

Kierkegaard and Descartes

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KIERKEGAARD'S FIRST KNOWLEDGE of Descartes was probably not derived from a direct study of his work but from the lectures he attended as a student at the University of Copenhagen in the 1830's. The view of modern philosophy then current in Denmark was that of a continuous movement extending from Descartes to Hegel, although the enormous prestige enjoyed by the latter meant that Cartesian thought was interpreted mainly as the starting point for the investigation of problems upon which later philosophers were deemed to have shed much greater light. Later on, when he read Descartes himself, Kierkegaard regretted that he had not begun immediately with him instead of allowing himself to be influenced by Hegel's rather condescending attitude toward his French predecessor.¹ Hegel certainly conceded to Descartes the great merit of having "extricated intellectual consciousness from that sophistry of thought which unsettles everything" and so of having comprehended the character of the "abstract idea," but he also implied that the Cartesian viewpoint was too naive, being "simple and as it were popular"—or as Kierkegaard expresses it "child-like"—in its approach to philosophical problems. Hegel speaks of Descartes, notes Kierkegaard, in a way that seems to mock at him, peremptorily closing his discussion with the remark that "mit ihm ist weiter nichts zu anfangen." In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* of 1846, Kierkegaard recalled this judgement of Hegel's, for the latter is there described as a thinker who "with the help of the principle of identity of thought and being was emancipated from a more childlike manner of philosophizing, something which he himself calls attention to, for example in connection with Descartes."²

During the years when he was supposed to be preparing for his theological examinations, Kierkegaard became increasingly interested in philosophy; he was for a time the pupil of a young teacher at the University of Copenhagen, H. L. Martensen, who later became a distinguished professor of theology and Primate of the Danish Church. In later life Kierkegaard was to see in Martensen an egregious example of "the Professor" who taught about Christianity instead of living it out: Martensen's academic attitude was, he believed, typical of the enervated values which were undermining the basis of contemporary spiritual life. Moreover, Martensen had come under the influence of Hegel, even claiming to be able to "go further" than the master himself. Yet in these student years Kierkegaard attended Martensen's lectures at the University and probably listened to him with respect. His papers contain notes on lectures which Marten-

¹ Cf. *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, edited by P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, and E. Torsting (20 vols.; Copenhagen: 1908-1948), IV B 13 (17). (Quoted hereafter as *Papirer*. The reference is to volume, section, and entry-number.) Hegel's view of Descartes is to be found especially in *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie (Werke, XV, 331-332)*.

² *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. E. Swenson and W. Lowrie (Princeton: 1941), p. 298, n.1.

sen delivered in the winter of 1837–1838 and which were later published in book form under the title of *Prolegomena to Speculative Dogmatics*. On November 29, 1837, Martensen, who was primarily concerned with the impact of philosophy on theology, dealt with Descartes in the course of his review of the whole development of modern philosophy both in England and on the continent. (As well as discussing Spinoza and Kant, he dealt with Bacon, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.)³ He followed Hegel in interpreting the Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum* as “the principle of the new Protestant subjectivity.” The essential point about this was that it resulted from a method which did not cast doubt on particular things but upon *everything*. Ultimately, however, Descartes’s intention was not to leave the issue in a “fluctuating condition,” but to produce a rational certainty resting upon “the absolute identity of thought and being.” More specifically still, this identity must first of all be associated with my own reality as a thinking being, because in every other case the “object” of thought remains outside me and so falls short of absolute certainty. The “I” thus postulated by the *cogito* is no empirical self, but a “speculative principle” capable of directing the development of all subsequent philosophical speculation. Martensen concluded, however, that the *cogito* principle was not very “rich in content” since it expressed little more than a “purely general thinking subjectivity.” However, as the germ of a new philosophical system, it could prove very fertile, for it replaced authority and tradition by freedom and self-consciousness, the “dialectical” consequence being to “make man the measure of all things.” Yet in thus bestowing supremacy upon self-consciousness, Descartes prepared the way for the eventual loss of the “object” by blurring the true distinction between the self and object. Many dangerous and surprising results might follow from this, concluded Martensen, most of which Descartes himself could not have foreseen, ranging from the “spiritualism” of Fichte and the crude materialism of other thinkers to a revival of the earlier mysticism of Jacob Böhme.

The influence of Martensen’s lectures probably explains, as Niels Thulstrup suggests,⁴ the philosophical content of the satirical play *Willibald* which Kierkegaard wrote for students in 1838, for this work deals light-heartedly with the whole development of modern philosophy from Descartes to Hegel. Although the satirical intention obviously precludes any serious discussion of philosophical questions, their formulation does at least reveal those aspects of Cartesian thought which had attracted Kierkegaard’s attention. Most of the play’s philosophical observations are put in the mouth of a grotesque philosopher, Hr.v. Springgaase, “an insignificant little man, one of whose legs is a good deal shorter than the other.” In order to illustrate his philosophical ideas, Springgaase “is accustomed, after first raising himself on his longer leg, to abandon that illusory standpoint in order to attain deeper reality”: he speaks eloquently of “the immortal Cartesius from whom dates the whole of modern philosophy.” “It was Cartesius who pronounced the remarkable, ever unforgettable words *Cogito*

³*Papirer*, II C 18.

⁴Søren Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende videnskabelig Efterskrift*, edited with an introduction and commentary by Niels Thulstrup (2 vols.; Copenhagen: 1962), II, 282.

ergo sum and *De Omnibus disputandum est*, words which in every well-regulated speculative state ought to be taught with the confirmation-lessons, and of which at least no theological candidate ought to be ignorant since without them no speculative director of souls can hope to attend successfully to his difficult vocation." These two principles should be treated as "the State's philosophical watchword, a palladium which will remove all heresy and which will remind us, like Adam's words, of the creation of our intellectual life." But the main character Willibald (a kind of projection of Kierkegaard himself) admits that he is not entirely convinced by Springgaase's eloquence and is therefore ordered to go to the "world-historical high-school" (i.e., of the Hegelians) for further illumination. Unfortunately, the construction of this school is not yet finished (like the Hegelian system!) only the *atrium* having been completed—even though this part of the building is capable of accommodating four professors. In this satirical play, Kierkegaard sees modern philosophy as a linear development from Descartes to Hegel, and from the very outset he stresses the importance of the two famous Cartesian principles of the *cogito* and *de omnibus dubitandum est*.

Already in 1836–1837—in the very first mention of Descartes in the Journals—Kierkegaard had spoken somewhat scornfully of the intellectual bankruptcy of a modern European culture which uses words and principles without making any genuine effort to give them real meaning.

It is only by an extraordinary chance that philosophy has acquired such a long historical tail as from Descartes to Hegel, which is, however, very short compared with the one used in its day "from the creation of the world." . . . But when one sees how necessary it has become in later times to begin every philosophical work with the sentence "Once upon a time there was a man and his name was Descartes"—one is tempted to compare it with the well-known method of the monks. But even if a few gifted men are able to save themselves, it only looks more dangerous for those who have to live on others. They have to grasp at the terminology as it rushes past them at a furious speed, which makes their expressions so various and so motley (a sort of posy or anathology) that just as a foreigner talking French can easily make a *double entendre* they often go on saying the same thing throughout a whole book, using different expressions taken from various systems.⁵

Reality becomes confused because people "easily convince one another owing to the wholly vague and inexact meaning of words." The result is that this "wild hunt after ideas" has led to few positive achievements, and it might well be a good thing, concludes Kierkegaard, to pause in the midst of this frantic activity and reflect upon its real purpose and significance.

Only in 1842 does Kierkegaard seem to have undertaken the serious study of Descartes's own works, for it is in this year that he first makes use of the *Opera philosophica* in the Amsterdam edition of 1692. He seems to have restricted his study to the Latin text since there is no mention of the French editions. The Journals also indicate that he read Descartes along with other seventeenth-century rationalists like Leibniz and Spinoza. In November, 1842, he jotted

⁵ *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. and edited by Alexander Dru (Oxford: 1938), Entry 88 (quoted hereafter as *Journals*). Cf. *Papirer*, I A 328, where the Danish editors point out that the expression: "There was once a man . . ." recalls an observation of Martensen's in the *Maanedsskrift for Litteratur*, XVI (1836).

down his first quotation from Descartes, a sentence from the beginning of the *Discourse on Method*, which he was later to use in his little volume of *Prefaces* published in 1844,⁶ while the very next entry refers explicitly to the *Meditations*. These and other entries made in the *Journals* at about the same time suggest that he read with some care the *Discourse on Method*, *Meditations*, *Principles of Philosophy*, and the *Treatise on Passions*. His perusal of the *Meditations* led him to reflect that a true philosopher does not necessarily have to express his thought in the form of an elaborate "system." "Descartes," he writes, "has in large measure expressed his system in the first six *Meditations*. So one does not always need to write systems. I will publish 'philosophical reflections' in parts and in them I will set forth my provisional views. Perhaps it would not be a bad idea to write in Latin."⁷ Although Kierkegaard did not follow up his idea of writing in Latin—indeed by a special dispensation he was able to present his Master of Arts thesis on *The Concept of Irony* in his mother tongue—the titles of the later *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* suggest that he was not unmindful of Descartes's example.

In view of Hegel's approval of the Cartesian principle of doubt as the starting point for a philosophy without presuppositions, it is not surprising that Kierkegaard should also have devoted a good deal of attention to this theme, to which his attention had already been called, as we have seen, by Martensen and which inspired the important, but unfinished, posthumous work, *Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* of 1842–1843.⁸ Moreover, the first part of this work, like the beginning of Descartes's *Discourse*, is largely autobiographical. For Johannes Climacus-Kierkegaard, the question of doubt is not merely an intellectual issue, but one of great personal significance. Not only had Kierkegaard's reading of the Romantics made him suspicious of the various forms of extreme rationalism, but the desperate need to find some "Archimedean point" (a phrase also used by Descartes) for his own tormented existence made this question of doubt particularly important.

From the very first, Kierkegaard appears to have made serious reservations about the predominantly intellectual character of Cartesian doubt, and this conviction was to influence all his later thinking on the subject. Descartes was, he declared, seriously inconsistent when he restricted doubt to the purely mental side of human existence, leaving action and morality provisionally intact. In a forceful comment in the *Journals* for 1842 he wrote:

What will really catch out the sceptics is ethics. All of them since Descartes have maintained that during the time in which they doubted, they might not say anything definite with

⁶ Cf. *Papirer*, IV A 1; *Samlede Vaerker* (3rd ed. in 20 vols.; Copenhagen: 1962–1964), V, 248. The sentence is: "Inter accidentia sola, non autem inter formas substantiales individuorum ejusdem speciei, plus et minus reperitur," which in the French version reads: "Il n'y a du plus ou du moins qu'entre les accidents, et non point entre les formes ou natures des individus d'une même espèce." Descartes says that in this he is merely following "the common opinion of philosophers."

⁷ *Papirer*, IV A 2.
⁸ Cf. *Johannes Climacus or, De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, trans. with an assessment by T. H. Croxall (London: 1958). Our later quotations are taken from this edition. The Danish text is given in *Papirer*, IV B 1–17.

regard to knowledge, but that, on the other hand, they might indeed act, because in that respect one could be satisfied with probability. What a monstrous contradiction! As if it were not far more terrible to do something about which one was doubtful (because one thereby takes a responsibility upon oneself) than to state something. Or was it because ethics was in itself certain? So there was something which doubt could not reach!⁹

These observations bring us to the very heart of Kierkegaard's view of the question. For him doubt is not mere scepticism, a kind of casual suspension of belief, but a deliberate act of *will* which refuses to believe. The doubter doubts because he chooses to do so. Otherwise he would remain in a state of mere uncertainty, which is something quite different from doubt. "Johannes Climacus saw that in doubt there must be an act of will; because otherwise doubting becomes identical with being uncertain."¹⁰ It could certainly be argued that Cartesian doubt is voluntary in so far as it advocates a deliberate abstention from belief, but Kierkegaard thinks that this voluntary element is restricted to intellectual questions and does not penetrate to the real basis of the will; a purely mental attitude which does not reach right down to the deeper levels of personal experience can never express a genuine choice. Superficially, doubt, as the starting point of a philosophy without presuppositions, might seem to be a very illuminating principle, and Hegel taught that only through doubt could the philosopher come to "pure Being." "Only he [i.e., Johannes Climacus] heard that through doubting everything one came to pure Being. He felt as he did when in his childhood he played the game of blind man's buff."¹¹ When it is thus limited to the intellectual sphere, doubt may seem capable of leading to the loftiest philosophical achievements, although in fact these are quite illusory when tested by the stern reality of "existence" because the "negativity" of doubt is never taken in earnest. The trouble with modern philosophy is that "it has never seriously done what it said. Its doubt is mere child's play."¹²

Since the famous principle of *Cogito ergo sum* is derived directly from the notion of doubt, it too must remain a "petrified proposition."¹³ Kierkegaard takes up Martensen's criticism of the somewhat barren nature of the *Cogito*, but expresses himself much more forcibly: "Descartes's sentence: 'I think, therefore I am' is, logically considered, a play upon words, because this 'I am' logically means nothing but 'I am thinking' or 'I think'."¹⁴

The point is re-affirmed in the *Unscientific Postscript* where Kierkegaard insists that "for an abstract thinker to try to prove his existence by the fact that he thinks is a curious contradiction." As for the Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum* which "has often been repeated," it is clear that "if the 'I' which is the subject of *Cogito* means an individual human being, the proposition proves nothing: 'I am thinking, ergo I am'; but if I *am* thinking what wonder that I *am*!?" If, on the other hand, the philosopher affirms that he is dealing with the 'pure ego,' that is,

⁹ *Papirer*, IV A 72. (Cf. *Journals*, 426.)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, IV B 5(8).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, IV B 8(13). Literally "playing the game of going to grandmother's door." I adopt the translation of T. H. Croxall (*Johannes Climacus*, p. 183, para. 17).

¹² *Journals*, 355.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 481.

'a purely conceptual existence,' what exact meaning can be given to the *ergo*? There is no conclusion here, for the proposition is a tautology."¹⁵

Descartes thus appears to Kierkegaard as a curiously divided thinker: on the one hand, he seemed to doubt everything "with honest seriousness" and yet on the other, by refusing to tamper with traditional morality, "he left everything standing." Even stranger still, this philosopher, who advocated a radical re-appraisal of human values in the name of rational certainty, urged men to accept divine revelation, even though this might conflict with the "natural light" on which philosophy was ultimately supposed to rest.¹⁶

In spite of the undoubted importance of his achievements, Kierkegaard thinks Descartes may ultimately be seen to have had a bad influence on the development of modern philosophy. The great respect paid to him and his method of doubt has served to inhibit genuinely creative thought. People have tended to believe that, since Descartes himself doubted, it could be assumed that he has done it for everybody, and the attitude of modern thinkers to Descartes, notes Kierkegaard boldly, is not dissimilar from that of certain religious people toward Christ who is deemed to have died for all. "Or perhaps one philosopher," observes Johannes Climacus, "has doubted for all (as Christ suffered for all), so that now we have only to believe this, and do not have to doubt ourselves. In that case our proposition ('Philosophy begins with doubt') is certainly not stated quite correctly: for then philosophy does not for everyone begin with doubt, but with believing that philosopher So-and-So has doubted for him."¹⁷ Certainly, it is Descartes's successors rather than Descartes himself who have been responsible for this aberration. In spite of the obvious restrictions he imposed upon doubt, Descartes, "that honest, venerable and humble philosopher," did "what he said he did." Moreover, he clearly pointed out at the beginning of the *Discourse on Method* that his philosophizing was prompted in the first place by personal motives, that it had "significance only for himself and was in part constructed on the confusion of his knowledge in his earlier years."¹⁸ By failing to observe this point and so to raise the question whether after all Descartes may have been to some extent mistaken, later philosophers seem to have "modelled themselves on the form sometimes found in fairy-stories, in which by always repeating everything that has gone before and adding a little new to it, one finally has an interminable series of things: stick beat dog, dog bite cat, cat scratch man . . ."¹⁹

As he pondered this question more carefully, Kierkegaard came to feel that after all the older philosophers—the Greek sceptics, for example—had had a more clear-sighted view of the whole question. Already they had seen the importance of the primary factor upon which Kierkegaard lays so much stress—the connection between doubt and will. "Not even the Sceptics doubted for doubting's sake—*immanente*, a thing which in other contexts is extolled. But in order

¹⁵ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 281.

¹⁶ *Papirer*, IV C 14.

¹⁷ *Johannes Climacus*, ed. Croxall, p. 137.

¹⁸ *Fear and Trembling*, trans. by Robert Payne (Oxford: 1946), p. viii.

¹⁹ *Journals*, 260.

to doubt one must will to do so.”²⁰ Kierkegaard then tries to distinguish between the “inquiring” doubt of modern philosophers and the “retiring” doubt of the Greek sceptics (*epoche*). “Retiring” doubt deliberately “withholds assent”—and Kierkegaard in his draft refers to a passage in Diogenes Laertius “which I have noted in my edition” as one of the sources of this idea²¹—and this means that such doubt is always the result of strenuous effort since it constantly refuses to compromise with the comfortable attitude of dogmatic philosophers who put forward their opinions as absolute truths. “Proficiency in doubt is not something achieved in a few weeks or days,” but constitutes “the task of a lifetime.”²² In doubting by “an act of will,” the Greek sceptics did not deny the validity of sensation or immediate cognition; error, they affirmed, comes from the conclusions one draws. In this respect, Descartes was at one with Plato and Aristotle in affirming that immediate sensation and immediate cognition cannot deceive, but that “error has its root in the will, which is overhasty in drawing conclusions.”²³ It is perhaps a pity that the French philosopher did not properly develop the implications of this valid observation. In any case, Greek scepticism was concerned with a “state of mind,” not with the validity of particular beliefs: it sought a doubt that was complete and uncompromising. The “inquiring” doubt of modern philosophers, on the other hand, is not genuine doubt, “least of all, when I know everything, and simply have doubts about how I shall arrange it. . . .”²⁴ It is already obvious in Descartes—and still more so in Hegel—that doubt is simply a device for reaching ultimate rational certainty. This very point is presupposed at the outset. But Kierkegaard constantly stresses—and once again he believes himself to be in agreement with the old sceptics—that if doubt involves a genuine act of will it cannot be overcome by knowledge. “This factor of the will must be removed if one is to cease doubting. Similarly one has to *will* doubt to continue; only then doubt is certainly not conquered by knowledge.”²⁵ The Greek sceptic, as Kierkegaard observes in *Philosophical Fragments*, “did not doubt by virtue of his knowledge but by an act of will. . . . From this it follows that doubt can be overcome only by a free act, an act of will, as every Greek sceptic would understand as soon as he had understood himself.”²⁶ Or, as he puts it in some philosophical notes jotted down in 1842–1843: “Doubt is in no way halted by the necessity of knowledge (that there is something which one must know), but through the categorical imperative of the will (that there is something which one cannot will). That is how the will becomes concrete in its activity, how it shows itself to be something other than an airy phantom.”²⁷

Instead of being satisfied with a mere criticism of the Cartesian position, Kierkegaard, in *Johannes Climacus*, goes on to give his own constructive view of

²⁰ *Johannes Climacus*, p. 182, para. 15.

²¹ *Papirer*, IV B 21. Cf. also a useful note in the edition of *Philosophical Fragments* by D. F. Swenson, Niels Thulstrup, and H. V. Hong (Princeton: 1962), p. 248 (note to p. 102 of text).

²² *Fear and Trembling*, p. ix.

²³ *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 103. Cf. *Papirer*, V B 15(11).

²⁴ *Papirer*, IV B 13 (21).

²⁵ *Johannes Climacus*, p. 183, para. 15.

²⁶ *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 102.

²⁷ *Papirer*, IV C 60.

the question. Doubt, he stresses, is a "relationship" involving "ideality" and "reality." Now it is certainly possible to consider this relationship conceptually in terms of "thought" and its "object," and so raise the question of cognition, because "there is already, in the very nature of things, an opposition between reality and ideality. The former gives us the particular example, set in time and space. The latter gives us the universal" (p. 184). But this is not the end of the matter because as soon as ideality is brought into active relationship with reality, the stress is laid upon the element of will, upon the factor of *interest*—upon what interests *me*. As long as I remain on the plane of "reflection," the whole process remains a "dichomatic" one ("thought" and "object"), but with the introduction of my personal consciousness, a new factor is added and we are dealing with a "trichomatic" process. The mistake of modern philosophers is to have seen man too much as a "reflective" being, thereby forgetting that the "reflective" self and the "real" self are by no means identical. When I view a matter with "concern" or "interest," I realize that I must assume the responsibility of following a certain course of action and this at once brings me face to face with the reality of ethical choice. In this respect, the elder Fichte was much nearer to the truth than Descartes when he affirmed: "I act, therefore I am," for he thereby refused to accord thought priority over action. In other words, much more fundamental to doubt than reflection is the basic fact of *freedom*. Doubt which involves active choice or decision can never be merely disinterested because it originates in a much deeper level of consciousness. Curiously enough, Descartes himself seems to have obtained a momentary glimpse of this truth when, as Kierkegaard points out, he emphasized in the fourth *Meditation* that freedom should take precedence over thought, but in his discussion of doubt he failed to profit from his own insight, for he made thought, not freedom, the absolute value.²⁸ As *Johannes Climacus* insists, the essential point about true doubt is that it inevitably affects the personality of the doubter: unlike mathematical and metaphysical questions which remain impersonal and objective, existential doubt brings the individual into personal relationship with those philosophical problems which concern him.²⁹

Since freedom is really action (decision), it cannot be reduced to the status of a mere concept or abstract idea, for if it ceases to be action, it ceases to exist at all. As Kierkegaard was to put it later in *The Sickness unto Death* of 1849, when we are moving in the domain of pure thought where "there is no question of the real individual man," "the transition from having understood something to the doing of it" may well come about "by necessity," as a "systematic" philosopher like Hegel would readily affirm. Yet this smooth piece of intellectual legerdemain merely conceals the real difficulty, which is that every existing individual has to choose the meaning of his own life. The fatal mistake of the famous Cartesian *Cogito* lay in its confident assumption that "to think is to be."³⁰ As soon as we accord priority to freedom, the possibility of this oversimplified mental equa-

²⁸ *Johannes Climacus*, p. 178.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 130–134.

³⁰ *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. by W. Lowrie (Princeton: 1941), p. 151.

tion is removed. The transition from thought to action immediately involves, as Kierkegaard has stressed from the first, a question of ethics, and we cannot move from the plane of intellectual possibility to that of moral decision without effecting a leap or discontinuity in our existence. To choose (to be free) is precisely "to exist." In so far as true doubt is "existential" it will always remain "dialectical," and as Kierkegaard puts it in his notes to *Johannes Climacus*, "to doubt is to dialectise."³¹

Kierkegaard recognizes that Descartes—like Leibniz—is quite aware of the danger of reducing all forms of reality to a single "substance," and the Cartesian separation of mind and body, for example, may seem to accept the principle of discontinuity, but this purely metaphysical distinction ultimately emerges as no true contradiction, for it is absorbed into the higher harmony which God, in His goodness, has ensured for His entire creation. Mind and body may seem—and probably are—*different*, but they constitute parts of a well-regulated universal mechanism whose smooth functioning was ensured by God from the moment of its creation.³² Moreover, the difficulty of such a system is that, whatever the intellectual satisfaction it may produce, it fails to satisfy the deeper requirements of the individual human consciousness. The being of God Himself, on which the entire philosophical edifice ultimately seems to rest, remains impersonal and abstract, aloof from the "interest" which forms the warp and woof of the individual man's *real* existence. However ingenious the *proofs* of God's existence—whether they take the Cartesian-Anselm form of the ontological argument or even Spinoza's alleged "improvement" upon it³³—the thinker starts with the idea, not the reality it represents. His "idea" may well be true—if the reality exists; but the ultimate difficulty is to lay hold of God's factual existence, for this is something that can never be achieved by purely conceptual means. Indeed, the reality of God is more likely to emerge from the dialectical interplay of the various elements which make up the human personality, that is, from the exercise of human freedom, than from a process of detached intellectual contemplation: as soon as the individual realizes that his "existence" is incommensurable with the "concept" and that the affirmation of his own freedom leads to the discontinuity of "thought" and "existence," he is prepared for the revelation of a Divine Being whose presence is made known to him through the tensions and contradictions of his own personal life rather than through meditation on the philosophical characteristics of "pure Being"!

To some extent Kierkegaard may well have been influenced by Hegel's view of Descartes, for the German philosopher had in fact stressed in his *History of Philosophy*, that "the doubting of Descartes does not occur in the interests of freedom . . . [Descartes] wants to arrive at what is fixed and objective, and not a factor of subjectivity."³⁴ In other words, he was not concerned that *I*, as an

³¹ *Papirer*, IV B 5(14).

³² Cf. *Papirer*, IV C 12, where he refers to the *systema assistentiae* and to the Leibnizian *harmonia praestabilita*.

³³ Cf. *Philosophical Fragments*, pp. 49 ff.; *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 297–299; *Papirer*, V B 5(3).

³⁴ Quoted by T. H. Croxall in *Johannes Climacus*, p. 181, n.1. Cf. Hegel, *op. cit.*, trans. Haldane (1955), III, 224 ff.

individual, should find the truth but that the *truth* should be unveiled. "Yet this last [i.e., principle of subjectivity]," adds Hegel, "comes along with the other, for it is from the starting-point of my thought that I attain my object. The impulse of freedom is likewise fundamental." If, as we have seen, Martensen was to treat (like Hegel himself) the Cartesian principles of doubt and the *Cogito* as the source of "Protestant subjectivity," this was simply because post-Cartesian thought was given a development which its originator could neither have foreseen nor approved.

Kierkegaard was eventually led to ask himself whether "doubt" was after all a genuinely valid starting point for philosophy. It might be more profitable, he believed, to abandon the negative, impersonal approach of modern philosophers for the more positive attitude of Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle who stress the importance of *wonder* as the inspiration of true philosophizing. Curiously enough, Kierkegaard found confirmation of this in Descartes himself who, as he noted, pointed out in the *Treatise on Passions* that "wonder" (*admiration*) is a passion that has no opposite. Kierkegaard refers explicitly to this point in an important note to *The Concept of Dread* where he observes:

In his treatise *De affectionibus* Descartes calls attention to the fact that there is a passion corresponding to every other, except to the passion of wonder. His demonstration in detail is rather weak, but it is interesting to me that he made an exception of wonder, since, as everybody knows, this concept of wonder, according to both Plato and Aristotle, is the passion of philosophy and the passion with which philosophy began. Moreover, envy corresponds to wonder, and modern philosophy would be inclined to talk of doubt as the opposite of wonder. Here precisely lies the fundamental error of modern philosophy, namely, that it wants to begin with the negative instead of with the positive, which is always the first! . . . The question whether the positive or the negative is first is exceedingly important, and so far as I know, the only modern philosopher who has pronounced in favour of the positive is Herbart.³⁵

Even when considering doubt itself, philosophers, hypnotized by the antithesis of "doubt" and "knowledge," have failed to perceive the importance of the real impulse with which it should be linked—faith. Kierkegaard's "existential" and "dialectical" conception of doubt inevitably leads him into religious—and ultimately Christian—categories. It is through the free affirmation of will that man comes to acknowledge the "paradox" of faith. Without freedom man could not come to a realization of the fact of sin. This is precisely what Christianity teaches—that sin lies in the will, the defiant will, but that man cannot come to an adequate sense of his own sinfulness without divine help. The Christian and Cartesian views thus stand opposed on a fundamental issue: whereas Descartes's *Cogito* really means that "to think is to be," the Christian faith teaches that "to believe is to be."³⁶ Toward the end of *Johannes Climacus*, Kierkegaard develops the idea that true existential doubt must lead ultimately to a form of spiritual renewal in the life of the individual—to a genuinely religious "repetition." With the notion of "repetition," however, we leave the

³⁵ *The Concept of Dread*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton: 1946), p. 130 n. Kierkegaard was probably thinking of J. F. Herbart's *Metaphysics*, II, paras. 201–204.

³⁶ *The Sickness unto Death*, p. 151.

whole domain of metaphysical speculation of the Cartesian type and move into the region of "dialectics" and "paradox." Yet, when once the true nature of "repetition" is understood, further light is shed on the human significance of doubt itself, which no longer constitutes a merely convenient piece of philosophical methodology but, as Kierkegaard himself puts it, becomes a "possibility" that is "essential to existence"—"the mystery of human life."³⁷

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³⁷ *Johannes Climacus*, p. 184.