

OPPOSITES, CONTRADICTIONARIES, AND MEDIATION IN KIERKEGAARD'S CRITIQUE OF HEGEL

1. INTRODUCTION

It is more or less uncontested that the heart of Kierkegaard's thought is strictly at odds with some, but not all, of the central tenets of Hegel's idealism.¹ Because the central themes of Kierkegaard's philosophy concern the individual's path to religious subjectivity and ultimately to Christianity, it is often emphasized that the main points of contention between Kierkegaard and Hegelianism are ethical and religious in nature. As both Kierkegaard and his religious pseudonym Anti-Climacus argue, the *telos* of existence is the transformation to *self-transparent* Christian faith before God. Merold Westphal remarks that, following Augustine, Kierkegaard presses on the point that faith is not a species of belief, and thus of the intellect, but of the *will*. The movement of faith, then, is not from epistemic confusion to further clarity and certainty about an object of belief or vice versa; rather, the movement of faith involves the direction of the will and the *transformation* of the heart in re-prioritizing one's ends of action.² In other words, faith is not simply an epistemic category but centrally involves human praxis and activity. For Hegel, on the other hand, the *telos* of life, documented in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is to move beyond a relatively confused mode of faith as *pistis* to scientific and philosophical clarity. In broad terms, then, disagreement between Kierkegaard and Hegel comes down to, on the one hand, the emphasis each places on the relationship between faith and reason and the role both the will and the intellect play in human flourishing.

I believe that this core difference between these two thinkers is indisputable. Strict emphasis on their different views about ethical and religious modes of life, however, exposes an undesirable one-sidedness in the interpretation of Kierkegaard's reception (positive or negative)

of Hegelian philosophy. Because the driving force of Hegel's idealism in its epistemological, metaphysical, historical, ethical, and religious modes is his *logic*, to embark on a critique of him would have to involve a trenchant estimation of the viability of some or all of his logical doctrines. In other words, to *really* take issue with Hegel or Hegelianism in general, Kierkegaard will have to dig below the surface of Hegel's idealism to its dialectical foundations. In fact, Kierkegaard does just that. So, to avoid one-sidedness of interpretation, we need to see how Kierkegaard engages Hegel's logic.

In gaining clarity about Kierkegaard's engagement with Hegel on the issue of logic, there is no better way to begin than to look at what he has to say about Hegel's doctrine of mediation (*Vermittlung*). At the core of the theory of mediation, stripped of all its complexity, is the notion of the conceptual and dialectical unification of *relative opposites*. Kierkegaard, perhaps to the surprise of some, actually favors the broad contours of the theory of mediation. However, the central issue of this paper pertains to Kierkegaard's *emphatic* denial of one of Hegel's important theses involving the doctrine of mediation. This is the thesis that there are *all and only* relative opposites. In many ways, I believe that Kierkegaard's overall thought stands or falls on his successfully demonstrating Hegel's thesis unsuccessful. As I show, this is due to the way Hegel envisions the oppositional relationship between faith and speculative reason. For Hegel, these opposites are relative and not absolute. Because Kierkegaard's notion of faith essentially involves a willed activity of self-emptying before God, he must show how faith and speculative reason are absolutely and categorically distinct.

Part of what motivates Kierkegaard's philosophical view of opposites, and his hesitation about Hegel's thesis, is his persistent endorsement of what I call the "classical logic perspective."³ The "classical logical perspective," rather than limiting the will, actually liberates

it from the chains of dialectical immanence often associated with Hegel's logic and metaphysics. This is because from his logical perspective, Kierkegaard has a far more *expansive* account of opposition than Hegel. Hegel finds much of the "classical logical perspective's" positions (particularly about the law of identity, the principle of non-contradiction, and the law of the excluded middle) "trivial."⁴ We might think that Hegel's taking aim at the "classical logical perspective" has only the kind of technical significance that philosophers of logic care about. However, Kierkegaard, in his own style, sets out to demonstrate what he sees is the *despair* and philosophical insidiousness that follows from Hegel's thesis. For Kierkegaard, I show, if our subjectivity is genuinely an issue for us, if the ultimate concerns of being human are properly reflected on and are realized in moral and religious activity, particularly in the activity of the will, then the positions that underlie "the classical logical perspective" are far from trivial. They actually have to do with our very being in the world, the possibility of our realization of ethical and religious projects. Logic—its foundations, and its status—is, then, of utmost importance for his philosophy of existence. Underlying Kierkegaard's existential program is a battle of logics. The battle is fought over the notion of opposites. Hegel claims that all opposites are relative, while Kierkegaard favors the "classical logical perspective" by arguing that some opposites are *contradictories*.

Being mindful of the kinds of opposites and their importance for logic and existence, Kierkegaard is keen to point out the important and illuminating exceptions to Hegel's thesis. Where we find those exceptions is in those places where Kierkegaard highlights *essential differences* between forms of existence. Where he finds essential differences between forms of existence he does not find relative opposites but contradictories. In this paper I look at two places

where he finds essential differences between forms of existence. In both places Kierkegaard argues in favor of there being *absolute* differences or contradictories.

The first comes in *Either/Or* II, in which the dutiful Judge William tells his aesthetic friend, the author of the fragmentary papers of *Either/Or* I, that he views his existence through a kind of Hegelian lens. Absolute differences, for example, the one between an aesthetic form of life and an ethical form of life, are not meaningful to him. Practically and existentially speaking, if they are not meaningful to him, then he can find no compelling reason to choose the one over the other. This, according to Judge William, is the aesthete's despair: the inability to make life-impacting, future-aiming, ethical choices and commitments. The aesthete's reasons to forgo making such choices are rooted in the way he views the *relation* between his aesthetic view of life and an ethical one. They are, for him, only *relatively different*. For Judge William, a theoretical stance such as this has existential fallout: a life of despair. Judge William, then, offers a practical argument against Hegel's thesis that there are all and only relative opposites.

A second place we see Kierkegaard argue against Hegel's thesis is in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In this work, his pseudonym Johannes Climacus issues what I call an "argument from insufficient difference." In this argument Climacus shows that, pace Hegel, the speculative philosophical project and Christianity are insufficiently different to be conceptually unified. Climacus, like Judge William who argues for the absolute difference between aesthetic and ethical forms of existence, argues that speculative philosophy and Christianity are absolutely contradictory. For Climacus, doing speculative metaphysics and concretely realizing one's religious beliefs are *absolutely* different sorts of things; these practices do not stand in relation to each other as relative opposites do. If they are not related as relative opposites, then they cannot be conceptually unified. Kierkegaard, then, argues that Hegel's thesis is false by highlighting the

coherence and non-triviality of contradictories in logic and the philosophy of existence. For Kierkegaard, if there are no contradictories, but only relative opposites, then there is no basis for the ethical and religious changes the self can initiate or undergo—e.g., no movement from a life of speculative reflection to a concrete and attentive religious existence.

In what follows, I begin with an account of the relationship between opposites and contradictories and tie this up with Hegel's argument for his thesis that there are all and only relative opposites in his *Encyclopaedia Logic*. Second, I develop Kierkegaard's argument for the importance of absolute contradictories in *Either/Or*. Lastly, I look at Climacus's "argument for insufficient difference." I claim that Climacus's argument is successful in proving Hegel's thesis that there are all and only relative opposites false.

2. HEGEL'S THESIS

In the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, Hegel argues for the thesis that no two things are absolutely different or opposed to each other; rather, opposites are relatively related to each other. He writes, "[e]verything stands in opposition. There is in fact nothing in heaven or on earth, either in the spiritual or the natural world, that exhibits the abstract 'either-or.'"⁵ The thesis that there are all and only relative opposites propounds a number of complicated ideas. Hegel's endorsement of his thesis is captured in his claim that there is nothing that "exhibits the abstract 'either-or.'" He means to suggest by this that of all opposites, none are actually related to each other as contradictories, "as either positive or negative."⁶ Perhaps more often than not, Hegel's thesis is described as espousing a "both-and" over the "either-or." At this very early stage, allow me to unpack the general meaning and differences associated with the notions of "opposite" and "contradictory." This will help us get clear about Hegel's thesis.

Hegel argues that *all* logical and ontological properties *only* have relative opposites.⁷ This is controversial.⁸ A relative opposite is classically understood to involve the notion that some property and its opposite are *necessary* for each other to obtain.⁹ There is some determining relationship that obtains between each property and its correlating opposite. In other words, for one to obtain, the other must obtain also. Thus, a relative opposite is a “necessary other” of its correlating opposite.¹⁰ The property of being hot is the relative opposite of the property of being cold, or the property of being something in particular is the relative opposite of the property of being nothing at all. These properties are relative opposites, as opposed to being absolutely different, because for the one to be the other must also be. They are not strictly speaking contraries, either. Contraries are opposites that are not said of the same thing at the same time. If something is healthy it cannot also at the same time be sick. In this case, as opposed, for example, to that of colors that have shades, there is no intermediate state between being healthy and being sick. In other words, depending on the kind of thing (e.g., a complex organism), it is either healthy or sick.

For Hegel, any philosophical account of some property, say hotness, also requires looking to what it is not. That is, for a complete account of the property of “hot,” we need to also see that “hot” is what it is in virtue of its being necessarily related to “cold.” Without the property of “cold” there would not be the property of “hot,” and vice versa. Jon Stewart, in his discussion of Hegel’s account of mediation, offers this passage from Hegel:

In the positive and the negative we think we have an absolute distinction. Both terms, however, are implicitly the same, and therefore we could call the positive “the negative” if we liked, and conversely we could call the negative “the positive” as well. Consequently, assets and debts are not two particular, independently subsisting species of assets. What is negative for the debtor is something positive for the creditor. The same applies to a road to the east: it is equally a road to the west. Thus, what is positive and

what is negative are essentially conditioned by one another, and are what they are only in their relation to one another. There cannot be the north pole of a magnet without the south pole nor the south pole without the north pole.¹¹

Like the properties “hot” and “cold,” our very notions of positive and negative, the properties of east and west, and the properties of south and north are relative opposites insofar as they are mutually determining of each other.

In addition, this passage from Hegel discusses another aspect of his view of relative opposites. Unlike contraries, relative opposites are such that something can be the bearer of both at the same time. In other words, something can be both F and the opposite of F at the same time. This speaks to his view of conceptual mediation or unification of opposites that he approvingly says goes against the classical law of the excluded middle. At a conceptual level, properties are the same in virtue of some common thing they share. For example, hot and cold are the same in virtue of being temperatures; they share a common genus. Things too can be both hot and cold, but only as long as we understand these properties as situated along a scale or gradient that includes intermediate cases. On a scale or gradient of temperature, a single thing can be both hot and cold. For example, the surface of the asphalt directly in the sun is hot, but it is also cold, cold in relation to the surface temperature of the sun.

Hegel’s view of opposites reveals a much more *comprehensive* picture as it underlies his theological and metaphysical conception of the relationship between God and creation. For Hegel, creation emerges from God’s own self-determining activity. Creation is the necessary movement of Spirit as it flips into its necessary other, and flops back by absorbing difference back into itself. The creating activity of Spirit’s self-determination expressly requires that the terms of the relation between Spirit and its necessary other—finite creation—are merely relative. But as relative differences, their identity far outweighs their differences. Indeed, Hegel

maintains in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* that “What God creates God himself is.”¹² William Desmond interprets it points out that this claim amounts to a doctrine of God’s own self-creation—God’s becoming himself through a process of self-differentiation.¹³

The first problem with this doctrine is that as an explication of Spirit, difference is found to be merely relative difference. Spirit’s other is a relative opposite and not absolutely different. But if what comes about out of this process of self-differentiation is the relative opposite of Spirit, then (1) the process of self-becoming is necessary, and (2) there is an identity between Spirit and its “creation.” The reason why the process of self-becoming is necessary is that the opposites at work in Hegel’s system are not only relative to each other, but are necessarily mutually determining. This means that in order for Spirit, or God, to be itself, it must seek out the determination of its other, and the other must seek the determination of Spirit. As Desmond explains,

Within the Hegelian interplay, (O) [origin] determines (C) [creation] and (C) determines (O); hence they are mutually determining...More, both are necessary to each other in this process of mutual determination: each is the other of the other, and hence necessary to the self-definition, or self-determination of the other. That is to say, each is necessary to the other as part of a more inclusive process which allows self-determination, a process which indeed is determining itself in the interplay of its participants.¹⁴

Hegel’s thesis that there are all and only relative opposites also places the principle of non-contradiction into question. If there are only relative opposites, then no properties and their opposites are incompatible with each other. That is, there are no opposites that are *contradictories*. This, of course, is not so from the “classical logical perspective.” Let’s take the example of hot and cold again. If we consider hot and cold in more detail, we see that even on a temperature gradient, hot and cold can quite easily be seen to be incompatible with each other. The asphalt’s being hot is incompatible with the idea of its being cold. If the asphalt is 100° then it cannot at the same time be colder than this. It cannot also be 50°. While we are still speaking

of hot and cold on a gradient, there is sense in which the incompatibility of something being both hot and cold at the same time and in the same respect is an example of the principle of non-contradiction. Asphalt cannot be both 100° and not 100°.

To be fair to Hegel at this stage, though, it would be negligent to not point out that all properties and their opposites are *not necessarily* incompatible. If Hegel is right that there are all and only relative opposite properties, then he'd also be right to point out that there are no contradictories either. This he does, in the passage above, by claiming that “positive” and “negative” and all other properties and their opposites are not *absolute distinctions*. In other words, relative opposites are not contradictories. This is for two reasons. First, from the “classical logical perspective,” contradictory opposites are so because, necessarily, everything must have one or the other of them. That is, everything is either green or not green, a square or not a square, a father or not a father. This is not the case with relative opposites (and even contraries—a third kind of opposite). Relative opposites are *not* such that everything *must* always have one or the other of them. Not everything must be either healthy or sick, either hot or cold, either dead or alive, or either a mother or a child. We can see this if we consider some sort of thing that, given the kind of thing it is, (1) must have one or another contradictory concept or property and (2) cannot have any one of these sets of opposites. Take *ideas*, for example. According to the “classical logical perspective,” it is a necessary truth that ideas are either green or not green, either square or not square, etc. However, it is not a necessary truth that ideas are either healthy or sick, either hot or cold, or either dead or alive. They cannot have any of these sets of opposites. Ideas, again depending on the ontology, occupy an *entirely different genus* of existing things, if they exist at all, than physical sorts of things. This is one reason not all

properties and their opposites are contradictories. That is, everything is either green or not green, a square or not a square, a father or not a father.

The second reason relative opposites are not contradictories is that contradictories are those that, necessarily, cannot be said of the same thing at the same time. As relative opposites, being a father and being a child are not incompatible. Something can be both at the same time. There is, in principle, no issue of incompatibility here between these opposites. From the “classical logical perspective,” contradictories cannot be said of the same thing at the same time. Something cannot be both a father and not a father at the same time.

The thesis that Kierkegaard thinks is false is not that there aren't relative opposites, but that there are *all and only* relative opposites. As we've seen already, there's initial reason to reject Hegel's thesis given that relative opposites cannot be said of things that occupy different genera, whereas contradictories can be meaningfully spoken about in this regard (e.g., both ideas and human beings are either green or not green). In the remainder of this paper, however, I consider two arguments Kierkegaard, by means of his interest in the Danish debate about Hegelian mediation, offers against Hegel's thesis.

3. *EITHER/OR*, AESTHETIC EXISTENCE, AND MEDIATION

Kierkegaard develops an argument against Hegel's thesis via a dramatic exchange between the anonymous A, an aesthetic personality whose papers compose *Either/Or* I, and Judge William, A's dutiful friend, whose letters to A make up most of *Either/Or* II. For Judge William, a necessary condition for freely initiating decisive genuine future-aiming projects is the existence of contradictories. In other words, Hegel's thesis that there are all and only relative opposites must be unviable if there are to be any genuine ethical projects that have personal significance.

This is the lesson Judge William imparts to his often disagreeable friend. A is not inclined to think his future possibilities for action are significant, life-impacting possibilities. They only have relative significance for him. For A, all important and momentous choices are regrettable. As he contemplates marrying or not marrying, he remarks that there is no real difference between them. Either to marry or not to marry are equally regrettable courses of action.¹⁵ A thinks of “either/ors” as mediated opposites. Judge William suggests that A’s views about “either/ors” are not far from the Hegelian philosopher who attempts to do away with absolute and incompatible distinctions through conceptual mediation. As Judge William claims, “If one admits mediation, then there is no absolute choice, and if there is no such thing, then there is no absolute Either/Or.”¹⁶ Judge William is here echoing a common mode of criticism popular among Danish anti-Hegelians. It turns out Judge William had read Frederik Sibbern, one of Kierkegaard’s dissertation committee members! Sibbern writes,

Like the law of contradiction it [sc. *principium exclusi medii inter duo contradictoria*] stands against flux since it basically aims at explaining that everything is determinable, that everything must be something definitely determinate and that therefore an *aut/aut* is generally valid. Certainly one might frequently observe, that a middle link can force its way in between the *aut/aut*, which seems to posit only two *contradictoria*, that is two things, of which the one is thought to be necessarily opposed to the other...I call the proposition “the law of determination,” and it states that every position ultimately reduces to a yes or a no or to something decided.¹⁷

Sibbern here claims that the law of the excluded middle between two contradictories, expressed in the Latin formulation of “either/or” as “*aut/aut*,” requires that everything be self-determinable, and not determinable in relation to an opposite. As we saw, Hegel’s position is that properties are only determined by their opposites. Moreover, Sibbern’s “law of determination seems to ground our decisions—a “yes” or a “no” to contradictory possibilities. Put otherwise, if at least two genuine contradictories do not obtain, there is no genuine ground for our decisions. I take what Sibbern is here claiming to be the heart of Judge Williams’ statement about mediation. The

doctrine of mediation, which argues for a third and unifying term between opposites, puts out of play the conditions needed for choice, since mediation requires that the terms being mediated be relative opposites and not contradictories.

Either/Or, I believe, is an indirect argument against Hegelian philosophy.¹⁸ A embodies a Hegelian standpoint in his papers, but one that is not merely philosophical, but existential. According to Judge William, A and Hegelianism hold similar standpoints which arrive at the same kind of conclusion regarding the legitimacy of “either/or”, a conclusion that is broadly aesthetic; it isn’t clear, however, in what sense their conclusion is aesthetic until we understand what is meant by “aesthetic.” Judge William’s letters to A, on the other hand, attempt, from an ethical standpoint, to demonstrate the paucity of A’s existence, and ultimately its despair. He desires for A to see this and change his life based on this realization.

Either/Or, rather than presenting a series of philosophical arguments, presents an absolute choice: *either* the aesthetic *or* the ethical, *but not both*. The exclusive disjunction between the aesthetic and the ethical precludes the possibility of there arising a state of affairs where both are true and precludes the possibility of a state of affairs whereby one can choose both at the same time.

A’s undermining of freedom is due to his indifference about a genuine “either/or.” He treats the notion of an “either/or” existentially in the way that the Hegelian undermines them speculatively. The aesthetic and speculative indifference toward the idea of an “either/or” is grounded in the denial that there are absolute contradictories and the acceptance that there are only relative opposites.

The ethicist Judge William, hones in on this difference when, in one of his letters to A, he argues that aesthetic existence is *indifferent* to the absolute difference between good and evil and

that the aesthetic life-view continually *thinks* relative differences. “Think what you will, think the most abstract of all categories, think the most concrete...you continually think relative differences, never the absolute difference.”¹⁹ Whereas the ethicist has made the decisive movement toward the good, whereby the absolute difference between good and evil emerges, the aesthete chooses nothing significant, since his existence mirrors a *merely* speculative, thinking-existence, where no absolute differences are personally meaningful to him. Thus A can say that with whatever “either/or” is available for him to choose, he is indifferent about the choice of the one against the other.

Marry and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way...Hang yourself, you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way...This, gentleman, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life.²⁰

One is struck by A's confidence that his indifference to the idea of an “either/or” is the height of all wisdom, and it is difficult to detect his meaning here. Surely, what A expresses is a pernicious form of nihilism and, for all that, what he says is downright depressing. How could anyone continue with such an outlook?

A is an agent who has reached a point of despair about both the logical principles and the moral principles that require genuine free agency. Not only does he find the “either/or” meaningless, he also has given up on his *will* to choose between these contradictories. He doesn't begin or choose a project for the reason that he doesn't think his choices are freely actualized choices, nor does he think that if he were to choose one project against another that the resulting state of affairs would endure. As he explains, he avoids the risks of future projects and his world is deterministic: “Before me is continually an empty space, and I am propelled by a consequence that lies behind me. This life is turned around and dreadful, not to be endured.”²¹

This may sound strange to the philosophical ear. Surely, how can a consequence be the cause of an antecedent action? I think a hint to this can be found in Judge William's admonishment to A that even though he views life fatalistically, he is nonetheless directed toward the future.²² But precisely because he is not confident in and has no presentiment about what the future will bring²³, he avoids the risk of choice altogether, a danger that Judge William claims must be earnestly embraced by the ethical.²⁴ In avoiding the risk of what the future will bring, he chooses nothing. Thus the consequent (the indeterminacy of the endurance of future projects) is the cause of his choosing nothing. A views his existence under the category of necessity, and so would rather not do anything at all; he admits of an incompatibilist determinism, but he cannot endure what this incompatibilism entails, namely, the loss of free choice and a will. Better do nothing altogether.

A would rather not choose, and he takes the wisdom of his maxim here to be directly related to the kind of dialectic he endorses. A writes that his dialectic of "either/or" does not operate after the choice, but before it. This can be misleading. He doesn't understand his dialectic to be employed "before" in the temporal sense. His dialectic is an *eternal* dialectic, and not subject to the temporal sequence of before and after. He writes,

It is not merely in isolated moments that I, as Spinoza says, view everything *aeterno modo* [in the mode of eternity], but I am continually *aeterno modo*. Many believe they, too, are this when after doing one thing or another they unite or mediate these opposites. But his is a misunderstanding, for the true eternity does not lie behind either/or but before it. Their eternity will therefore also be a painful temporal sequence, since they will have a double regret on which to live.²⁵

A chides those who see their choices from the hither side, who take the pains to choose one project against another, and then in looking back regret their choice. They wish that perhaps they hadn't married or hadn't trusted the girl they put all their inner passion into receiving with open arms. These persons may wish, after the fact, that they had chosen both; chosen both,

because at one moment they perhaps enjoy their marriage, at another moment not. Thus the temporal dialectic of “either/or” results, for A, in dual regret. Their sorrow over their decision waxes and wanes; subsequently, they wish that they had both married and not married.

But, for A, “one must differentiate between the subsequent dialectic in “either/or” and the eternal one suggested here.”²⁶ The temporal dialectic of “either/or” ends in double regret, but A’s eternal dialectic attempts to avoid regret altogether. Those who follow the former perhaps have, from the beginning, too much faith that their choices would result in an enduring state of affairs, that the joy they felt in making the choice to marry would continue for them, and that this endurance is due to some belief about their autonomy or that their choices would result in states of affairs that are more or less still up to them.

However, A’s “either/or” never gets off the ground, and this is because he views “his” actions to be necessitated and fated. Unlike the proponents of the temporal dialectic who choose one thing against another, and afterward desire to unite these in their regret, A, from the beginning, views the notion of an “either/or” as meaningless, since he believes that his agency is empty; that it, in the end, assumes no causal role. Without free agency, A is necessitated and determined. He writes, “I am predestined; fate laughs at me when it suddenly shows me how everything I do to resist becomes a factor in such an existence [*Tilværelse*].”²⁷ Elsewhere, he says, “Time stands still, and so do I. All the plans I project fly straight back at me; when I spit, I spite in my own face.”²⁸ He also observes, “I feel as a chessman must feel when the opponent says of it: That piece cannot be moved.”²⁹ A’s aesthetic self-conception is that of a chess figure that cannot move itself. While a helpful analogy, A’s situation is much more dire than a pawn in chess, since A is an agent who despairs over his own agency, something a pawn could not do. In

despairing over his agency, he effectively undermines it. He has willed not to begin at all, and this is his maxim.

As Michelle Kosch has recently argued, A views his actions as necessarily determined, and has chosen himself according to this necessity; but if his actions are necessarily determined, he is not responsible for whatever act he engages. Kosch remarks, “The situation is that of an individual stymied by his own refusal to believe that anything is up to him.”³⁰ With the belief that nothing is up to him, A sees “himself as a spectator in life rather than a participant in it,”³¹ for if he were an active participant in his own life, he would no doubt believe that his participation meant something, that it was not for nothing.

That A is “outside” himself, taking on the position of an observer of life, gives us a clue to his eternal dialectic. A’s eternal dialectic does not admit of *movement* (as he says, “I do not move”³² and, as Judge William remarks, A is like the speculative philosopher insofar as the movement of life has come to a stop for him.³³ Contrary to the temporal dialectic, the eternal dialectic A employs is one which no existing human being can properly engage. He takes himself to exist *sub specie aeterni*; but the eternal that does not *move*.

As Judge William understands it, the eternal dialectic, while lacking the resources for genuine change, also views existence under the category of necessity. Like the speculative philosopher that observes the past as necessitated according to the organizing function of world-spirit, A observes the future to be necessitated from the beginning. According to Judge William, for both free agency is out of the question, and this because both A and the speculative philosopher are indifferent to absolute contradictories. The speculative philosopher

Sees history under the category of necessity, not under the category of freedom, for even though the world-historical process is said to be free, this is in the same sense as one speaks of the organizing process in nature. For the historical process there is not question of an Either/Or... This in turn accounts for its incapacity for having a person act, its

inclination to let everything come to a standstill, for what it actually demands is that one must act necessarily, which is a contradiction.³⁴

A's dialectic is not the same as a Hegelian one, even though Judge William argues both A and Hegelianism arrives at the same conclusion, namely an indifference to an "either/or" and thus the undermining of choice, all according to "modern philosophy's pet theory that the principle of contradiction is canceled."³⁵

On this point, Judge William admonishes A's indifference to movement, which the speculative philosopher exhibits in the sphere of thought. A's papers, which Johannes Climacus, in "A Glance at Danish Literature" in the *Postscript*, defines as expositing "an existence-possibility that cannot attain existence,"³⁶ clarify aesthetic forms of life which, while they are situated in the sphere of action, do not make the movements necessary and sufficient for arriving at existence. Climacus further claims that aesthetic existence

Is not existence, but existence-possibility oriented toward existence, and brought so close that one almost feels how every moment is wasted in which a decision has not yet been reached. But the existence-possibility in the existing A does not want to be conscious of this and holds existence at bay by the most subtle of all deceptions, by thinking. He has thought everything possible, and yet has not existed at all.³⁷

But as Judge William argues, A's lack of movement is a symptom of the aesthete's indifference to the meaningfulness of these possibilities. Even though A is not a speculative philosopher, his inaction leads him to the same place as the speculative philosopher, because his treatment of "either/or" leads to the same kind of conclusion about its legitimacy. However, the conclusions both A and the speculative philosopher draw about the existence of a genuine "either/or" are self-referentially inconsistent. Both A and the speculative philosopher are committed to some form of determinism. A doesn't think his actions and beliefs are freely chosen and the speculative philosopher believes that conceptual and logical necessity governs world history.³⁸ Within the sphere of action and practice, A treats the notion of "either/or" with indifference;

within the sphere of contemplation, the speculative philosopher undermines the possibility of an “either/or” by mediating it into a “both/and,” thus relativizing what Judge William holds are absolute differences. The Judge writes, “You are situated in the sphere of action, philosophy in the area of contemplation. As soon as it is to be *moved* into the area of practice, it must arrive at the same conclusion as you do, even though it does not express it in the same way.”³⁹ The conclusions both A and the speculative philosopher draw are the same, but they are expressed differently according to their respective relations to *time*. As the Judge relates, A’s life is positioned toward the future, the speculative philosopher the past.⁴⁰ This is because A resides in the sphere of action, the speculative philosopher in the sphere of contemplation, which “turns toward the past, toward the totality of experienced world history; it shows how the discursive elements come together in a higher unity; it mediates and mediates.”⁴¹ To say that the aesthete does not make significant choices may sound, at first, like a provocative and perhaps very confusing claim, but if we are mindful of Judge William’s understanding of choice, it may, in the end, become clear. Judge William tells A that his choices are “figurative,” since choice is an ethical category and it is in the ethical sphere where the question of the “either/or” emerges. The aesthete’s life, the Judge remarks, “comes to a *halt*,” just as the speculative philosopher seeks the eternal vantage point from which to observe and mediate world history.⁴²

If there are no absolute differences, but only relative opposites, there can be no significant choices, since there would be no genuine alternative possibilities to choose from. Judge William writes, “That the person who chooses good and evil chooses the good is indeed true, but only later does this become manifest, for the esthetic is not evil but the indifferent. And that is why I said that the ethical constitutes the choice.”⁴³ In choosing the good, the ethicist has the grounds for choosing between good and evil, which emerge as contradictory possibilities for

the ethicist. But even more fundamental is the ethicist's "either/or" between the ethical and the aesthetic. The "either/or," for Judge William, consists of the choice by which he "chooses good and evil or rules them out."⁴⁴ Thus, there are two "either/or's" operative in Judge William's letter to the aesthete—either good or evil, but not both, and either the ethical or the aesthetic, but not both. The Judge claims that the latter is his primary "either/or." However, aesthetic existence, whose main principle is mediation, does not choose anything, since choice requires contradictories.

5. JOHANNES CLIMACUS'S ARGUMENT AGAINST THE HEGELIAN THESIS

Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, offers an additional argument against Hegel's thesis. Rather than placing emphasis on the despair that results in being indifferent to absolute differences, Climacus's argument reveals the relationship between speculative philosophy and Christianity. He argues that Christianity and speculative philosophy are not relative opposites, as the Hegelian philosophy argues, but are absolutely different. The upshot of Climacus's more theoretically tinged argument is that, as contradictories, speculation and Christianity cannot be mediated.

There is no reason to think, however, that those who hold onto the existence of absolute contradictories (i) deny that there are relative opposites and (ii) that these relative opposites cannot be mediated into something else or are the same in virtue of something else. Indeed, Kierkegaard, his family pastor Mynster, as well as many of his pseudonyms are proponents of the theory that relative opposites can be mediated, but they, as we have seen, argue that there *are* contradictories.⁴⁵ For example, Mynster claims that "One can mediate between opposites but not between contradictions."⁴⁶ Along the same lines, in his journal, Kierkegaard states,

All relative contrasts can be mediated; we do not really need Hegel for this, inasmuch as the ancients point out that they can be distinguished. Personality will for all eternity protest against the idea that absolute contrasts can be mediated (and this protest is incommensurable with the assertion of mediation); for all eternity it will repeat its immortal dilemma: to be or not to be—that is the question.⁴⁷

So, both Mynster and Kierkegaard agree that relative opposites can be mediated, but they disagree with Hegelianism that absolute contradictories don't exist. About mediation, then, Kierkegaard denies the following:

- (1) There are no absolute contradictories
- (2) There are *all and only* relative opposites

He, however, agrees with Hegelianism that

- (3) All relative opposites are mediated

Kierkegaard accepts (3) because he accepts something like:

- (2') There are relative opposites⁴⁸

If one holds to (1), then one effectively undermines the principle of non-contradiction.

Accepting (2) and (3) together entails the denial of the law of the excluded middle as well as the classical law of identity.

Before turning to Climacus' arguments for his rejection of (1) and (2), I'd like to just briefly say something about his acceptance of (3) and (2'), so that I can get to his more important arguments (at least given the purposes of this paper) against (1) and (2). His argument rests on clarifying just what can be considered relative opposites and what escapes this relativity, altogether. He proceeds as follows:

Within speculation it is possible for whatever makes a claim of being speculation to be assigned its relative place and the opposites to be mediated—namely, the opposites that have this in common, that each is a speculative endeavor...for example, when speculative thought mediates between the doctrine of the Eleatics and that of Heraclitus, this can be altogether proper, because the doctrine of the

Eleatics is not related as an opposite of speculation but is itself speculative, and likewise the doctrine of Heraclitus.⁴⁹

I think we can understand Kierkegaard's account of the mediation of relative opposites if we take him to be making a distinction between two members of a common genus. Speculation is a genus of thought under which may be found relatively opposed, but not contradictory, ideas. Since the doctrines of Parmenides and Zeno and those of Heraclitus fall under a common genus of thought, they can be mediated according to the method of speculation. Whatever the tenability of Kierkegaard's claiming (1) that both the Eleatics and Heraclitus share in common the speculative enterprise and (2) that they are relatively opposed and not absolutely opposed, the point is that in those cases where relative opposites obtain, they can be mediated. In this case, some species that fall under a genus are relatively opposed, but not contradictories, because they share an essence in common.

Climacus shows, then, that mediation obtains between relative opposites, and that this is largely a speculative/Hegelian endeavor. Species of speculation (like that of the doctrines of the Eleatics and Heraclitus) can be mediated in thought. But as we know all too well from Kierkegaard's writings, the *objectivity* of speculative philosophy, that feature that turns Christianity into a doctrine—into an image of its own likeness—is significantly different from the *subjectivity* of Christian existence. As Climacus writes, "Surely a philosophical theory that is to be comprehended and speculatively understood is one thing, and a doctrine that is to be *actualized in existence* is something else."⁵⁰ A speculative philosophy which dabbles in theology does not have much, if anything, in common with a doctrine which, rather than being speculatively understood, is subjectively actualized or appropriated. Climacus' point is that even though mediation obtains between relative opposites, speculative philosophy and Christianity are not relative opposites, nor does Christianity fall under the lattice of speculation.⁵¹ There is thus,

an *exception* to the exhaustive doctrine of mediation, which holds that there are all and only relative opposites.

Climacus intimates that the mediation of Christianity into its philosophical form is achieved from the vantage point of philosophy itself. Speculative philosophy here is both rule and judge in the task of mediation since Christianity is accorded its dialectical place and development *by* speculation.⁵² Thus, Christianity is something like a species of speculative thought, much like the philosophical doctrines of Parmenides and Heraclitus are speculative. This is why, when Climacus imagines how a speculative philosopher would respond when asked what Christianity is, the speculator would say, “The speculative conception of Christianity.”⁵³

Recalling the debates in Denmark about mediation, Climacus treats speculation and Christianity as *apparent* opposites, opposites the Danish Hegelians argue have been mediated (the Hegelians Bornemann and Martensen come to mind here). As has been discussed in section two, at issue here is how speculative thought argues that Christianity has dialectically developed into the philosophical notion of it, thereby granting truth to the content of Christianity in the mediation. As Westphal says, “Here mediation is the name for the transformation of Christianity from its immediate, religious form to its mediated, philosophical form.”⁵⁴ As such, the mediation of Christianity into its philosophical form is achieved from the vantage point of philosophy itself.

However, if Christianity just is the concept speculation has of it, then it is difficult to see how they can be mediated. I will treat two arguments Climacus gives for why they cannot be mediated. Climacus issues a *reductio* for why they cannot be mediated. I’ll call it the “argument from insufficient difference.”

Climacus’s “argument from insufficient difference” goes as follows:

But even if speculative thought assumes a distinction between Christianity and speculative thought, if for no other reason than merely the satisfaction of mediating, if it still does not definitely and decisively state the distinction, then one must ask: Is not *mediation* speculative thought's idea? Consequently, when the opposites are *mediated*, the opposites (speculative thought—Christianity) are not equal before the arbiter, but Christianity is an element within speculation, and speculation acquires dominance because it had dominance, and because there was no moment of balance when the opposites were weighed against each other.⁵⁵

Climacus highlights speculative thought's penchant to conceive of speculation and Christianity as relative and mediated opposites. But he asks whether their status as relative opposites is such that they are sufficiently distinguished to be mediated—that is, whether speculative philosophy's conception of the difference between itself and Christianity is such that they can be mediated. Opposition, recall, is a relationship that obtains, by means of determinate negation, between something and its *necessary other*. Are Christianity and speculation related and opposed in this way? Climacus argues that they cannot be, because Christianity and speculation are not opposites “of equal standing”—they are not balanced opposites, but the former stands an inferior relation to the former.⁵⁶ As such, they cannot be mediated.

Climacus is argues, then, that Christianity is not a genuine opposite of speculation, because speculation defines the rules by which Christianity is defined. As an element within speculation, Christianity is merely a species of it. If Christianity is merely a species of speculation, then it is not a genuine opposite of speculation, since genuine opposites are defined, having equal standing, in relation to each other. Here, however, Christianity is revealed as a lesser in relation that which is dominant.

The gist of Climacus' “argument from insufficient difference” is that speculation and Christianity are not sufficiently different enough for the mediation of them to obtain. Recall that Hegel argues that opposites are produced from each other, by means of determinate negation. However, opposites are, nonetheless, self-identical and, as Climacus argues, “of equal standing.”

But a relationship between a lesser and dominant cannot yield to mediation, since the superiority of the one over the other abjures any balanced opposition.

Climacus' arguments suggest that Christianity is not the necessary other of speculation. If Christianity is not the necessary other of speculation, then Christianity cannot be mediated. But if Christianity cannot be mediated with speculation, then the law of excluded middle remains inviolated with respect to these two spheres. Like Judge William, who argues for an "either/or" between the aesthetic and the ethical, Climacus argues: *either* speculation, *or* Christianity, but not both. In this way, he denies (1), that there are no absolute contradictories. In denying (1), furthermore, he also rejects (2), that there are *all* and *only* relative opposites.

If Christianity and speculation are not related as a species to a genus, or even related as two species under a common genus are related, how then are they related? Climacus suggests that they are *absolutely different*—Christianity is the opposite of speculation "on the whole."⁵⁷ The language of genus and species can no longer explain Climacus' meaning, since Climacus claims that Christianity is not related to speculation as a species of a genus. One might think, instead, that Christianity and speculation are opposed as two different genera are opposed, whereby Christianity is *essentially* different from speculation, much like "animal" and "table" are differences in kind. However, Christianity and speculation aren't *merely different* genera. The trouble with this way of thinking is that if Christianity and speculation are just *merely* different like the kinds "animal" and "table" are, then the relationship between them is more like the relationship between determinate terms that are, in essence, unrelated to each other. Hegel terms this sort of relationship *diversity*, whereby "The distinguished terms subsist as indifferently different toward one another because each is self-identical."⁵⁸ But the diversity of these terms

does not entail the strict or absolute opposition of these terms. “Animal” and “table” are not directly opposed to each other, like X and not-X or “lower” and “higher” are.

It is important to determine just what Climacus means when he says that Christianity is, “on the whole,” opposed to speculation and, because of this, that they cannot be mediated. First, it seems clear that Christianity is not generated out of speculation and vice versa. If they were, then the one would include the other in itself, which is something Climacus wants to deny. Recall that, for Climacus, given what Christianity is, speculation does not hold rights over it, since Christianity occupies a qualitatively different sphere than speculation—Christianity the sphere of existence, subjectivity, and movement and speculation the sphere of contemplation, objectivity, and rest. In this way, Christianity is not a species of the genus of speculation, but is rather an altogether different genus than speculation.

For Climacus, there is no philosophical or existential justification for the mediation of speculation and Christianity. Rather, the relation between Christianity and speculation is better seen as one where the speculative philosopher, in order to really engage Christianity, must *break off* from speculation and move—*leap*—to Christianity. On this point, Climacus alludes to the Aristotelian notion of a *metabasis eis allo genos*—a shift or *transition* from one genus to another genus.⁵⁹

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper I argued that Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegelianism, and Hegel in particular, requires an evaluation of the underlying logical foundations of Hegel’s idealism. While Kierkegaard sees the viability of the theory of mediation in its broad outlines, he questions the truth of Hegel’s thesis that there are all and only relative opposites. Favoring “the classical

logical perspective” Kierkegaard offers both a practical argument (through Judge William in *Either/Or*) and a theoretical argument (through Johannes Climacus) against this thesis.

Notes:

¹ One detractor from this fairly common view of Kierkegaard is Jon Stewart who, in his *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), argues that the core of Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegelianism are not aimed at Hegel after all, but to certain Danish Hegelians. This does not mean, of course, that some criticisms Kierkegaard issues against his fellow Danes cannot be extended to Hegel. It does mean, however, that Hegel, the thinker, was not Kierkegaard's main target.

² Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996), pp. 40-41. Henceforth Westphal.

³ By the “classical logical perspective,” I am referring, roughly, to the logical “family line” going back to Aristotle.

⁴ G.W.F Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, translated by A.V. Miller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1969), p. 424. Henceforth *Hegel's Science of Logic*.

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), § 119, Addition 2. Henceforth *Encyclopaedia Logic*.

⁶ *Hegel's Science of Logic*, p. 438.

⁷ We will look at the context and argument for this in the next section on Hegel's thesis.

⁸ From a classical logical point of view, this is controversial because, on the one hand, there are some properties that have no correlating opposite, like being mid-sized or grey. On the hand, opposites are generally divided in to at least three kinds: relative opposites, contraries, and contradictories. Hegel tends to see all properties as relative opposites, and does not normally speak of them in terms of contraries. So, from the classical logical point of view, while hot and cold are contraries, because they are opposite properties, and something cannot be both at the same time, Hegel will allow something to be both at the same time. He will also allow there to be middle term between being and nothing. This violates the law of the excluded middle and the principle of non-contradiction. Kierkegaard was found these logical laws inviolable.

⁹ For example, as Peter of Spain argues: “The Topic from relative opposites is the relationship of one correlate to the other; and it is both constructive and destructive. For example, ‘A father is; therefore, a child is,’ and vice versa; ‘A father is not; therefore, a child is not,’ and vice versa... The maxim: When one of a pair of correlates is posited, the other is also posited; and when one is destroyed, the other is also destroyed.” *The Cambridge Translations of Medieval Texts: Logic and the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Norman Kretzman and Eleanor Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 239-240

¹⁰ Within Hegel's philosophy, this notion is prevalent in his description of the relationship between God and the finite world. Each is a determining and necessary opposite. Without the one there isn't the other. So, in order for God (or Spirit) to become itself, God must posit the finite world.

¹¹ G. W. F Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, § 119. Quoted in Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, p.196-197. Henceforth Stewart.

¹² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Peter Crafts Hodgson, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion : One-Volume Edition : The Lectures of 1827*, 1 v. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p.129.

¹³ William Desmond, *Hegel's God: A Counterfeit Double?* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), p.132. Henceforth cited as Desmond.

¹⁴ Desmond, p.134.

¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 38-39. Henceforth abbreviated as *E/O I*.

¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 173. Henceforth abbreviated as *E/O II*.

¹⁷ Frederik Sibbern, “Om dem Maade, hvorpaa Contradictionsprincipet behandles I den hegelske Skole, med mere, som henhører til de logiske Grundbetragtninger”, *Maanedsskrift for Litterature*, no. 19, 1838, Article II, 432. This passage is quoted in Stewart, p. 189. Emphasis mine.

¹⁸ Thus, I agree with Clare Carlisle who, on p. 54 of her *Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), writes, "The aesthetes' writings function as an indirect critique of Hegelian philosophy, by means of the resemblance between them."

¹⁹ *E/O* II, p., 223.

²⁰ *E/O* I, pp., 38-39.

²¹ *E/O* I, p., 24.

²² *E/O* II, p., 170.

²³ *E/O* I, p., 24.

²⁴ *E/O* II, p., 164.

²⁵ *E/O* I, p., 39.

²⁶ *E/O* I, p., 39.

²⁷ *E/O* I, p., 36.

²⁸ *E/O* I, p., 26.

²⁹ *E/O* I, p., 22.

³⁰ Michelle Kosch, "'Despair' in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44, no. 1 (2006).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *E/O* I, p., 39.

³³ *E/O* II, p., 172, p., 225.

³⁴ *E/O* II, p., 175.

³⁵ *E/O* II, p., 170.

³⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 253. Henceforth abbreviated as *CUP*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Here I am in agreement with Michelle Kosch in her "'Despair' in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*." Both she and I are in disagreement with Mark Taylor's developmental psychological reading of Kierkegaard's spheres of existence. He understands the spheres of existence to be developmental in the sense that one existence sphere is only inadequate from the perspective of a higher sphere. Aesthetic existence is not a fully fledged existence for the reason that it isn't fully developed. The ethical self is a more fully developed self, and the difference between the two selves is made explicit by the ethical. This view amounts to saying that the aesthetic self is not intrinsically problematic, but only relatively, in comparison to the ethical. But if this is the case, then the aesthete has no reasons to change his standpoint on existence, other than those provided by the ethicist. However, if the reasons for only change come from the ethical sphere, there seems to be no grounds that the aesthete would accept to change his perspective. Kosch, instead, argues that the aesthete is "intrinsically unstable" (93), and that this instability amounts to the aesthete holding a set of contradictory beliefs and stances toward his existence. Prodding the aesthete to realize this, it is argued, would result in modifying those beliefs and stances toward a more coherent view point, the ethical.

³⁹ *E/O* II, p.170. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *E/O* II, p.171.

⁴³ *E/O* II, p.156.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Both Judge William and Climacus argue that there are relative opposites and that such opposites can be mediated. They deny, along with Kierkegaard and Mynster, that there are all and only relative opposites. I will treat Climacus' argument for this in this section. Judge William argues that for thought there is mediation, but for freedom there is not. He attempts to keep these two spheres separate, such that freedom would be a breaking off point from thought in the moment of decision. See *E/O* II, pp.,170-173.

⁴⁶ Stewart, Mynster's "Rationalism, Supernaturalism," p. 582.

⁴⁷ Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), § 1578.

⁴⁸ Cf. *E/O* II, pp.,173-175; *CUP*, p., 376. To affirm that there are absolute contradictories does not preclude one from conceding to something like (2'). Relative opposites are, quite rightly, opposites which obtain within a species or genus. A horse and a human being are relatively contrasted and they can be mediated, since they share a common species, animal. Absolute contradictories, on the other hand, cannot obtain within a single species or genus, but refer to the negation of a species or genus. It may seem like this kind of contradiction is not of the classical

Aristotelian kind, since it seems to not refer, at bottom, to propositions. We will see that Kierkegaard was very much concerned about the role contradiction plays in propositions as well.

⁴⁹ *CUP*, p., 376;

⁵⁰ *CUP*, p., 379fn. Emphasis mine.

⁵¹ Climacus issues a similar critique of Hegelianism in the “Interlude” to *Philosophical Fragments*. There he argues that in the sphere of necessity, there is no actualization, no movement, because what is necessary “is always related to itself and is related to itself in the same way.” This sameness admits no difference, as such, there is no change. Cf. *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 74.

⁵² *CUP*, pp., 375-376. Henceforth abbreviated as *CUP*.

⁵³ *CUP*, p., 375.

⁵⁴ Westphal, p., 146.

⁵⁵ *CUP*, pp., 375-376.

⁵⁶ *CUP*, p., 376.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Hegel's Science of Logic*, p., 418.

⁵⁹ *CUP*, p. 98. See also *JP*, § 260. There Kierkegaard argues that Hegel has never done justice to the category of transition.