

Kierkegaard's "Anti-Rationalism" in the Service of Reason and Faith: A Response to the Hegelian System

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Abstract: This article explores the prevailing understanding that Kierkegaard's criticism of the Hegelian system constitutes an attack against reason as such. As paradox is encountered through reason, I look to Hegel in order to discover Kierkegaard. In this way the inadequacies of Hegel's idealism, revealed in his philosophical formulation of the incarnation, demonstrate the necessity of Kierkegaard's existentialism, expressed in terms of 'faith'. By this means one may begin to revise any dualistic notions of faith and reason as competing alternatives for articulating the Christian vision.

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this".

Acts 17:32

JOHN D. MOORE WRITES in the introduction to his illuminating text *Wrestling with Rationality in Paul*, that "for Paul the truth of the gospel of Christ was not to be understood by dodging the logical riddles with which it confronts us".¹ Rather, Paul "speaks as if, sharpened and directed by the Holy Spirit, the human capacity for exercising critical judgement plays a formative role in our grasp of the gospel".²

Moore's interpretation of Paul is but one response to a fundamental difficulty endemic to religious thought. Augustine confronts this problem in the first book of his *Confessions* when he writes:

Grant me, Lord, to know and understand whether a man...must know you before he can call you to his aid. If he does not know you, how can he pray to you? For he may call for some other help,

1. John D. Moore, *Wrestling with Rationality in Paul: Romans 1-8 in a new perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 1.

2. Moore, *Wrestling with Rationality in Paul*, 1.

mistaking it for yours. Or are men to pray to you and learn to know you through their prayers?³

These pointed questions capture the essence of the controversy between faith and reason that plagues philosophical and theological inquiry. However, it would appear the postmodern reaction against objectivity will ensure the "unreasonableness" of faith, and thus there is little risk now of collapsing faith into a branch of reason, in the manner of Enlightenment thought. Instead, the more pressing concern would appear to be the treatment of faith and reason as mutually exclusive and independent of one another, as though an adequate response to questions of God and existence is possible without reference to both.

It is to Augustine's question, broadly construed, that this discussion seeks to respond by asking whether the inadequacies of language and reason create the most favourable condition for the emergence of faith; that is, whether it is precisely in the limitations of the Hegelian system, that the possibilities of Kierkegaardian faith are discovered as most compelling?

Faith "has in fact two tasks: to take care in every moment to discover the improbable, the paradox: and then to hold it fast with the passion of inwardness".⁴ This characterisation of faith by Kierkegaard could suggest that he was uncompromising in his conviction that faith and reason cannot co-operate to present, in a way that is authentic, the core of the Christian confession. The "Absolute Paradox" of God becoming man stands as an affront to the plausible, the probable, in other words, the reasonable.⁵ For Kierkegaard, the "absurdity" of the incarnation is offensive to reason and may only be appropriated by the believer through faith, through "the passion of inwardness".⁶

However, to speak of *paradox* necessarily invokes the language of reason, as paradox is inescapably a category of reason, albeit the category that speaks most compellingly of its own limitations. Thus it is only via reason that the absurdity of the paradox may be revealed. In order to *encounter* paradox as "paradox", the tools of reason must be employed in earnest and then demonstrated to fail in producing a

3. St Augustine, *Confessions* (London: Penguin Books, 1961) 21.

4. S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960) 209.

5. "Absolute Paradox", within Kierkegaard's writings, is a specific reference to the incarnation. "In order to be a man's Teacher, God proposed to make himself like the individual man, so that he might understand him fully. Thus our paradox is rendered still more appalling, or the same paradox has the double aspect which proclaims it as the Absolute Paradox; negatively by revealing the absolute unlikeness of sin; positively by proposing to do away with the absolute unlikeness in absolute likeness." S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962) 37.

6. "How does the learner then become the believer or disciple? When Reason is set aside and he receives the condition", Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 51.

satisfactory resolution of that which is paradoxical. At this point, something may truly be said "to be a paradox".

Thus it is precisely in the limitations of reason, and its most pointed expression in "paradox", that the necessity of reason is revealed, and the long-held understanding of Kierkegaard as anti-rationalist brought into doubt. Upon closer analysis, it becomes apparent that Kierkegaard employs reason in the service of faith precisely by means of revealing the limitations of reason, a paradox in itself.⁷

Meanwhile it is possible that Hegel, though generally regarded as an arch-apostle of reason in the service of Christian faith, in fact undermines both reason and faith: through a potentially idolatrous devotion to a *system* of existence, in which the incarnation, dare one say, "sits comfortably". In one sense, Hegel's system stands as an offence to the paradox, refusing to allow paradox to be paradox, denying the incarnation its absurdity.

As the unreasonable is most exposed as such by means of reason, Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism may be revealed most strikingly by means of Hegel's philosophical idealism. Further, in the limitations of Hegel's system we encounter the possibilities of Kierkegaard's vision and thus "fair trial" must be granted to Hegel, if the limitations are to be *encountered* as "limitations", and paradox *encountered* as paradox. Nothing less than the dialectic, in method and conclusion, will suffice.

Religious persuasions aside, the Christian claim of the incarnation of Jesus Christ confronts philosophers with a proposition that resists any straightforward explanations. The extent to which Hegel and Kierkegaard seek to explain (or refuse to explain) the event reveals something of their effectiveness as Christian philosophers, and the character of the metaphysics that this entails. Therefore, a brief exposition, in general terms, of their respective treatments of the incarnation will serve to illuminate what I later intend to say.

In stark contrast to Hegel, for whom the incarnation is a necessary and "ingenious construction on the part of spirit to reunite what has been split",⁸ Kierkegaard *encounters* the incarnation as "Absolute Paradox, formed by an absurd coincidence of opposites which unyieldingly resist all rational, historical and religious mediation".⁹ However, this *knowledge* of the paradox is, at best, the point at which reconciliation begins. Kierkegaard calls Christians to *radical faith*. Faith

7. This understanding has been the fruit of more recent work on Kierkegaard's thought such as C. Steven Evans, *Passionate Reason* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), in which he writes "One cannot rationally understand the paradox, but one can hope to understand why the paradox cannot be understood" (p. 108).

8. Norman Melchert, *The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 4th Edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002) 483.

9. M. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel & Kierkegaard* (California: University of California Press, 1980) 258.

is the only mode in which the paradox of the incarnation can be tolerated and nothing less than radical faith will withstand the incarnation's affront to human reason.

However, to speak intelligently of the incarnation as an affront upon the scope of human reason one must begin with reason and discover where, to recall Kierkegaard's famous image, "the seventy thousand fathoms" of water begins, where wading is no longer possible, where the probable must be subsumed within the possible, where reason is made complete in faith.¹⁰

Therefore, to avoid fleeing to faith, full account must be taken of the possibilities of reason in making plausible the paradoxical. And to this end, few could offer a more comprehensive vision than Hegel.

HEGEL'S RESPONSE TO KANT'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE "NOUMENAL" AND THE "PHENOMENAL"

Hegel's ontological dialectic of identity-in-difference begins with the basic epistemological concerns of *criterion* and *skepticism*: that is, asking by what means knowledge can be subjected to external verification in order to measure its truth and by what means can a thing be revealed to be the thing it is *in itself*, independent of the lens of perception. These are the fundamental problems of epistemology, addressed and re-addressed since the time of the Skeptics.

These questions became the central concerns of philosophy during the Enlightenment when, under the direction of Descartes' radical doubt, "truth" became synonymous with certainty. Ultimately, however, the "Enlightenment broke down because it was unable to find *objective connections*, whether in thought or reality, between discrete particulars".¹¹ The limitations of reason were unmasked in Hume's work, which constituted "an explicit statement of the impossibility of finding objective connections".¹²

In this climate of skepticism, Kant introduces a distinction between things as they appear to be, and things as they are in themselves. Thus, by placing a limit on what can be known, Kantian epistemology allows for greater certainty – though of less. Kant's distinction divides reality

10. Faith is "believing against the understanding, the peril of lying upon the deep, the seventy thousand fathoms, in order there to find God. The wader feels his way with his foot, lest he get beyond his depth; and so the shrewd and prudent man feels his way with the understanding in the realm of the probable, and finds God where the probabilities are favourable, and gives thanks on the great holidays of probability, when he has acquired a good livelihood, and there is probability besides for an early advancement.... To believe against the understanding is something different." Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 208.

11. Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985) 222.

12. Allen, *Philosophy*, 222.

into *phenomena* (things as they appear) and *noumena* (things as they are in themselves). With this framework in place, one may speak confidently of a thing as it appears while simultaneously conceding that this thing as it appears may be quite different from the thing as it is in itself, of which we cannot speak. Being forever trapped behind the lenses of perception, human knowledge can only speak of things as they appear, never as they are.

This distinction by Kant is highly suspect as a basis for knowledge and may in fact be regarded as self-negating. By making this distinction, he denies the possibility of objective knowledge. In this way rather than answering the question, he renders it meaningless and instead "cultivates the garden of phenomena in the midst of a vast sea of unknowables".¹³

Against this philosophical background Hegel emerges and revisits the original epistemological problems of *criterion* and *skepticism*. His response, however, consists in a radical departure from that of his predecessors. Hegel subverts the dual distinction between knowledge and the necessity for independent verification, on the one hand, and the knowledge of something and the thing itself, on the other, by denying the external reality of this distinction, relocating it within consciousness itself. This move by Hegel is most easily explained in terms of the distinction between *subject* and *object*.

He observes that one may at once conceive of an object as simply existing, and conceive of that object, as it is appearing to exist. For example, a person may stand in a certain relation to a house and realise that its appearance from that particular angle may be quite different from its appearance if the relation were changed (that is, the relation of subject and object). Furthermore, a person may realise that regardless of what angle the house is observed from, no angle and no number of angles will fully account for the appearance of the house. And so therefore a "single consciousness" may recognise "house" as object, *and* house as object consisting in particular qualities. Therefore consciousness itself recognises both the object and awareness of that object.

Hegel infers from this observation that consciousness of an object, and consciousness of consciousness of an object both exist within consciousness itself: "both are *for* the same consciousness".¹⁴ Therefore there is no object without subject but rather "every conceivable object, is an object *for a subject*".¹⁵ Observing this process of "*internal dialectic* through which consciousness moves toward ever more satisfactory

13. Melchert, *The Great Conversation*, 472.

14. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 54.

15. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 54.

relations with its objects", Hegel describes this as *phenomenology*.¹⁶ In this process of internalising all subject/object distinctions, Hegel begins his project of reconciling all ontological difference and in doing so making knowledge possible.¹⁷

THE INTERNALISING OF DISTINCTION AND
THE EMERGENCE OF IDENTITY-IN-DIFFERENCE

Hegel's attempt at reconciliation, as presented above, begins to reveal the core of his dialectic philosophy in which identity necessarily entails difference – that one cannot be understood except in relation to the other. However, difference cannot arise from "absolute identity" and therefore difference must in some sense be present within identity itself. Thus, Hegel "develops the idea of a unity or identity which is dialectical, that is, an identity which includes within its own unity what is its negation or opposite".¹⁸

This position consists in a radical revision of the western philosophical tradition that, from the time of Aristotle, has sought to abstract universals from particulars. Hegel, in contrast, proposes that "the individual is the universal" which, understood in terms of traditional logic, is a contradiction.¹⁹ Convinced of the truth of this claim, Hegel claims the deficiency exists in the logic by which the claim fails, and thus argues that "logic misleads us because reality is a continuum in which everything *in order to be itself* has as part of its identity its relations to what it is not".²⁰ In the next section I shall conduct an exposition of Hegel's basis for this claim in terms of the famous "Master/Slave" relation. For the present it is enough to state as clearly as possible the paradoxical content of Hegel's dialectic ontology.

Hegel attempts to resolve the problems of epistemology by a radical revision of the assumptions of ontology. In striking contrast to an Aristotelian understanding of *essence* or *being* (as that aspect of a thing that is most fully the thing it is), he seeks to express the essential being of a thing by "presenting the way something is both different from and like other things", and therefore, "to say what something is involves saying what are its relations to all else".²¹

16. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 472.

17. "At bottom is the conviction that reality is a continuum, so that nothing is ever utterly separate (discrete). Otherwise there would be no hope of ever bridging the gap between things or of connecting things, especially of bridging the gap between the subject and the object so that knowledge is possible." Allen, *Philosophy*, 224.

18. Allen, *Philosophy*, 224.

19. Quentin Lauer, *Hegel's Idea of Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974) 54.

20. Allen, *Philosophy*, 224.

21. Allen, *Philosophy*, 225.

However, all difference, all aspects in which one thing differs from another, exist *within* a prevailing and ultimate unity. Hegel, it would seem, begins with a conviction of the unity of all things and then proceeds to demonstrate this conviction with philosophical argument. In the individual and epistemological realm, the priority of unity is expressed in terms of the single consciousness that recognises both object and object perceived. In the cosmological and ontological realm this unity is postulated in the form of the Absolute in whom/which the dialectical nature of reality, through the progress of history, is gradually reconciled to its one true reality, which is unity.²²

It is clear from these cursory remarks that Hegel's philosophy could be appropriated in such a way as to provide a philosophical basis for Christianity. The extent to which this is warranted I examine later. At this point it is necessary to explain Hegel's famous examples, cited in support of his dialectic ontology of identity-in-difference.

SENSE-CERTAINTY

Hegel begins with the most basic and secure form of knowledge, "sense-certainty". He then proceeds to demonstrate that this form of knowledge is in fact the least certain and, more importantly is not, in truth, knowledge at all. The argument can be best understood through participation in the experience of consciousness. Consider, for example, the *experience* of standing before the Australian painter Arthur Boyd's *Crucifixion*.²³ In a state of pure consciousness there is no thinking occurring, no relating of lines to colours, meanings to intentions. There is just the silent awareness of object by subject. This experience Hegel describes as *immediate*.²⁴

Liberated from the constraints of the conceptual lens and its attendant uncertainties, one stands before Boyd's *Crucifixion* but experiences nothing of the particular qualities that enable the arrangement of canvass and paint to be Boyd's *Crucifixion*. The experience is one that cannot be spoken of. To speak would be to engage concepts and thus undermine the certainty of *immediate* experience.

Therefore, this most certain of knowledge is, at once, the most impoverished of knowledge, as it is certainty ensured only through the

22. "Hegel views the entire cosmos and its history as the Absolute coming into greater actualization and greater articulation in multiplicity in an orderly, rationally understandable way." Allen, *Philosophy*, 225.

23. I have selected this painting because it may be understood as expressing a central thesis of Hegel's philosophy: that is, the "universal incarnation and crucifixion" of human consciousness. Boyd depicts a woman crucified in a characteristically Australian setting and in so doing symbolises the Christ event as occurring beyond the boundaries of its historical and literal setting.

24. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 59. See also pp. 58-66.

absence of content. This observation leads Hegel to maintain that "sense-certainty immediately appears as the richest kind of knowledge ...but, in the event, this very *certainty* proves itself to be the most abstract and poorest *truth*".²⁵ The strength of this argument establishes the dialectic character of knowledge. However, Hegel's next move establishes the internal nature of the dialectic process, and in so doing provides a convincing response to the traditional problems of *criterion* and *scepticism*.

By *doing* phenomenology (that is, by "looking on") he recognises that the deficiencies of sense-certainty prompt the knower to engage in a more detailed analysis of the object.²⁶ In this analysis, the deficiencies of sense-certainty are not abandoned but rather incorporated into the next level of knowledge. From this we may draw two conclusions.

First, the process of moving from inadequate to ever more adequate degrees of knowledge of an object is an *internal* process. Therefore, the traditional criterion of verification is to be found within the subject and occurs through *doing* phenomenology. Secondly, the knowledge acquired at the level of sense-certainty is incorporated into the next level, and each level moves towards an ever-greater union between subject and object. Therefore the possibility of radical scepticism is denied.

By this means Hegel argues for an essential unity in which all things are defined relationally, and eliminates the possibility of *speaking* about (and therefore conceptualising) any object except in relation to a subject: thus, "no object without a subject".²⁷

The inseparability of this dialectical unity is further developed in Hegel's famous "Master/Slave" formulation, something most effective in demonstrating the underlying unity in a relation that, on the surface, appears radically different.

MASTER-SLAVE RELATION AS ONE OF UNITY UNDERLYING DIFFERENCE

Hegel's formulation of the *master* is that of one in whom the self is fully recognised, and by this means fully realised, through the subordination of another, the *slave*. Therefore, from the outset the master's identity is inextricable from relation to the slave. By the same token the master's "independence" is entirely determined by the dependence of the slave. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that the "master cannot be truly independent or free unless he or she *has*

25. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 58.

26. I would point out that Hegel's phenomenology is not, formally speaking, identical with the understanding of "phenomenology" that developed in the early twentieth century under the influence especially of Edmund Husserl. See Melchert, *The Great Conversation*, 703.

27. Melchert, *The Great Conversation*, 473.

something which is not himself or herself", and thus the "very idea of independence implies its opposite, dependence, and independence includes dependence in its very self".²⁸

Furthermore, for the master to conceive of himself as "master" entails a degree of uniqueness from others, a relation that is affirmed by the presence of slaves. However, to be a master is to belong to a group or kind who exist in a particular relation to others, that is, who exist as masters to slaves. Therefore, "the very uniqueness of consciousness realized in masterhood is dependent on a condition which contradicts its truth".²⁹

In this formulation Hegel convincingly demonstrates that the apparent independence of the master as master is revealed upon closer examination to be an independence that is entirely dependent upon an other, that is the slave. The distinction between master and slave in terms of dependence and independence is thus an illusory one.

The point I wish to make through the above analysis is simply this: Hegel's fundamental concern with *reconciliation* is grounded in a convincing philosophical framework, the crowning idea of which may be described (albeit inadequately) as an ontological dialectic of identity-in-difference. I now examine his analysis of the core of Christian confession, the incarnation of Christ.

HEGEL AND THE INCARNATION

The most pointed expression of Hegel's determination for ontological and metaphysical reconciliation is to be seen in his analysis of the incarnation. However, in what, according to Hegel, does the incarnation consist?

The examination of this question must begin with Hegel's concept of Absolute Spirit (*Geist*, mind), which bears some resemblance to the Christian notion of God. Absolute Spirit is the *telos* of the universe and thus "history is the progressive self-unfolding and self-realization of the Absolute".³⁰ According to Hegel, the human spirit is a manifestation of Absolute Spirit (albeit an imperfect one), and thus "finite spirits and Infinite Spirit have an implicit unity-in-difference that is progressively becoming explicit".³¹

On this basis Hegel's formulation bears a striking resemblance to a Christian understanding of God, soul and human temporality, whereby in each person there exists both the soul, that is of God, and the reality of transient existence (exemplified in the body that is born and dies).

28. Allen, *Philosophy*, 231.

29. Allen, *Philosophy*, 231.

30. Allen, *Philosophy*, 221.

31. Allen, *Philosophy*, 226.

The religious path is one in which a person seeks to dwell in the eternal (soul) aspect of human nature while remaining within, and being subject to, the limitations of temporal existence. This condition Hegel describes as the "Unhappy Consciousness".³²

The reason for this "unhappiness" reveals the distinctive and radical aspect of Hegel's philosophy. For Hegel, the unchanging aspect of the human person is not an expression of God but is, in fact God (Infinite Spirit), limited only by its relation to that which it both is and is not: finite spirit. Thus the individual's consciousness is "unhappy" because it struggles between these "two poles", one illusory and the other true.³³

Along these lines Hegel establishes the essential (though in all cases, save one, *unrealised*) dual nature of all humanity. If this understanding is accepted, then it follows that "we are in reality one with God, who is not essentially different from us, not totally alien. There is continuity between God and us."³⁴ In Hegel's ontology the concern for reconciliation is expressed in terms of a "rift that must be healed" "between God and creature", between "that of the infinite and finite".³⁵ The necessity of that reconciliation follows from the understanding of human and divine nature as identity-in-difference.

If the unity does indeed exist in an ontological sense then, Hegel writes, it "must accordingly show itself to consciousness in a purely temporal, absolutely ordinary manifestation of reality, in one particular man, in a finite individual who is at the same time known to be the Divine Idea, not merely a Being of a higher kind in general, but rather the highest, the absolute Idea, the Son of God".³⁶ Hegel's emphatic language establishes his conviction of the *necessity* of the incarnation.

On this point Hegel's philosophy becomes utterly irreconcilable with a Christian understanding of the incarnation as an expression of God's infinite grace and mercy. For Hegel, Christ is the mediator who "demonstrates that *in principle* the two sides of spirit – the eternal and the temporal – are one"³⁷ and thus the incarnation of Christ "does not create the possibility of reconciliation between God and humanity" (as Christian doctrine would assert).³⁸ Rather "the basis for reconciliation has always existed because God and humanity have an underlying unity".³⁹

Hegel's position is indeed elusive though he certainly leaves open the possibility that the incarnation, understood in the broadest possible

32. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 126. See also pp. 119-38.

33. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 119-38.

34. Allen, *Philosophy*, 236.

35. Allen, *Philosophy*, 234.

36. G. Hegel, *Lectures in Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3 (New York: Humanities Press, 1962) 72-73.

37. Melchert, *The Great Conversation*, 483.

38. Allen, *Philosophy*, 238.

39. Allen, *Philosophy*, 238.

terms, occurred in Adam. That is, in an ontological sense the infinite was "made flesh" in self-conscious humanity, but only *realised* as such in the Christ event. Thus the incarnation of Christ becomes the moment when the "finite becomes conscious of its identity with the Infinite" and expresses this realisation pedagogically in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.⁴⁰ Therefore, the incarnation, perceived through the lens of Hegel's philosophy, is *necessary* and *illustrative*. In this claim Hegel's philosophy departs radically from a Christian world-view.

KIERKEGAARD'S ATTACK UPON HEGEL'S SYSTEM

Hegel's unrelenting effort to reconcile difference has the inevitable consequence of diminishing the significance of individuality – between human individuals, and between God and humanity. Furthermore, the scientific precision with which he attempts to systematise the metaphysical relations objectifies religious "experience" and in so doing virtually eliminates the need for faith. In these respects the limitations of Hegel's philosophy, via Kierkegaard's observations, are revealed to be most serious.

If Hegel begins with *identity*, Kierkegaard begins with *difference*. Kierkegaard uncompromisingly asserts the fundamental "otherness" of God, whom a person encounters in "fear and trembling", convinced by reasons that are not the reasons of rationality, but the reasons of faith alone.⁴¹ This faith is born of human experience, with the possibility of choice and decision at its core. Kierkegaard's emphasis upon the priority of human experience is such that he pre-empted the later movement known broadly as "existentialism".⁴² In his priority of experience over thought, Kierkegaard's position stands in criticism of Hegel for whom all is determined by the inevitable unfolding and self-actualising of consciousness. If Hegel presents an essential unity, Kierkegaard proposes a fundamental alienation, known by the experience of *dread*, between God and humanity.⁴³ For Kierkegaard, the

40. Allen, *Philosophy*, 235.

41. S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952).

42. For a more recent exposition of Kierkegaard's influences and influence see chapter 1 in Martin J. Matustik and Merold Westphal (eds.), *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).

43. S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); see esp. ch. V "Dread as saving experience by means of faith", 139-145.

Although one could confidently argue for a fundamental difference between the thought of Kierkegaard and Hegel, more recent research has revealed certain subtleties within this difference that suggest Kierkegaard's thought was driven by obscured allegiances to Hegel and particularly to Kant. R. Green's *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992) provides a brief though valuable overview of the evolving understanding of the complex relationship between Kierkegaard and Hegel. See also Taylor's "Concluding Preface" in *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel & Kierkegaard*.

inexplicability of this gulf between humanity and the “wholly other” God is such that he describes the condition as one of “absurdity”.⁴⁴

However, on this claim an obvious difficulty emerges. If God is wholly other, then God cannot be *known* as “wholly other”. In this regard Hegel’s dialectic, that each implies its opposite, is a valuable corrective. Thus, in order for the proposition, “God is other”, to be meaningful, there must exist a definite relationship, sufficient to state “God is other”. Therefore, the “gulf” of which Kierkegaard writes is not unbridgeable, but is deep and wide to such an extent as to be unbridgeable by human initiative and effort. So by what means, according to Kierkegaard, is this gulf bridged?

As a Christian, Kierkegaard naturally turns to the incarnation, and encounters it as Absolute Paradox.⁴⁵ The transcendence of God and the immanence of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, stand as an offence to all that is reasonable. While Kierkegaard, along with most Christians, concedes that the incarnation cannot be accounted for by means of reason, the belief that it happened (and in another important sense *continues* to happen) persists. So in full recognition of the limitations of reason – limitations revealed through a persistent belief in the truth of the incarnation – Kierkegaard encounters the incarnation in a posture of *faith*. And it is here, “Kierkegaard the philosopher” becomes, unmistakably, “Kierkegaard the Christian existentialist”, standing alone, with Abraham, before God.

In this call to faith, Kierkegaard surpasses Hegel’s analysis of the incarnation as he establishes as the central category of Christian theology Christian life and faith, lived in response to an awareness of divine mystery. Hegel’s formulation of identity-in-difference, though indispensable in establishing a convincing philosophical basis for the relationship between the finite and the infinite, is an obstacle to a Christian understanding of the relationship between God and humanity as it reduces reconciliation to an imperative.⁴⁶ Reconciliation, understood in such terms, undermines the grace of God and the freedom of human individuals, both of which cannot be compromised in a genuinely Christian theology.

44. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, in Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, p. 248.

45. Kierkegaard’s recognition of the incarnation as “Absolute Paradox” is, essentially, a statement of faith. That is, the possibility of God becoming man is in itself a paradox. That it actually happened, that the absolute unlikeness of humanity to God has been made *likeness* through Jesus Christ, makes mere paradox “Absolute Paradox”. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 37.

46. However, this begs a further question as to whether reconciliation is a necessity, on the basis of God’s being consisting of love. That is, if the character of love is to reconcile, does the truth that God’s being consists of love compromise God’s freedom?

Although Kierkegaard's call to recognise "the paradox: and then hold it fast with the passion of inwardness"⁴⁷, may suggest an unqualified emphasis upon the priority of faith, such faith as a *response* to paradox inevitably leads to the necessity of reason. Therefore, the recognition of the incarnation as paradox is by definition a response to the limitations of reason. Thus we find, at the beginning of Kierkegaard's radical faith, a radical commitment to reason. Unlike Hegel, however, Kierkegaard's commitment extends to the honest recognition of the limitations of rational explanation.

And so one is lead unavoidably to the conclusion that "to take care in every moment to discover the improbable, the paradox",⁴⁸ is to engage the faculties of reason in the service of faith. Admittedly, reason cannot resolve the paradox, though nothing other than reason can reveal the paradox as "paradox". And without the paradox revealed as such, to what may we "hold fast with the passion of inwardness?"

Thus through Kierkegaard's thought we discover that faith cannot be understood as an alternative to reason but rather is *demande*d by the limitations of reason itself, limitations that we must "take care in every moment to discover".⁴⁹ Kierkegaard's polemical writings do not express a rejection of reason and philosophy *per se*. Rather, they challenge and continue to call into serious question any attempts to construct a totalising vision of the reasonableness of human existence and Christian faith. Ultimately Kierkegaard leads his readers, if they dare, to the necessity of reason, and to the courageous acceptance of its eventual limitations, in the service of authentic Christian faith.

CONCLUSION

In terms of a complete expression of the Christian vision, the thought of both these great thinkers is, nonetheless, best understood as mutually *corrective* rather than *comprehensive*. Recognising that each writes out of a particular context, we may see that Hegel provides an expression, unprecedented in its detail and scope, of the possibilities of reason to understand the eternally elusive relationship between creature and creator. Through relentless critical analysis, Hegel enables the artificial distinction between identity and difference to be overcome by a formulation of identity-in-difference. As regards Kierkegaard, the religiosity and vacuous piety of the Lutheran church in Denmark drove him, with an almost manic force, towards a re-emphasis upon the

47. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 208-209.

48. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 208-209.

49. "Where the understanding despairs, faith is already present in order to make the despair properly decisive; in order that the movement of faith may not become a mere exchange within the bargaining sphere of the understanding." Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 208.

unreasonableness of faith and centrality of divine mystery in any religion that may rightfully be considered Christian. While both thinkers have much to offer any analysis of Christianity, both, for dramatically different reasons, also fail to capture the essential truth of Christian life.

Kierkegaard's system is not as closed or complete as that of Hegel. At its very centre it maintains a gaping hole through which one must go to discover the empty heart of an extreme vision. To understand Kierkegaard one must ultimately abandon Kierkegaard lest his thought makes the unreasonable, reasonable.