonetheless proceed in accordance with them since there simply is no other way to proceed. And provided these things had been demonstrated in a way that did not itself presuppose any methodological norms or substantive doctrines, it would thereby have been shown that (1) and (2) are spontaneously generated by a rational inquiry—rather than being imposed, as it were, from outside. In particular, (2) would have been derived in a way that satisfies its own demands and so allows for its explicit invocation in further inquiry without danger of self-stultification.

In this way, Hegel apparently envisaged his earlier work as performing a *via negativa* towards a properly philosophical form of inquiry, by revealing the inadequacy of uncritical and non-reflexive forms of thought. And this is perhaps the sense in which the *Phenomenology* furnishes an “introduction” to systematic philosophy, as Hegel insists it does.¹⁶ Before we are ready to begin Science proper (i.e. the *Logic*), the *Phenomenology* would have us observe the incoherence of forms of thought that attempt to begin without conforming to (1) and (2). In short, this prolegomenon to philosophical science would diagnose just what it is that goes wrong with any attempt to understand the world and our place in it in a way that falls short of a *pure* form of thought; the results of which might also explain the tendency of previous searches to end in *aporia* and *impasse*. And this would then provide the necessary impetus to motivate (1) and (2), without simply assuming these in such a way as to contravene their own stipulations.

All this, of course, requires that the preliminary, negatively oriented inquiry proceeds in a way that does not itself contravene (2). For this reason, it is of the utmost methodological importance that the *Phenomenology* offers no more than an “immanent critique” of its targeted theories, showing these to be unsatisfactory by their own lights rather than according to some presupposed criterion of truth or adequacy or success. Note that, in this light, the notion of immanent critique appears less a kind of proof-strategy—as though tests for internal coherence were somehow the most valuable critical tools—than a provision for ensuring that methodological requirements properly emerge in the very process of inquiring. Indeed, it would be disastrous for Hegel’s whole strategy, as I am presenting it, simply to take for granted some norm of internal coherence.

It is clear, however, that Hegel’s preliminary inquiry *does* have a fixed and limited subject matter. For it studies, namely, any starting-point—any “formation of consciousness”—that violates the constraints on an absolute beginning. As Terry Pinkard reconstructs the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, “since we must start somewhere, it seems that we must simply take whatever standards of evaluation we happen to have and subject them to some kind of internal test”.¹⁷ Happily, this means that Hegel’s preliminary inquiry is itself free from the burden of having to make an absolute beginning in the sense of constraint (1) above; for it simply

observes what happens when other forms of inquiry do not. And it may be taken in this way to serve as a kind of phenomenology of philosophy itself; an exposé of the ways in which various unexamined presuppositions lead to failure just by dint of their status as such. If successful and sufficiently comprehensive, it would show that properly philosophical searching is impossible in the absence of an absolute beginning.

Fortunately, the details of how the *Phenomenology* is actually supposed to accomplish these tasks need not detain us here. We can simply take it on trust that Hegel has provided an incisive, comprehensive and properly internal critique of putatively philosophical investigations that fail to make a radical beginning. But the question remains how philosophy *should* begin if it cannot so much as determine its proper domain in advance of the process of inquiring. How does the immanent science of “self-determining determinacy” get underway once it has been shown, *via negativa*, to be necessary?

It is by way of a general answer to this question that Hegel says in the passage cited earlier that the inquiry must begin with “an immediacy or rather *immediacy itself*” (*SL*, p. 70). Negatively, this is the idea of a form of thought that does not deploy any conceptual material the content of which has been determined independently of that very form of thought. By contrast, my thought that grass is green, for instance, deploys concepts that are determined by numerous other concepts—the concepts *colour* and *plant* and so on. And we may suppose that the content of my thought that grass is green is further determined by sensory experience. To take up an inquiry according to constraint (1) above—i.e. to begin with “that which is immediate”—would therefore be to treat as primitive to the inquiry that which, whatever it is, is not already mediated or determined in any way at all.

This clearly rules out beginning with any concepts the grasp of which requires the prior grasp of other concepts. And it rules out treating complex concepts as primitive, in so far as these are determined by (“mediated” by) simpler concepts. Indeed, the requirement appears to rule out beginning with any concepts whatsoever, inasmuch as all concepts have intensional and extensional properties that stand in complex relations of mutual determination.¹⁸ Hegel, however, evidently thinks there is indeed a form of thinking that does not deploy any determinate concepts whatsoever. To see what this is, we need first to understand how Hegel thinks it is achieved. For immediate thinking, as Hegel conceives it, is the terminus and *telos* of a certain technique or procedure.

This basically amounts to a procedure of abstraction in the sense of selective inattention.¹⁹ Suppose I were to abstract from (i.e. “bracket”, turn my attention away from) each and every aspect of the determinate conceptual content of my thought that grass is green. There is, for Hegel, a real question about what would remain after this kind of reduction. And

there is a real question, in particular, about what *content* would remain: for Hegel rejects the (Kantian) supposition that abstracting from the determinate content of a concept would isolate its “pure form”, on the grounds that form and content are inseparable. Of course, it could not be that the remainder is comprised of determinate conceptual content—for, *ex hypothesi*, all such content is out of court. But here Hegel makes a startling move, for he suggests that what would remain after a process of abstracting from the determinate content of thoughts is a kind of *indeterminate* content which he calls “*immediacy itself*” and which he goes on to equate with “*pure being*”.

Very roughly, the idea here appears to be this. In order to execute a thorough-going abstraction from the determinate content of my thought that grass is green, for example, I would plainly have to jettison the concepts *grass* and *green* and any other concepts upon which these depend. What I would not, however, have to jettison is arguably the pure relational structure (...) *is* (...), where what “(...)” is a place-holder for is left entirely unspecified (this may not be conceived as standing in for objects or things or entities or concepts or categories or whatever—all this is put aside). This remainder may appropriately be called “*immediacy itself*” inasmuch as what would remain, on this characterisation, is the mere abstract thought of *relatedness as such*, where this does not determine what is related or any specific medium in which things are related thus-and-so. And Hegel thinks the remainder may also appropriately be called “*pure being*” inasmuch as the schema “(...) *is* (...)” represents the merely abstract relation of *being*, where the thought of this relation is supposed not to deploy any conception of what there is or of what it is to be.

Why, then, is this characterisation of indeterminate content supposed to mark the necessary terminus of a thoroughgoing procedure of abstraction? Hegel appears to have been impressed by the following line of thought. In one way or another, each and every thought deploys the concept of being, and being can be said and thought in many different ways. But suppose we abstract away from all the possible ways there are of determining the content: *being*. We would then surely be left, according to this line of thought, with nothing but the pure concept of being itself, wholly independent of any more positive characterisation. Note, however, that for Hegel it would be misleading to characterise what remains even in terms of the structure, *a concept of such-and-such*, since what we are left with is precisely not supposed to be a determinate *concept* of being but rather with whatever content of thought is conceptualized *by* any determinate concept of being. Something similar might then be said about the alternative characterisation of the remainder after abstraction in terms of “*immediacy itself*”. For on the supposition that that the content of each and every thought has a relational structure, Hegel may argue that to abstract from the determinate content of this structure, to abstract from each and every

way in which terms may be mediated or related, is to isolate a relation of pure immediacy.

It appears that Hegel's programme in the *Logic* is then to begin with this most abstract remainder of all determinate thoughts—i.e. with that which is determined by all discursive thinking—merely investigating this content and any *aporiai* it may throw up. By addressing each problem as it arises, the inquiry might then gradually accumulate ever richer and more complex conceptual material, proceeding towards a complete and fully satisfying articulation. And the inquiry would terminate at just the point at which it generates a form of thinking that no longer gives rise to any *aporiai* whatsoever—the discovery, as they say, that gives philosophy peace. But the crucial point here is that, if Hegel's strategy succeeds, none of the conceptual materials deployed in this process will have been simply presupposed: rather, these will have been generated in the development of a properly philosophical search. Hegel can thus characterise his science of logic in terms of the contrast between ordinary cognition and “pure” philosophical thought:

In the case of thought in the ordinary sense we always represent to ourselves that is not merely pure thought, for we intend by it something that is thought of, but which has an empirical content. In the *Logic*, thoughts are grasped in such a way that they have no content other than one that belongs to thinking itself, and is brought forth by thinking. So then thoughts are *pure* thoughts ... We consider *Logic* as the system of pure thought-determinations (*EL*, §24).²⁰

In summary, then, Hegel conceives of a solution to the paradox of beginning in terms of (a) an immanent critique of theories that fail to satisfy the constraints on an absolute beginning; and (b) an investigation into the nature of thought, which proceeds from a perfectly abstract form of thinking towards ever more complex and determinate conceptual specifications. The first part of the strategy aims to ensure that no methodological apparatus is presupposed, the second that no conceptual material is treated as merely given. If the strategy works, Hegel might just have found a way of getting an inquiry off the ground without making an assumption of any kind.

III. Pure chimeras

Søren Kierkegaard—alias Johannes Climacus—deals with what he calls the “dialectic of the beginning” at some length in Book Two, Part One, Chapter Three, Section Four of the *Postscript*.²¹ In keeping with the self-consciously unsystematic nature of this eccentric work, Climacus' remarks are typically fragmentary, often funny and satirical, rarely closely argued. For instance,

he hints at an objection to the effect that the comparative reflection in talk amongst Hegelians of “the most immediate of all” might be dangerous for an absolute beginning—and adds in a footnote that he has learnt not to bother properly expanding his objections since the philosophers’ rejoinders tend only to show that the real mistake was ever to have taken their work to be more than “flabby thinking concealed by the most overbearing of expressions” (*CUP*, p. 111 fn.). This pattern of alluded objections collapsing into satire and abuse is, from an analytical point of view, all too common. And the mischievous style has the (thoroughly intended) effect of making the substance behind the jibes frustratingly elusive.²² Real substance, however, I think there is.

The objection I want to pinpoint—for there are several distinct objections in this section—is to the effect that Hegel’s constraints on an absolute beginning are rather too lenient. Climacus says that Hegel is “quite correct” that the concept of an absolutely systematic inquiry implies the idea of beginning with that which is immediate, but that he completely overlooks an important corollary of this very constraint:

The system begins with the immediate and therefore without presuppositions and therefore absolutely. This is entirely correct and has indeed also been adequately admired. But why, then, before the system is begun, has that other equally important, definitely equally important, question not been clarified and its clear implications honored: *How does the system begin with the immediate, that is, does it begin with it immediately?* The answer to this must certainly be an unconditional no ... The beginning of the system that begins with the immediate *is then itself achieved through reflection*. Here is the difficulty, for if one does not let go of this one thought, deceptively or thoughtlessly or in breathless haste to have the system finished, this thought in all its simplicity is capable of deciding that ... a logical system must not boast of an absolute beginning, because such a beginning is ... a pure chimera (*CUP*, p. 112).

Climacus wants to know just *how* we are to begin with that which is immediate. Presumably, if Hegel’s second constraint is to be satisfied, we must begin immediately. For part of what it means for an inquiry to be self-determining is that it is not determined, or in any way mediated, by the outcome of prior reflection. Climacus complains that Hegel does not so much as properly consider the implications of this constraint, let alone meet them. Now this criticism may seem at the very least exaggerated. Perhaps Hegel cannot ultimately meet this requirement, but it seems clear he at least wants to. As we have seen, he is acutely aware not only of the need to begin with immediate content but also in such a way that the form of the inquiry is immediately constituted, that is, without presupposing any prior conceptual

or methodological apparatus. In this light, Richard Winfield has suggested that Climacus' "equally important question" can readily be accommodated within Hegel's own account of the beginning:

If philosophy begins with indeterminacy to be free of foundations and provide the only admissible commencement for a development determined by nothing but itself, then indeed, the indeterminate content with which philosophy begins is equally indeterminate in form, in so far as no determinate method can already be operative. Hence, *contra* Kierkegaard, the beginning not only begins with immediacy but begins immediately.²³

Perhaps, then, Climacus has simply not read enough Hegel to know that the latter certainly does at least attempt to "honour the implications" of the requirement that we not only begin with that which is immediate, but that our inquiries also assume an immediate form?²⁴ Well, Climacus says that this constraint needs to be clarified before its clear implications can be honoured. In fact, I think, he wants to add a third constraint, which is supposed to follow from the two Hegel plainly does recognise, namely:

(3) The inquirer must begin immediately with that with which he begins.

Climacus' point is that constraint (2)—that the inquiry must begin immediately with that with which it begins—has an important implication for the *inquirer* as well as the inquiry; namely (3). And this is surely correct: if an inquiry is to spontaneously establish itself it must not in any way be mediated by the prejudices of any particular inquirer. That is, it may not depend upon the outcome of any prior acts of reflection an inquirer may have performed. But it is precisely this constraint that Climacus charges Hegel with not so much as recognising, let alone satisfying. More: he proceeds to argue that since this constraint cannot be satisfied, the very idea of an absolute beginning is a "pure chimera".

Between the dots in the passage cited above, this argument impinges upon a contrast between "existence" and "a logical system", and on some claim about the priority of the former, an adequate interpretation of which would involve a careful reading of Climacus' quasi-technical use of the term "existence" already in play here. But, for present purposes, I think we can do without this involved excursion. The basic structure of the objection becomes clearer as Climacus expands:

In other words, if a beginning cannot be made immediately with the immediate (which would then be conceived as a fortuitous event or a miracle, that is, which would mean not to think), but this beginning

must be achieved through reflection, then the question arises very simply (alas, if only I am not put in the doghouse on account of my simplicity, because everyone can understand my question—and consequently must feel ashamed of the questioner’s popular knowledge): how do I bring to a halt the reflection set in motion in order to reach that beginning? Reflection has the notable quality of being infinite. But being infinite must in any case mean that it cannot stop of its own accord, because in stopping itself it indeed uses itself and can be stopped only in the same way as a sickness is cured if it is itself allowed to prescribe the remedy, that is, the sickness is promoted (*CUP*, p. 112).

Climacus evidently wants to force Hegel into a straightforward dilemma here. On the one hand, it may be that the inquirer begins spontaneously, in which case how he begins could only be conceived as utterly thoughtless and, inasmuch as it provides the basis for a successful inquiry, a lucky guess or (as Climacus sardonically suggests) a “miracle”.²⁵ On the other hand, the inquirer may begin in a reflective way, in which case it surely follows that how he begins is not properly characterized as spontaneous or immediate.

If Hegel were to grasp the first horn of this dilemma, he would forfeit the resources to argue for a particular starting-point, however “immanent” the critique in which his reasons are embedded. For it is incoherent that a non-discursive, spontaneous act should mediate between possibilities on the basis of reasons. Hegel would thereby have to give up his characterization of the inquiry as comprehensively critical: for it would presumably have to rest on some kind of direct insight or intuition. This option certainly seems unlikely to be congenial to Hegel who was of course at great pains to distance himself from Romantic appeals to “intellectual intuition” and the like. If, on the other hand, Hegel were to go for the second horn of Climacus’ dilemma, he owes an account of how a prior process of reflection can culminate in a spontaneous act. And short of such an account—which Climacus thinks is unlikely to be forthcoming due to the “infinite” quality of reflection—Hegel must give up his characterization of the beginning as immediate.

Climacus finds this all embarrassingly straightforward, but his claim, especially, that “reflection has the notable quality of being infinite” perhaps admits of clarification.²⁶ We can begin by noting that it is a general feature of thoughts that one of the things a thought can be about is another thought—I can think about a thought I had a few moments ago, for instance, that it was reasonable, or whimsical or whatever. In this sense, at least, acts of thinking can be significantly reflexive.²⁷ Now if we construe Climacus’ “reflection” as a generic term for reflexive acts of thinking—i.e. acts of thinking about thoughts—it may become clearer why he should claim that reflection “has the notable quality of being infinite”. Consider this proof of Dedekind’s that at least one infinite set exists:²⁸

Given some arbitrary thought s_1 , there is a separate thought s_2 , namely that s_1 can be an object of thought. And so on *ad infinitum*. Thus the set of thoughts is infinite.

Whether or not we take this to prove the existence of an infinite set of thoughts, we can surely give some sense to the “and so on *ad infinitum*” here. And it suggests, at least, a natural way to read Climacus’ claim that reflection has an infinite *quality*; i.e. in just the sense that it is possible that an initial thought could “set in motion” a self-perpetuating series of subsequent reflections, each reflecting on a prior act of thinking.

Given that the search for an absolute beginning is also the search for an immediate and therefore non-reflective mode of thinking, the worry is how just such a self-perpetuating series of reflexive acts is to be halted. Reflection on what it is to inquire in a properly philosophical way gives us reason to make an absolute beginning. So we reflect on how to do that. We conclude that we must begin immediately. So we reflect on how to do that. But we perceive that we cannot do that whilst we are reflecting. So we reflect on that. And so on, interminably. Each act judges of its object that it fails the requirements of an absolute beginning, just by dint of its status as an object of reflection. One thing, says Climacus, is clear: this sort of tail-chasing is not going to resolve itself into an absolute beginning. To attempt to reflect oneself out of reflection, he observes, would be like attempting to cure oneself of a disease by promoting it—or compare the insomniac’s attempt to escape wakefulness by reflecting on the need for sleep.

We may suppose, however, that Hegel would simply accept Climacus’ second option here, whilst denying that this is incompatible with the idea of an immediate beginning. For recall that it is Hegel’s view that a prior process of reflection—viz. a certain procedure of selective inattention—is halted just when we reach the content, “immediacy itself”, and that this is a thought in which no determinate conceptual material whatsoever is deployed. Hegel would surely therefore want to distinguish this purely reflexive form of cognition both from ordinary discursive thinking and from non-discursive feelings or insights. And his response might then be that the prior process of abstraction results in a genuinely spontaneous act—that is a form of cognition that, although made possible by a prior process of abstraction, is not as such determined by any other act.²⁹

Now one worry we might have about this response is that the idea of a purely reflexive act—the notion of an act that has nothing but itself as its own object—is basically incoherent. For we may suppose that such an act would have lost the *raison d’être* of an act of thinking in something like the way “This is a statement” has lost the *raison d’être* of a statement—or again that the concept of thinking loses its grip here in something like the way that the concept of fishing loses its grip in the case of fishing for one’s own net. In the *Charmides*, Socrates argued in effect that if there were an act that

was directed *only* towards itself, we could not in that case distinguish between the act itself and that towards which it is *directed*. By contrast, Socrates argued, we evidently can distinguish between acts of hearing and sounds, for example, or acts of moving and moved things (see *Charmides* 167c–169a). But it appears we need just such a distinction in order to determine an act as one kind of thing rather than another (e.g. we individuate an act of hearing by reference to sounds, an act of moving by reference to moved things). Likewise, we may wonder how something can count, precisely, as an act of *thinking* where this is supposed not to be directed towards anything other than itself. Climacus appears to have just this kind of worry in mind when he reconstructs and probes the Hegelian position as follows:

When a beginning with the immediate is achieved by reflection, the immediate must mean something different from what it usually does. Hegelian logicians have correctly discerned this, and therefore they define the immediate, with which logic begins, as follows: the most abstract remainder after an exhaustive abstraction. There is no objection to this definition, but it is certainly objectionable that they do not respect what they themselves are saying, inasmuch as this definition indirectly states that there is no absolute beginning. “How is that?” I hear someone say. “When one has abstracted from everything is there not then, etc.?” Indeed, *when* one has abstracted from everything. Let us be human beings. Like the act of reflection, this act of abstraction is infinite; so how do I bring it to a halt? (*CUP*, p.)

Climacus imagines his Hegelian interlocutor responding to his initial goad about how reflection is to be halted by appealing to the prior process of abstraction. What remains after this procedure has been executed, the Hegelian may say, is an act of thinking that has no content other than the pure act of thinking itself. Now Climacus is worried that this procedure of abstraction would itself be interminable, since the very act of abstracting from the determinate content of a given thought would presumably constitute a new possible object of thought with determinate content and therefore supply further material for abstraction. For the sake of argument, however, Climacus is willing to imagine that someone has actually performed an “act of infinite abstraction”:

Let us even venture an imaginary construction in thought. Let that act of infinite abstraction be *in actu*; the beginning is not an act of abstraction but comes afterward. But then with what do I begin, now that there has been an abstraction from everything? Alas, at this point a Hegelian, deeply moved, perhaps would collapse on my chest and blissfully stammer: With nothing. And this is precisely what the system

declares: that it begins with nothing. But I must pose my second question: How do I begin with this nothing? ... The expression “to begin with nothing,” even apart from its relation to the infinite act of abstraction, is itself deceptive ... “The beginning is not” and “the beginning begins with nothing” are altogether identical theses, and I do not move from the spot (*CUP*, pp. 114–5).

In effect, and strangely enough, Climacus is making a similar charge against Hegel to the one that Carnap famously levelled against Heidegger, namely that it is a mistake to treat negative terms like “nothing” as substantives or predicates—or, in the more precise and cautious formulation Climacus suggests, that it is deceptive to treat such terms as having substantial content whilst appearing to treat them as lacking such content.³⁰ Thinking about nothing is equivalent simply to not thinking—unless, that is, the kind of “nothingness” in question can be fleshed out in some positive way (by reference, perhaps, to the concept of absence or lack or mere possibility).³¹ Of course Hegel may say that the nothingness in question can indeed be characterized as the abstract content *immediacy itself* or *pure being*. But the question Climacus wants to press at this juncture is just *how* this “content”, which is supposed to be utterly indeterminate, could possibly serve as an *object of thought*, as something one can think and inquire *of* or *about*. Either, he wants to say, this so-called content really is indeterminate in which case it cannot figure as an object of thought, or it really does serve as an object of thought in which case it is not utterly indeterminate. And it is indeed obscure what third way there could possibly be here.

To reiterate: the basic structure of Climacus’ objection takes the form of a dilemma. In so far as we begin immediately, we forfeit any discursive justification for beginning where we do. But as soon as we start a process of reflection in order to do that, we forfeit the possibility of beginning immediately. Either a Hegelian inquiry cannot legitimate itself because it is founded on an arbitrary act or it cannot get started because it presupposes a self-perpetuating process of reflection. Climacus then sharpens the second horn by foreclosing any idea that such a process can be halted by a pure act that has no content other than its own activity. There is, for Climacus, no such thing as a purely reflexive mental act—to think is to have a determinate thought. I take it that this dilemma, this “simple thought”, is from a dialectical point of view very powerful against Hegel. For it can as it were grant that Hegel’s inquiry is “presuppositionless” in every other respect than the misguided conception of thought upon which it crucially depends. Certainly, this is how Climacus formulates his conclusion:

This means that pure thinking is a phantom. And if Hegelian philosophy is free from all postulates, it has attained this with one insane postulate: the beginning of pure thinking (*CUP*, p. 314).

Bluntly put, the objection is that the vision of a fully reflexive, critical inquiry comes to grief on the truism that the concept *thinking* is instantiated by nothing less than a relation between a particular act of thinking and a determinate object of thought. (Climacus is well aware that insisting on this has the ring of the platitudinous. His objection is “very plain and simple” and he is “almost embarrassed to say it or to have to say it” (*CUP*, p. 116).) The dream of an absolute beginning is chimerical (not because it is somehow supposed to be beyond finite creatures like us but) because this would require comically overlooking the fact that thinking does not occur, as it were, all by itself. Hegel maintained that “it is a matter of perfect indifference where a thing originated; the only question is: ‘is it true in and for itself?’”³² “Therefore one must be very cautious about becoming involved with a Hegelian”, Climacus warns, “and above all must ascertain who it is with whom one has the honour of speaking. Is he a human being, an existing human being?” (*CUP*, p. 306)

IV. Pure Socrates

The issue to which I would like to turn by way of conclusion is what Kierkegaard has to offer by way of an alternative account of what is to inquire in a properly philosophical way and what it means, in the eminent sense, to think. I take it that this issue is especially pressing given his reputation for having simply shirked all accountability to the standards of critical inquiry, opting instead for a wilfully irrational commitment to religion.

An alternative account does in fact begin to emerge as early as Kierkegaard’s *magister* dissertation, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*. His diagnosis of what he presents there as Xenophon’s signal failure to do justice to Socrates, for instance, is the “*total lack of situation*” in Xenophon’s account, such that any particular conversation or anecdote he reports seems to come, so to speak, out of the blue.³³ Kierkegaard takes it that this lack of an “eye for situation” is seriously obscuring in the case of a thinker whose inquiries were, by all other accounts, so deeply rooted in the “multicoloured variety of exuberant Athenian life”:

Yet this emphasis on situation was especially significant ... in order to make graphic the genuine Socratic method, which found no phenomenon too humble a point of departure from which to work oneself up into the sphere of thought. This Socratic possibility of beginning anywhere, actualized in life..., this Socratic modest frugality that formed such a sharp contrast to the Sophist’s empty noise and unsatiating gorging—all this one might wish that Xenophon had let us perceive (*CI*, pp. 16–18).

Kierkegaard goes on to appeal to Plato's early dialogues in order more fully to articulate his sense of "the genuine Socratic method" as exemplary of a properly *situated* form of thought and inquiry—and therefore, as he no doubt intended his Hegelian examiners to note, a salutary counterweight against the "empty noise and unsatiating gorging" of all forms of sophistry. Setting aside for now Kierkegaard's predominant concern in the dissertation with the concept of irony, and his complicated attempts to distil what he calls "the unalloyed Socratic" from Plato, four features of this account especially stand out.³⁴

Firstly, Socratic inquiry is anchored in (what Climacus will call) *concrete thinking*.³⁵ Kierkegaard cites Socrates' maxim, for instance, that "if anyone means to deliberate successfully about anything, there is one thing he must do at the outset. He must know what it is he is deliberating about; otherwise he is bound to go utterly astray" (*Phaedrus* 237c).³⁶ The contrast with the idea of beginning in the absence of a determinate domain of inquiry could hardly be more marked. And Kierkegaard further highlights Socrates' characteristic tendency to draw into his inquiries such lowly matters as food and drink, shoemakers and tanners, shepherds and pack-asses and so forth.³⁷ Rather than *begin* by turning in on itself, then, it is distinctive of a Socratic search that, in the first instance, it inquires of or about concrete phenomena, things in the familiar world. Thus, to take the most familiar instance, Socrates typically inquired of and about various artisans, poets, speech-makers and statesmen of his day, whether they were wise. And it is certainly plausible that, in Plato's so-called Socratic dialogues at least, Socrates' questions are directed in the first instance at his interlocutors rather than at abstract viewpoints or theories.

The general notion of "concrete thinking" here is simply that of thinking of or about something *as* thus-and-so—or, as we may say, under a certain description—such as when I think of a particular person as a friend, say. Unlike abstract or reflexive thinking, the conceptual content deployed in concrete thinking serves merely as vehicle or medium of thought and not as its thematic object. Here, the conceptual content is, to echo Merleau-Ponty, *self-effacing*: it points beyond itself to that which the thought is *of* or *about*.³⁸ And Kierkegaard wishes to stress, first, that not all thinking is abstract thinking and, second, that by keeping continually in mind what the inquiry is of or about, a Socratic inquiry is able to "stick to the subject", saying the same about the same, and thereby avoiding the kind of "chatter" that is liable to result when, as Climacus puts it, "thought selfishly wants to think itself instead of serving by thinking something" (*CUP*, p. 355).

Secondly, however, and given that the inquiry is grounded in this way, a Socratic inquiry certainly does involve abstract, reflexive thinking. Indeed, Kierkegaard repeatedly characterizes Socrates' method as one of "simplifying life's multifarious complexities by leading them back to an ever more abstract abbreviation" (*CI*, pp. 32, 41) and this plainly involves reflecting on

various attempts to account for diverse phenomena in an abstract, unified way.³⁹ But what Kierkegaard wishes to stress here is that, for Socrates, such abstract thinking was always *mediated* by certain determinate material for reflection, conceptual as well as concrete. It was never entirely free-floating in the way suggested for instance by the idea of an initial suspension of all determinate conceptual content, or (for that matter) an initial stance of global scepticism.⁴⁰

Kierkegaard draws special attention in this respect to the passage in the *Apology* in which Socrates tentatively construes the import of the Delphic oracle to have been that, compared with the wisdom of the gods, “human wisdom is of little or no value”.⁴¹ According to this retrospective account, Socrates’ subsequent investigations—that is, his famous searches for definitions of certain ethical concepts—appear to have been in some way guided in advance by this interpretation of the oracle. Indeed, on Kierkegaard’s view, Socrates took this presupposition quite seriously—not in the sense that he shielded it from criticism, accepting it blindly from the gods, but in the sense that it provided a definite *orientation* for his subsequent inquiries, a lead to follow as it were. So, whilst it may indeed be true that his subsequent inquiries did not presuppose the *truth* of any claim whatsoever, and were in that sense without presupposition, Kierkegaard may still argue that these were shaped in an important way by Socrates’ reflections on the value of human wisdom and by his interpretation of his own intellectual task.⁴²

One might however suspect that the real agenda here is to suggest that Socrates began with a prejudice in favour of a dim view of human knowledge that predated any of his particular “searches” for knowledge and predestined their ostensible “failure”. Two things tell decisively against this suspicion. Firstly, Kierkegaard takes it that the paradox associated with the oracle—viz. that Socrates, who knew that he was ignorant, was singled out as supremely wise—was a genuine source of perplexity for Socrates.⁴³ His interpretation of the oracle was, therefore, no mere matter of pre-philosophical prejudice or opinion, but was itself part and parcel of a particular *search*—namely, the search for an answer to the riddle.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Socrates’ interpretation of the paradox was not, on Kierkegaard’s view, a “fixed point” around which his subsequent investigations revolved. On the contrary, what Kierkegaard finds most remarkable of all about Socrates is precisely the absence of any such stable core of opinions or doctrines, such that he had the intellectual freedom to “begin anywhere”.⁴⁵ And we may suppose that it was in just this kind of non-committal (say, “ironic”) spirit that Socrates treated his interpretation of the oracle, i.e. as essentially provisional and incomplete, a matter for further investigation, a reason for asking further questions. It did not, therefore, either predate Socrates’ philosophical searching or serve to fix in advance the outcome of such searching.⁴⁶

Thirdly, and in a closely related way, Socratic inquiry is essentially subject-involving. Kierkegaard expressly pits Socrates against Hegel in these terms:

... Socratic questioning is clearly, though remotely, analogous to the negative in Hegel, except that the negation, according to Hegel, is a necessary element in thought itself, is a determinant *ad intra*; in Plato, the negative is made graphic and placed outside the object in the inquiring individual. In Hegel, the thought does not need to be questioned from the outside, for it asks and answers itself within itself; in Plato thought answers only insofar as it is questioned, but whether or not it is questioned is accidental, and how it is questioned is not less accidental (*CI*, p. 35).

Even at this early and comparatively muted stage in Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel, the emphasis is thus firmly on the remoteness of the analogy between the "negative in Hegel" and the Socratic elenchus, in the sense of Socrates' examination of the views of others. For Plato, on Kierkegaard's view, "Socrates" was no place-holder for a necessary moment within the unfolding of "thought itself" but was rather a vital historical personality whose inquiries took a particular form and by whom Plato had himself been personally and profoundly touched. It is quite clear here that the point is not that Socratic inquiry is "subjective" in the sense that it abandons any search for objectivity—on the contrary, Kierkegaard repeatedly stresses that Socratic questioning aims to "allow the thought itself to emerge [from the phenomena] in all its objectivity" (*CI*, p. 32). The point is simply that inquiry has its origins in "a specific external point of departure", viz. a unique personality with particular interests and problems and a particular style of thinking.⁴⁷

Fourthly, and finally, Socratic inquiry is *objectively motivated*. Having stressed the contingent nature of the relation between Socrates' actual questions and any notion of "thought itself" as that which is questioned in philosophy, Kierkegaard immediately qualifies this emphasis significantly. For he distinguishes between asking questions in a relatively passive and receptive way—such as asking a question of somebody whose authority is not in question—and the more active business of *interrogating* something, in roughly the sense of "sounding it out" or putting it to the test. In the case of the latter, distinctively Socratic kind of questioning, Kierkegaard goes on to argue, the relation between act of questioning and object of interrogation is *necessary* rather than accidental: as he puts it, "the reason for the individual's asking thus-and-so is found not in his arbitrariness but in the subject [i.e. the subject-matter, the domain of inquiry], in the relation of necessity that binds them together" (*CI*, p. 35).

Kierkegaard is making the striking claim here that, on a Socratic paradigm, the subject-matter of philosophical inquiry is properly comprised

of that which, whatever it is, incites or affords interrogation in a particular way. The inquiry is therefore objectively motivated: in Kierkegaard's analogy, it is attracted to that which invites and repays investigation "just as a divining rod ... mysteriously communicates with the water hidden in the earth and wishes only where there is water" (*CI*, p. 35 fn.). Kierkegaard does not dwell on this claim in his dissertation (at least thematically) but it arguably goes to the heart of his well-known predilection for paradoxes. Consider, for instance, the following from his *Journals*:

Paradox is the intellectual life's authentic *pathos*, and just as only great souls are prone to passions, so only great thinkers are prone to what I call paradoxes, which are nothing but grand thoughts still wanting completion.⁴⁸

Two things are immediately noteworthy about this remark. First a paradox cannot, according to Kierkegaard's usage, simply be dismissed as logically absurd; for a paradox is a *thought* with determinate content, and moreover a thought that, were it to be brought to completion, would be of great intellectual significance. But secondly, a paradox may not simply be endorsed or affirmed as it stands since it falls short of a fully articulated thought and demands completion. This characterisation clearly goes further than that of an apparent contradiction or an impasse in thought: in Kierkegaard's usage, a paradox is a problem which, in some particular way, recommends itself to further inquiry.

Much in Kierkegaard's work invites a comparison in this connection with Aristotle's characterisation of *aporia* in terms of an "equality of opposite reasonings", such that we are confronted with an "either/or" that pulls in both directions (see, e.g., *Topics*, VI.145^b4–20).⁴⁹ And it is perhaps *because* paradoxes indicate a genuine pull in opposing directions that they are aptly characterised as incomplete and yet inherently productive thoughts. For now, however, we may simply take it from the remark cited above that it is the basic two-fold structure of paradoxes—possessing significant content and yet standing in want of completion—that accounts for their peculiar capacity to stimulate interrogative inquiry, and in a way that is entirely independent of the "arbitrariness" of the inquirer. For it is very plausible that a paradox, on this characterisation, would be such as to elicit in anyone who properly recognised it as such, firstly, a feeling of dissatisfaction with its incompleteness, but also, secondly, a desire to bring the thought to completion, due to its inherent interest and apparent import (rather than, say, a desire simply to forget it). It is in this way, we may suppose, that reflection on a particular paradox gives *pathos* to a philosophical inquiry and thereby guards against its becoming glib or pointless.

Again, this characterisation of paradox is reminiscent of the Hegelian idea of *aporiai* that arise immanently in the course of inquiry. But what is

distinctive about a Socratic approach, as Kierkegaard sees it, is that the problems at stake are emphatically not of the kind that *could* be simply “dissolved” by constructing a system of concepts such that they no longer arise. For it is evidently Kierkegaard’s general view that philosophical *aporiai* are not of a purely conceptual nature but concern also “the things themselves” (as Aristotle also insists, see e.g. *Metaphysics* I.3,984^a16–19).⁵⁰ More precisely, such problems typically concern the *relations* between thoughts or concepts and that which they are of or about, i.e. the actual phenomena. As Kierkegaard puts it in his introduction to *The Concept of Irony*, the philosopher’s task is to “help the phenomenon obtain its full disclosure”, given that something is in question precisely because how it appears is such as to resist conceptual articulation. The legitimacy of any proposal to adjust our concepts in order to solve a particular paradox must therefore be demonstrated by reference to actual phenomena.⁵¹

The foregoing sketch of Kierkegaard’s account of concrete, subject-involving, reflective and objectively motivated inquiry is certainly incomplete and raises many further questions. But it should at least be clear that his criticisms of Hegel are not *ad hoc* or anti-philosophical or merely negative. On the contrary, these complement and are continuous with an alternative account of what it is to take up and pursue a properly philosophical inquiry, and (therefore) what it is to think. It is hardly news that this account emphasizes personal engagement. But it is especially striking that it also affords a central role for abstract, reflective thinking and interrogative questioning in response to particular problems—and that it takes up as valuable some key elements in Hegel. And we may conclude that one of the things that incited Kierkegaard’s own interrogative questioning was not so much the claims of his contemporaries to have solved great problems than their claim to have done so precisely by beginning with no problem in particular.⁵²

Notes

1. Ameriks (1992) p. 177.
2. Cf. Kierkegaard [1846] (1992) p. 117 (hereafter cited in the text as “*CUP*”).
3. See, for example, Houlgate (1991); Maker (1994); Winfield (1991).
4. There is an increasing tendency to view Kierkegaard’s “critique of Hegel”, on the contrary, as highly parochial. Thus, according to Stewart (2003) the attack is aimed primarily at certain Danish thinkers, whose versions of Hegelianism were quite idiosyncratic, and was fuelled by personal grievances. By contrast, I shall argue that—whatever else is in his sights—Kierkegaard raises criticisms that are directly applicable to Hegel and that engage with features of Hegel’s work that have at least some initial plausibility. I follow in this respect the approach of, e.g., Westphal (1996) and Pattison (2005).
5. See, for example, Hegel [1830] (1975), §§ 19, 39 (hereafter cited in the text as “*EL*”).
6. For a *locus classicus* of the “category” reading see Hartmann (1972). See also, e.g., Lamb (1980); Pinkard (1988); Maker (1998). For criticism see Rosen (1993).

7. There is a strong case that Kierkegaard is no exception here. His approach to biblical and ecclesiastical authority, for instance, is far from uncritical (see, e.g., his remarks on biblical interpretation in Kierkegaard [1844] (1980), p. 40). What Kierkegaard does bluntly reject is a culture in which the tendency “to bring fundamental assumptions under discussion” has the consequence that “a marvelous number of men in the mass get on their feet and open their mouths all at once in the game of discussion” thereby revealing themselves to be “the most insignificant twaddlers” (Kierkegaard [1872] (1994) p. 137).
8. McDowell (1994) p. 8.
9. Hegel [1812] (1964) p. 45 (hereafter cited in the body of the text as “*SL*”).
10. Of course, it may be that someone is both a natural scientist and a philosopher of science—the point is simply that one need not be both in order properly to count as the former. I should also point out here that the reference to the digestive systems of rattlesnakes is not an allusion to Hegel’s analogies between animal-eating and philosophy (see, e.g., Hegel [1807] (1977) p. 65). Thanks to an anonymous referee of this journal to drawing my attention to this possibility.
11. Hegel thus likens Kant’s conception of a critique of the human faculty of reason by way of clearing the ground for metaphysics to Scholasticus’ resolution not to venture into the water until he had learned to swim (Cf. *EL*, §41).
12. Cf. Maker (1987); (1994).
13. This remark alone is perhaps sufficient to give the lie to Jon Stewart’s thesis that the “true targets” of Climacus’ critique in the *Postscript* were certain Danish Hegelians with whom Kierkegaard was personally at enmity (see Stuart (2003) pp. 453–466). Here, at least, Climacus’ target is evidently precisely those elements of Hegel that survive the attempts of “admirers” such as H. L. Martensen to patch up what they present as local defects with Hegel’s system and who thereby make him out to be a “rattlebrain”.
14. Cf. Westphal (1996) p. 89: ‘To be absolute is to be not relative to, and thus dependent (either causally or conceptually) upon, something other than oneself ... To be mediated is precisely to be so related to one’s other, by which one is mediated.’
15. Cf. *SL*, p. 48.
16. It is a large and further question whether—as some of Hegel’s “non-metaphysical” readers insist—the *Phenomenology* is supposed to be an *entirely* negative work in this way.
17. Pinkard (1996) p. 6.
18. It is worth noting here that Hegel is himself committed to the view that “[t]he moments of a concept cannot be separated; ... each of its moments can only be grasped immediately on the basis of and together with the others” (*EL* §164 Translated by Geraets, Suchting and Harris p. 241.) For an illuminating recent treatment of Hegel’s theory of concepts see Käufer (2005).
19. Hegel writes of “ridding oneself of all reflections and opinions whatsoever, [in order] simply to take up, *what is there before us*” (*SL*, p. 69). I should add that the following interpretation goes beyond Hegel’s text in an attempt to make sense of why this procedure should leave us with, precisely, “immediacy itself”.
20. Trans. Geraets, Suchting and Harris (1991) p. 58.
21. The over-the-top sectioning of *Postscript* is no doubt part of the parody of “scientific” philosophy.
22. “Thoroughly intended” because Climacus, a self-styled “humourist”, wants to show that if the proper response to errors in thought is careful criticism, the proper response to illusions of thought is laughter. Thus Climacus writes that the problem with “modern speculative thought” after Hegel is “not a *false* proposition but a *comic* presupposition, occasioned by its having forgotten ... what it means to be a human being” (*CUP*, p. 120). On Climacus’ humour see Lippitt (2000).

23. Winfield (1990) p. 55.
24. Thulstrup (1980) reports that Kierkegaard's knowledge of Hegel's texts "can scarcely be correctly described as particularly extensive or exhaustive" (p. 13). And although Stewart (2003) provides plenty of evidence to correct this view, Stewart nonetheless claims that "the picture of Hegel" in the *Postscript* "is not one based on his primary texts but is rather simply a position, in many ways arbitrary, which Kierkegaard has Climacus use in contrast to his own" (p. 451). At any rate, I shall argue that Climacus' critique is very much to the point in the light of what Hegel actually says.
25. Cf. *CUP*, p. 188: "... when a systematician entertains us with a report that he became an adherent of the system through a miracle, something that seems to suggest that his systematic life and career do not have this in common with the system: to begin with nothing".
26. Justus Hartnack, for one, seems to think this claim is deeply problematic: "in the sense in which it is self-evident it is irrelevant, and in the sense in which it is relevant it is not correct that [reflection] is infinite" (Hartnack (1991) p. 125).
27. The implied contrast here is with that which is *trivially* reflexive, e.g., where "thinking a thought" or "fighting a fight" are mere cognate accusatives.
28. Cited in Moore (1990) p. 113.
29. That this is indeed how Hegel would respond is suggested, for instance, by his claims that "simple immediacy is itself an expression of reflection" (*SL*, p. 69) and that "identity-with-self is the immediacy of reflection" (*SL*, p. 411).
30. Cf. Carnap (1959).
31. One may well have in mind Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety* here, according to which there is at least one psychological state—namely, *angst*—that has a determinate kind of "nothingness" as its object (cf. Kierkegaard [1844] (1980) p. 61 and *passim*).
32. Hegel [1837] (1956) p. 331.
33. Kierkegaard [1841] (1989) p. 16 (hereafter cited in the body of the text as "*CI*").
34. Any reading of Kierkegaard's dissertation as a whole would have to come to terms with the thorny issue of the extent to which, and the sense in which, this is itself an ironic text. Suffice it to say here that one of the ways in which he characterizes irony within the text is as an "equivocation" between earnestness and jest and that Kierkegaard's own depiction of Socrates as an "ironist" certainly displays this sort of equivocation (see, e.g., *CI*, p. 57).
35. See, for example, *CUP*, p. 332.
36. Hamilton & Cairns (1963) p. 485; cited in *CI*, fn. p. 34
37. See *CI*, p. 17.
38. Cf. Merleau-Ponty (1973) p. 108: "Now, one of the effects of language is to efface itself to the extent that its expression comes across. In the way it works, language hides itself from us. Its triumph is to efface itself. There is language after the fact, or language as an institution, which effaces itself in order to yield the meaning which it conveys."
39. It should be noted here that here, in the dissertation, Kierkegaard presents this method of abstraction as inferior to the "speculative" methods of modern philosophy (see especially *CI*, p. 41). This may be seen either as evidence that Kierkegaard remained at this stage considerably under the sway of Hegelian thought, or as one of the marks that his dissertation is an instance, as well as a discussion, of the concept of irony.
40. That Kierkegaard closely associates these two methodological programmes is clear from his unfinished novella "*Johannes Climacus' or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* which satirizes the idea that "doubting everything" is a prerequisite for philosophizing. See Kierkegaard [1842-3] (1985).
41. See, for example, *CI*, p. 40 fn.
42. Kierkegaard sees this particular form of mediation as a decisive difference between Socrates and Plato (who allegedly had a more "positive" view of human knowledge).

- But note that Kierkegaard does *not* claim that Plato's inquiries were therefore any less "situated": on the contrary, he stresses that Plato's thought was situated, precisely, by his profound reflection on his own encounter with Socrates.
43. This is indeed clear at *Apology* 21b: "For a long time I was at a loss as to his [the god's] meaning, then I very reluctantly turned to some such investigation as this: ..." (G. M. A. Grube (Trans.) in Cooper (1997) p. 21). Kierkegaard clearly alludes to this passage when he refers, perhaps with a touch of irony, to Socrates' "moment of perplexity" (*CI*, p. 38.)
 44. On the oracle as an example of an *aporia* in early Plato, in the sense of a particular problem or puzzle, see Politis (2006).
 45. See, for example, *CI*, p. 16–17.
 46. Admittedly, Kierkegaard appears to endorse the view that Socrates' "searches" for definitions were designed to induce a state of *aporia* in his interlocutors and expose their pretences of knowledge. But it is consistent with this view that these ironic exercises were part of a wider philosophical search—and especially the search for self-knowledge.
 47. On the importance of the notion of a *style* of thinking see, e.g., *CUP*, pp. 349–360.
 48. See Hannay (1996) p. 115.
 49. In his papers, for instance, Kierkegaard makes a very revealing comment about what he views as most salutary about his *Either/Or*: "that which matters most to me about the whole of *Either/Or*", he writes, "is that it become really evident that the metaphysical meaning that underlies it all leads everywhere to the dilemma" (*Pap. II B 177 n.d.*, 1842 trans. H. V. Hong and E. H Hong). Kierkegaard also echoes Aristotle's characterisation of *aporiai* in the *Metaphysics* (III.1,995^a27–34) when Anti-Climacus characterises his own work as designed to form a "dialectical knot" (Kierkegaard [1850] (1991) p. 133).
 50. See also *Metaphysics* III.1,995^a29–30 in which Aristotle characterizes *aporia* as a knot "in the object". On Aristotle's account of objective *aporiai* see Politis (2002).
 51. This is the point, for instance, of the satirical figure of philosophers as knights: "one sometimes hears too much the jingling of spurs and the voice of the master" (*CI*, p. 9.).
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