

EXISTENTIAL PRACTICE: RELATING TO THE INFINITE

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Abstract

The present article discusses “the positive” in Kierkegaard’s thinking in order to sketch out an existential practice in relating to the infinite. Kierkegaard’s thinking is mainly tied to currents as “the negative” and “negativity”, especially caused by his continual reference to Socrates and his overall inspiration from Hegelian dialectics. This article poses questions as: What exactly do we mean by using the operators “the positive” and “the negative”? Does Hegelian and Kierkegaardian negativity mean the same? To what extent is it legitimate to state “a positivity” in Kierkegaard’s thinking? How does this positivity relate to the single individual? How can we interpret the category of “sin”? What does Johannes Climacus bear in mind differentiating a “Religiousness A” from a “Religiousness B”? Given that Climacus knows the art of dialectics to be an indispensable part of our conceptions and act of thinking, how does he pose an alternative way of thinking of dialectics than pure reflection? How does Climacus more precisely sketch an existential practice in relating to the infinite, e. g. what does he understand by the expression “to practice the absolute relation to the absolute τέλος”? What is the relationship between an existential practice and the comical? What is Climacus’ point of ranging some life stages? What is “the comic paradigm” in modern research? Given that the modern idea of the infinite is tied to comedy, the question is what existential possibilities are implied? Does Climacus agree with modern research? Texts from Kierkegaard, Hegel and Alenka Zupančič provide the basis for this discussion.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, existential practice, positivity, dialectics, incarnation, the comical, freedom.

“Omnis affirmatio est negatio”². In the *Concept of Anxiety*, Virgilius Hafniensis hints in a footnote to Spinoza’s famous formula for the act of defining: every affirmation is a negation. Hafniensis notices that affirmation *precedes* negation, like a person always begins with something positive, e. g. he begins by admiring a person. But as soon as he begins to reflect, it triggers a dialectical process, in which the positive only precedes the negative, as admiration pre-

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² S. Kierkegaard: *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. by R. Thomte and A.B. Anderson, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980, 146.

cedes jealousy, pride precedes cowardice etc. Above all “the new philosophy” [Hegel] have got it all wrong by setting the negative *before* the positive.

This article is mainly concerned with “the positive” in Kierkegaard’s thinking in order to sketch out what I would like to call an “existential practice” regarding the act of *relating to the infinite*. The primary work referred to will be Johannes Climacus’ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1846).

The article consists of six parts. After sorting out the scientific levels concerning the linguistic operators “the negative” and “the positive” in the first part, in the second part I display two concepts of positivity, found in *The Concept of Irony* (1841). Further I argue for a link between positivity and subjectivity/inwardness regarding the single individual. The third part presents an outline and discussion of Climacus’ differentiation of “Religiousness A” from “Religiousness B”; formally connected to respectively a Greek and a Christian paradigm. In my opinion this differentiation explores the positive and the negative at a new level, and it sketches two existential practices, namely that of holding a dialectical-ironical attitude toward the world, referring to A, and that of holding a dialectical-comical attitude, referring to B. Part four exposes Climacus’ definition of the comical, in relation to the famous stage hierarchy of personalities and points to an existential practice, connected to “an expanded eye for the comical”. Part five discusses this existential practice by holding it against a modern perspective on the comical, namely the Slovenian scholar Alenka Zupančič. I argue that Climacus by relating to a positivity/prime confirmation avoids ending up in a modern tendency of drawing empty caricatures in the name of taking “a critical approach”. Finally part six will offer some concluding remarks.

To sort out the levels

In his reference to the Spinozistic quotation, Hafniensis speaks at an existential level despite of using the logical operators “the positive” and “the negative”. To get closer to the idea of an existential practice of relating to the infinite, I will sort out some levels where it makes sense to use these operators:

At an *epistemological level*, it is clear that it is not possible only to negate since you always negate *something*. In this sense, it keeps up with Spinoza. However, negation is not *negativity*; a scholarly movement cogently set forward by the German philosopher, Michael Theunissen to characterise a certain philosophical method. “Negativity” seems to say something about the mutual relationship between the positive and the negative; it states their very difference towards each other. Theunissen made important and standing contributions concerning Kierkegaard’s method of negativity³ which one has to consider carefully before pointing to the positive in Kierkegaard’s thinking.

³ M. Theunissen: *Das Selbst auf dem Grund der Verzweiflung*, Frankfurt am Main: Hain 1991.

At a *life practical level*, we could state negativity as an experience of pain, anxiety, suffering etc., that is, everything that has failed and run at a background of the idea of a life that came out well. At an *epistemological level*, negativity states the limits for knowing and understanding the positive. At an *ontological level*, negativity functions as reference to the origin of Being, as well as to its future, that is, it determines the transition from Being to Non-Being and vice versa as a process determined by reason and reality, taking place *in time*, as we find it in Hegel's thinking.

The Kierkegaardian negativity process, in which he describes life practical phenomena as anxiety, despair, sorrow etc., appears almost as a Hegelian reality process running in time. The only difference seems to be that Kierkegaard is a better psychologist than Hegel as he offers extremely differentiated descriptions of the complex existential dialectics. Contrary to this simplification, I argue for a fully other type of dialectics in Kierkegaard's thinking – a type of dialectics connected to an existential practice tied to Religiousness B. *If* and only *if* it is possible to slip out of the exhausting dialectical immersion, it must be by having the dialectical in second place⁴, as Climacus puts it in *The Postscript*.

Two concepts of “positivity”

In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard ascribes to the sophists positivity and to Socrates negativity, emphasizing it to be a simplification. Sophistic positivity finds a good example in Protagoras who positively states that virtue *can* be taught and so holds a great confidence to existence and knowledge⁵. Contrary to this, Socrates “knows nothing”, and in this way he negates. But Socrates does not negate *everything*, since he exactly states something breaking new in history, namely subjectivity. According to Kierkegaard, Greece urgently needed liberation from this sophistic positivity, and this could only happen through a radical cure, namely Socrates. However, the liberation battle has not come to its end. Socrates represents an *abstract form* of subjectivity, Kierkegaard states, since he is in lack of the “objectivity in which subjectivity in its intrinsic freedom is free”⁶.

Despite of sounding almost Hegelian in pointing to a lack of objectivity, Kierkegaard first and foremost thinks in a structure of incarnation, which is also a structure of paradox. Climacus words it “the God in time”⁷. This incarnated factum *is* the affirmative objectivity that sets the

⁴ S. Kierkegaard: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992, 556.

⁵ S. Kierkegaard: *The Concept of Irony With Continual Reference to Socrates*, ed. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989, 208.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁷ S. Kierkegaard: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992, 583.

freedom of the subject's freedom, functioning in Kierkegaard's words as an "enlarging boundary of subjectivity"⁸.

In opposition to this, subjectivity and irony *own* Socrates; he is caught up in a reflective snare, pulling the loop infinite backwards with his irony. The Greek positivity, however, rises again in a Hegelian disguise, since in the Hegelian thinking the negative only precedes the positive (remembering Hafniensis' rebuke in the footnote). That is why Socrates keeps on playing a very important role in many of the Kierkegaardian works, namely as the one who guards the boundary lines for what can be predicated and what can not. This new conception of positivity, rooted in the incarnated factum, ties as well to a new concept of subjectivity/inwardness regarding the single subject. Hafniensis opens *The Concept of anxiety* not only pointing to the odd phenomena anxiety but also by pointing to the even more odd phenomenon *sin* – a phenomenon man, in all kinds of sciences, is unable to get a hold on. Sin as a "border conception" is in short what is left of man's identity in the Christian paradigm. Christ negates all human systems and concepts, including the identity of every individual. Opposite Socrates, who keeps on groping for his identity, as he questions himself whether he is a more curious monster or by nature sharing something divine⁹, the Christian sinner cannot even pose this question. All marks of identity have been erased. We may recognize this feeling that the existential curtain is suddenly pulled away, leaving us momentarily without reality. But to Hafniensis, as well as to Climacus, this feeling is not temporarily but definitive. Nevertheless it opens up a new orientation, a new sense perception, a new sort of inwardness that escapes the dialectics situated within immanence. The ironical laughter stops for a moment. It is, however, important to accentuate that we can never escape dialectics in our expositions and conceptions. But the point is that Climacus introduces a dialectics situated within transcendence, and inside this rests a new positivity as well as a new existential practice. I will now qualify this more precisely by fleshing out Religiousness A and B.

"Religiousness A" and "Religiousness B"

In *The Postscripts*, Climacus imparts us with the following definitions of Religiousness A:

"Religiousness A is the dialectic of inward deepening; it is the relation to an eternal happiness that is not conditioned by a something but is the dialectical inward deepening of the relation, consequently conditioned only by the inward deepening, which is dialectical."¹⁰

⁸ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, op. cit., 211.

⁹ This takes place in the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*, S. Kierkegaard: *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1985, 37.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, op. cit., 556.

In my opinion, Religiousness A corresponds to Socrates, to immanence, to negativity, to irony; whereas Religiousness B corresponds to the Christian Paradigm, to transcendence, to confirmation, to the comical. In Religiousness A, the individual is, in referring to his inward deepening, “dialectical in self-annihilation”. This indicates the art of suffering, in which man holds himself in a constant relationship to the great infinite by making himself small and insignificant. Actually not so far from the Hegelian dialectical process of resolving contrasts into a synthesis, since is the same strong need of totalizing. At an existential level, it may grasp the meaning of not only the need for totalizing, but also a closely related need of immersing ourselves in our own deep reflection – ambivalently for the very sake of relating. In this way, we place all dialectics *inside* ourselves. Religiousness B, however, suggests a different existential practice. It suggests depositing the dialectics *outside* ourselves, referring back to Climacus’ wording of having the dialectical “in second place”. This indeterminate wording is shortly after “specified” as a “definite something”¹¹, provocatively pointing to a third human need, namely that of constantly classifying and determining. In Religiousness B, we must exactly relate to the fact that concerning our “eternal happiness” we are left powerless, only to put our trust in an undefined “definite something” – a paradoxical formulation, pointing to a task which requires an extremely great and continuous amount of passion. Now we have reached the very core of the existential practice:

“If the individual is paradoxical-dialectical, every remnant of original immanence annihilated, and all connection cut away, and the individual situated at the edge of existence, then we have the *paradoxical-religious*. This paradoxical inwardness is the greatest possible, because even the most dialectical qualification, if it is still within immanence, has, as it were, a possibility of an escape, of a shifting away, of a withdrawal into the eternal behind it; it is as if everything were not actually at stake. But the break makes the inwardness the greatest possible.”¹²

In the following, I will try to sort these complex expressions out. As we notice, this individual is “paradox-dialectical”; and he balances the difficult life task being “situated at the edge of existence”, constantly having the feeling that “all connection is cut away” and “everything is at stake”. That is, he is able to keep together contrasts, namely on the one hand the longing and creation of a coherent life and on the other, the fact that existence is always indeterminable open. Post the coming of Christ, the individual has eternally lost his identity, referring back to Hafniensis’ conception of sin. This is analogous to what Climacus refers to as “the break that makes the inwardness greatest possible”. An answer to this frustrating lack of existential orientation, Climacus explains, is not to enter the monastery. The task is more precisely to practice “the absolute distinction” (what I have also called the task of relating to the infinite)

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, op. cit., 556.

¹² *Ibid.*, 572

which does not necessarily mean that the individual becomes indifferent to the finite¹³. Climacus words the task in a short formula:

“The task is to practice the absolute relation to the absolute τέλος in such a way that the individual strives to reach this maximum: to relate himself *simultaneously* to his absolute τέλος and to the relative—not by mediating them but by relating himself absolutely to his absolute τέλος and relatively to the relative.”¹⁴

In this way, the paradoxical-dialectical individual masters the almost schizophrenic task of relating simultaneously to the absolute and to the relative being two different things. This guards the individual against the three mentioned negative needs, namely the dangerous need for totalizing, the destroying need for never ending reflection and the immediate need for categorizing. In my perspective, it is evident that we have a very hard time accepting not only everything that conditions us (cf. Religiousness A and B both make strong conditions) but in particular we question a condition that “has the dialectical in second place”. For how can we settle for (just) the real, namely being in a radical open position and not immediately taking control of the place of the dialectical process? Climacus seeks to remind us that we always live in a “dialectical moment” and that we should not try to limit the scope of the dialectical by placing it according to our very fixed conceptions of time and place. In this way the dialectical exists only in second place and the individual who relates to this fact lives with an open attitude towards the world, willing to trust unknown events that can, however, end up having a crucial impact on his life. Like this the conceptions of time and place are constantly displaced.

This thinking roots, as mentioned, in the structure of incarnation, interestingly referring back to the etymology: in-carnatio (embodied in flesh), that is God himself incarnated in the fragile at a certain time and place. In this way God proved the whole point of relating to an indefinite “definite something”, namely in the meaning of taking a chance right here and right now by relying in something fragile and open, something beyond categories and yet something *definite*, something *concrete*. This is also what happens in love and faith when we cannot help ourselves reaching out for this definite something, willingly being conditioned. We can take this “definite something” as the art of affirmative objectivity, limiting the subject, that Climacus called for in his pointing out negatively Socrates’ unlimited subjectivity. Like this the positive precedes the negative. The meaning of the incarnation is nothing else but this fact: It really did happen! I really was limited. Impossible to explain in details afterwards but necessary to keep on relating to. Hereby the negative dialectical spiral has been stopped.

¹³ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, op. cit., 407.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Existential practice tied to “an expanded eye for the comical”

As already mentioned, we can overall tie Religiousness A with a practice of irony and Religiousness B with a practice of the comical. I will qualify this perspective by exploring Climacus’ conception of the comical. His definition is this:

“The matter is very simple. The comic is present in every stage of life (except that position is different), because where there is life there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction, the comic is present. The tragic and the comic are the same inasmuch as both are contradiction, but the tragic is suffering contradiction, and the comic is painless contradiction.”¹⁵

Now, Climacus states that “the comical” is present wherever there is life, that is, wherever human beings are. Eventually, he ties the comical to an anthropological description by asking whether the individual has the comical/the contradiction inside or outside himself. Accordingly, he outlines a hierarchy consisting of different personalities or “life stages” (primarily the aesthete – the ethicist – the religious) with the comical as the organizing principle: The aesthete has the contradiction outside himself since the only thing that holds him back from the party comes from the outside.

The ethicist has the comical within himself since he must put up a safeguard between protecting e.g. animal rights for bats and the hatred to bats from the rest of the world.

Finally, we reach a boundary. The religious individual as hidden inwardness is inaccessible to the comical interpretation. He cannot hold the comical outside himself because it is *hidden* inwardness and does not contradict with anything. Furthermore, the religious has brought into consciousness the inner contradiction dominating the preceding stage and “has it with himself” as something lower. Like this, Climacus concludes that the religious individual is “protected by the comic against the comic”¹⁶. Another wording is that the comic has become *auxiliary*, that is, it no longer controls the individual, and he can relate to the infinite and express himself in passion without constantly redrawing himself in humour. This does of course not imply that the religious has no sense of humour; on the contrary the religious has the most expanded eye for the comical since he makes the top stage.

The structuring principle for the stage hierarchy is that the lower never makes the higher comical. As Climacus exemplifies:

“Thus a horse can be the occasion for a man to look ludicrous, but the horse does not have the power to make him ludicrous”¹⁷.

In the same way, a humorist (the stage below the religious) can be the occasion for a religious to look ludicrous, but the humorist’s joke does not have the power to make the religious ludicrous. Accordingly, I argue

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, op. cit., 513.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 522.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 520.

the same point as I did by exposing the dialectics of Religiousness B: The comical/the contradiction has become auxiliary in the religious sphere, because it has been placed *outside* the individual. He cannot immerse himself in any immanent structure, including that of the comical, since he must *live* the contradiction. In this way the contradiction is nothing else but the individual's own humble existence contrasted against the absolute. There is an analogy with the aesthetic sphere in which the contradiction also comes from outside; the only difference is the *conscious* contradictory living in the religious sphere.

This idea has a general implication for theological conceptions such as repentance, faith, sin, etc., referring back to phenomena which are dialectically and individually *lived* since there exist no higher perspective from where they can be ranked lower (only God can forgive sins). Climacus offers an illustrative example as he points out that a low and dissolving ranking of repentance, e.g. like the system of indulgence in The Middle Ages, would be to flee into the aesthetical sphere whereas repentance belongs to the religious sphere¹⁸.

“The comic paradigm” and its limitations

During the past few years there has been a focus on the comical and comedy, even expounded as the “comic paradigm”, lead by Alenka Zupančič among others. Inspired by Hegel and the Christian writer, Nathan A. Scott, Zupančič understands comedy as “incarnation” (in a structural way) due to the fact that comedy is not the material undermining of the infinite¹⁹ but the infinite's undermining of itself. That is, Christ is not a religious genius but Christ *is* the God, who slipped on his head. Now, what could be a possible limitation in such a conception? I argue that Zupančič's anthropology beforehand determines her perspective on the comical which reacts back on her anthropology in a reductive way.

Zupančič understands man as a “failed finitude”, filled with passion and constantly exceeding himself. This endless striving/contradiction is summed up in the comic paradigm. Zupančič states:

“And then there is also a possible ‘*objectification*’ (or singularization) of the (endless) internal contradiction, which one could relate, among other things, to comedy and to the ‘comic paradigm.’”²⁰

This statement shows that to Zupančič the comical *is* the very objectification of contradictions. Or put in other words, the good joke sets us free. In my opinion Zupančič not only lessens Hegel's very dynamic conception of spirit, she also lessens the entire room for transcendence and the existential possibilities of man. In Hegel's thinking incarnation and comedy does not share the same structure, since comedy is an art

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, op. cit., 524.

¹⁹ The infinite is understood in an immanent (Hegelian) way.

²⁰ A. Zupančič: *The Odd One In On Comedy*, Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2008, 55 (*my italicization*).

form of representation whereas incarnation belongs to a higher form of spirit, carrying self consciousness *in itself* so as to appear in faith as a real person²¹. Zupančič on the other hand puts her trust in the comedy but her idea of infinity is purely functional, namely that of showing man his own failures. His existential practice is reduced to that of seeing through all contradictions in order in a hollow laughter to enjoy himself being objectified.

The striking thing, however, is that the anthropology of Climacus and Zupančič are much alike, since Climacus also ascribes to man something contradictory as shown in my outline of the stage hierarchy. But the crucial difference is the dynamic in the stage hierarchy which constantly enables a *new* individual position, naturally continuously based on a contradiction (this is the negativity that we will never escape). For example, the humorist laughs at other jokes than the aesthete, in the same way as we can change our perspective and suddenly find ourselves laughing of things we certainly did not laugh at five years ago. This dynamic which we can understand is analogous with that of living in a “dialectical moment” makes room for the individual to change radically, to be suddenly limited in a new affirmative way.

I will state the central difference between Climacus and Zupančič like this: Zupančič’s anthropology determines “her picture of God”, reacting back on her anthropology in a limiting way, whereas Climacus’ “picture of God” inspires his anthropology in a dynamic way. In this way, for Climacus it all does not end up in a good joke but there exists a hope for the individual to break out of the dialectics situated within immanence and express pathos. “The God in time”, Climacus’ picture of God, holds together the infinite and the finite *in time* and by mirroring ourselves in this paradox that blows up all finite contrasts do we have a hope of getting out of the exhausting power of the comical.

Concluding remarks

This article has tried to reflect on positivity in Kierkegaard’s thinking in order to sketch an “existential practice” in relating to the infinite. Kierkegaard is a trained dialectical thinker, wrapped in Socratic and Hegelian negativity. He is but aware that pure negativity at an existential level locks the individual up in a reflective cage and a hollow ironic laughter.

Whereas the sophistic positivity reappears in a Hegelian disguise, carrying great expectation to human existence and knowledge, Socrates puts himself at stake in pure negativity. To Kierkegaard, however, Socrates lacks an objectivity that paradoxically enlarges his subjectivity *by limiting it*. God’s incarnation is stated as this affirmative objectivity, having its dialectics in second place that is, *outside* the individual instead of *inside*. The dialectics situated within transcendence sets the individual free of three destroying needs, namely that of totalizing, that of never-ending inner reflection and that of immediate categorizing. Ironi-

²¹ G.W.F. Hegel: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1970, 541.

cally, self-annihilation and an illusory self-image of controlling the place of dialectics go hand in hand.

The new positivity ties to a new sort of inwardness in which the individual is deprived of his whole identity, expressed by Hafniensis as "sin". "Situating at the edge of existence" the individual, however, masters the difficult task of holding together contrasts and practising an absolute distinction by accepting that life is always radical open. The paradoxical-dialectical individual takes a chance in trusting a "definite something" and is hereby affirmatively limited, just like in love and faith. In my opinion we need to keep on practicing exactly this being affirmative limited.

Finally I have called attention to the link between an existential practice and an expanded eye for the comical. Inspired by Climacus' dynamic thinking in tying the comical, understood as a contradiction, to different individual positions which changes all life, I have argued against a modern tendency of letting comedy be our final salvation. In the stage hierarchy the comical has become auxiliary in the top stage since the religious expresses a hidden inwardness and rather *lives* as a contradiction. I take this to be analogous to the idea of having dialectics in second place, namely that the individual in this way relates to the infinite *outside* himself and is freed of all immanent originality. I find that Zupančič's conception of the infinite merely mirrors her anthropology in which man is a failed finitude, whereas Climacus' "God in time" manifests the greatest paradox and makes it possible for the individual to mirror this in a room of freedom.