

# KIERKEGAARD'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMPASSE: SUBJECTIVE THINKER AND REALITY OF THOUGHT

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**Resumo:** Kierkegaard é geralmente lido como um defensor de algum tipo de relativismo devido às suas frequentes afirmações sobre a subjetividade. No entanto, se nos aprofundarmos em suas obras, é possível ver que sua posição é muito mais intrigante. Na realidade, se é verdade que o conceito de subjetividade desempenha um papel central em seu pensamento, também é verdade que o filósofo dinamarquês não endossa uma visão relativista do conhecimento, mas defende uma compreensão realista da natureza de certos tipos. de pensamentos. Consequentemente, o que emerge da relação necessária entre existência e pensamento é filosoficamente mais sofisticado do que a visão que poderíamos chamar de "leitura padrão" das posições epistemológicas de Kierkegaard. Neste artigo, pretendo mostrar que as reflexões de Kierkegaard sobre o conhecimento abrangem um impasse de ordem superior que não é resolvido pela divisão padrão entre conhecimento "objetivo-não essencial" e "subjetivo-essencial". Não obstante, esse impasse abre novas perspectivas sobre o assunto.

**Palavras-chave:** Kierkegaard, Epistemologia, Subjetividade, Objetividade, Filosofia do 19º Século.

**Abstract:** Kierkegaard is usually read as a defender of some kind of relativism due to his frequent statements on subjectivity. Nevertheless, if we go deeper into his works, it is possible to see that his position is much more puzzling. In fact, if it is true that the concept of subjectivity plays a central role in his thought, it is also true that the Danish philosopher does not endorse a relativistic view on knowledge, but he argues for a realistic understanding of the nature of certain kinds of thoughts. Accordingly, what emerges from the necessary relation between existence and thought is philosophically more sophisticated than the view we could call the 'standard reading' of Kierkegaard's epistemological positions. In this paper, I aim to show that Kierkegaard's reflections on knowledge embrace a higher order impasse that is not solved by the standard division between "objective-inessential" and 'subjective-essential' knowledge. Notwithstanding, this impasse opens some new perspectives on the issue.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaard, Epistemology, Subjectivity, Objectivity, 19th Century Philosophy.

## Introduction

There is a quite interesting view – and paradoxical somehow – concerning Kierkegaard's epistemological positions. It oscillates between, on the one hand, considering his epistemological views as indifferent or insignificant, since he did not write any explicit treatise on the subject and, on the other hand, thinking as a philosophical commonplace that Kierkegaard is a

hardcore subjectivist and, even more, that his subjectivism is absolutely not a flaw, but actually one of his major contributions to Modern and Contemporary Philosophy<sup>1</sup>. In fact, one could say the Danish philosopher did not help a lot to solve this embarrassing situation which consists in, at the same time, to be seen as irrelevant and as a champion of one side of the coin. If it is true that epistemology does not occupy a privileged place within his work, Kierkegaard is also the author of widely known statements like ‘Subjectivity is truth’ (*CUP1*, p. 343 / *SKS* 7, 314). But if we take a moment and, for instance, taking a Fregean criteria to judge his so-called subjectivism (see FREGE, 1982, p. xv-xvi), we cannot find any instance of Kierkegaard either assuming that truth is being taken to be true or considering the known object as a product of the act of knowing.

What we can notice, if we go a bit further into Kierkegaard’s works, is that this apparent paradox gives room to a deeper and philosophically more interesting problem. Despite Kierkegaard’s statement that ‘Subjectivity is truth’, in the same *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, published in 1846, we can find excerpts like this:

This triumph of pure thinking (that in it thinking and being are one) is both laughable and lamentable, because in pure thinking there can really be no question at all of the difference. –Greek philosophy assumed as a matter of course that thinking has reality [*Realitet*]. In reflecting upon it, one must come to the same result, but why is thought-reality [*Tanke-Realitet*] confused with actuality [*Virkelighed*]? Thought-reality is possibility, and thinking needs only to reject any further questioning about whether it is actual [*Virkelig*]. (*CUP1*, p. 328 / *SKS* 7, 299).

The excerpt has many points I cannot unfold here. However, for my purpose here, it is enough to highlight something that Kierkegaard, perhaps naïvely, explicitly asserts, namely, that thought has some sort of reality [*Realitet*] or, in other words, that the thought also has reality as one of its properties; actually, he refers to it using the compound expression *Tanke-Realitet*. As we

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<sup>1</sup> HENCE, J. L. Mackie, for instance, says that Kierkegaard disdains rational considerations” and plays “a sort of intellectual Russian roulette” (1982, p. 216). For L. Mackey, “[...] in Kierkegaard philosophy becomes poetry. Modern philosophers have always thought it possible to be objective; that is, they have claimed to occupy an existentially neutral standpoint, to view reality from the perspective of the angels. Kierkegaard counters: every standpoint is in fact not neutral but biased, not objective but subjective, not angelic but human and finite. Philosophy as understood by modern tradition is impossible.” (1969, p. 325). There is still another position among the interpreters which acknowledges Kierkegaard’s epistemological views –what I will later call the “Standard View” –, but it is not a mainstream.

can also see in the same excerpt, such thought-reality is clearly dissimilar to actual being<sup>2</sup>. Isn't it already impressive that a philosopher who is usually seen as a subjectivist/relativist is assuming 'as a matter of course' that thought has a real ontological status like this?

If it is equally true that Kierkegaard did not develop such a claim, we can find other passages pointing towards the same direction:

To exist as this individual human being is not as imperfect an existence as, for example, to be a rose. (...) But to be an individual human being is not a pure idea-existence either. Only humanity in general exists in this way, that is, does not exist. Existence is always the particular; the abstract does not exist. To conclude from this that the abstract does not have reality [*Realitet*] is a misunderstanding, but is also a misunderstanding to confuse the discussion by asking about existence in relation to it or about actuality in the sense of existence [*om Virkelighed i Betydning af Existentis*]. (CUP1, p. 330 / SKS 7, 301).

Leaving aside what appears as a sort of Kierkegaard's 'Meinongianism' *avant la lettre*, there are some important remarks to make here. Once again, the background against the reality of thought is asserted in the context of the distinction regarding the actuality of existence. It is interesting to notice that, both in the first and in this excerpt, despite his sharp differentiation, Kierkegaard quickly asserts that from that distinction one should not derive the conclusion that thought has no reality [*Realitet*] at all. Firstly, it is not wrong to infer from such claims that Kierkegaard admits that there are at least some 'thoughts' that are real, nevertheless, they are never actual; actually, for Kierkegaard, the most to which thought can aspire, so to speak, is to be 'real', never 'actual'. In other words, actuality is the last limit or boundary for thought.

Three important questions can be asked here: (1) Why is Kierkegaard concerned to affirm that thought, although it does not have actuality, has reality? (2) Is it connected to the main topics of his work and, if so, (3) how? Since the answers to the last two questions are deeply rooted in the answer to the first question, I would like to address here only the first one.

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<sup>2</sup> Here a very important remark must be done. In some extent, Kierkegaard is pointing out to the ancient distinction between *Realitas* and *Actualitas*. That said, one could read such excerpt as Kierkegaard making the distinction between the *Quidditas* – the essence of a given being – and its existence. In fact, Kierkegaard does this differentiation in some other places. However, in excerpts like this, the very composed term – *Tanke-Realitet* – is clearly expressing a property of the thought itself, and not that distinction explained before.

As we can easily see, for the purpose of safeguarding actual existence, Kierkegaard could just assert the modal differentiation between being *qua* actual and thought *qua* possible and the asymmetry between them, like he sometimes actually does<sup>3</sup>. However, if sometimes he goes further, Kierkegaard probably had something else in mind and the reader should not simply ignore what is happening here.

## 2 Objective knowledge vs. essential knowledge: the standard reading

If we are to follow the standard reading, the impasse concerning the relations of subjective knower and the reality of thought in Kierkegaard's approach to knowledge is not left unsolved by the philosopher<sup>4</sup>. In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard makes a sharp distinction between two types of knowledge, namely, objective-inessential knowledge and subjective-essential knowledge, named by him as 'two ways of reflection' (*CUPI*, 193 / *SKS* 7, 177). Therefore, for the position I am labelling 'the standard reading', every time Kierkegaard talks about 'thought' and 'existence' or 'subjectivity', it can be traced back to the distinction between those 'two ways'. Hence, when dealing with what he calls 'objective knowledge', Kierkegaard puts forward a criterion in order to distinguish it, namely, the extent to which the knowing subject is indifferent to existence:

The way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something. The way to the objective truth goes away from the subject, and while the subject and subjectivity become indifferent [*ligegyldig*], the truth also becomes indifferent, and that is precisely its objective validity [*Cyldighed*], because the interest, just like the decision [*Afjorelsen*], is subjectivity. The way of objective reflection now leads to abstract thinking, mathematics, to historical knowledge of various kinds, and always leads away from the subjective individual, whose existence or nonexistence becomes, from an objective point of view, altogether properly,

<sup>3</sup> For instance, *PF*, p. 41-42 / *SKS* 4, 246; *Pap. X* 2 A 439, 1850 / *SKS* 23, 72.

<sup>4</sup> As mentioned before, there are only few interpreters who acknowledge the presence of epistemological problems in Kierkegaard's *opus*. Of course, there are differences between them. However, concerning the answer to the problem of the relation between a knowing subject and ideas, thoughts or representations, those interpreters usually follow the dual pattern I am exposing here. Examples of what I am referring to when I say "the standard reading" concerning that subject are PERKINS (1973/1990) *POJMAN* (1991), *FURTAK* (2010), *PIETY* (2010), *MCCOMBS* (2013), and *SLOTTY* (2015).

infinitely indifferent, altogether properly, because, as Hamlet says, existence and nonexistence have only subjective significance. (*CUPI*, 193 / *SKS* 7, 177).

On the other hand, we have a type of knowledge that entails the very opposite approach, namely, the necessary engagement of subjectivity with the object:

All essential knowing pertains to existence, or only the knowing whose relation to existence is essential is essential knowing. Essentially viewed, the knowing that does not inwardly in the reflection of inwardness pertains to existence is accidental knowing, and its degree and scope, essentially viewed, are a matter of indifference. That essential knowing is essentially related to existence does not, however, signify the above-mentioned abstract identity between thinking and being, nor does it signify that the knowledge is objectively related to something existent as its object, but it means that the knowledge is related to the knower [*Erkëjendende*], who is essentially an existing person [*Existerende*], and that all essential knowing is therefore essentially related to existence and to existing. Therefore, only ethical and ethical-religious knowing is essential knowing. But all ethical and all ethical-religious knowing is essentially a relating to the existing of the knower. (*CUPI*, p. 197-198 / *SKS* 7, 181).

The indifference to subjectivity is the very *index* of objectivity and, therefore, still following the standard reading, it is not even a matter of reconciliation between them, but the point is that those two ways are qualitatively distinct realms of knowledge that ask for different kinds of relation regarding the (knowing) subject. Concerning objective knowledge, the realm of knowledge like mathematics and logic, the relation is an intellectual/rational one and, whereas essential knowledge entails the existence of the subject and the relation must be what Kierkegaard calls ‘to exist in truth’ (see *CUPI*, p. 386 / *SKS* 7, 351). As Kierkegaard himself sums it up: ‘To objective reflection, truth becomes something objective, an object, and the point is to disregard the subject. To subjective reflection, truth becomes appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the point is to immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity.’ (*CUPI*, 192 / *SKS* 7, 176).

As seen under the light of the standard reading, there is a clear-cut differentiation between those types or ways of knowing, and because of a structural configuration of the human existent and its subjectivity, objective knowledge is necessarily detached from such subjectivity. That interpretation is strengthened by the background of a ‘fallen nature’ thesis due to which our

knowledge is somehow defective. In such a view, the question of the reality of thought is transposed or translated to the realm of the contents of objective knowledge<sup>5</sup>. And the famous thesis which asserts that ‘subjectivity is truth’ concerns precisely with essential/subjective knowledge. From this point of view any possible impasse or hindrance when it comes to the relation between an existent *qua* actual and thought is, in fact, dissolved in a disjunction, an *either/or* issue.

There is no doubt that the distinction between subjective and objective knowledge in terms of essential and inessential knowledge is one of the great insights of Kierkegaard. Questions having God, faith, or ethical decisions as objects, ‘move’ the questioner to decision-making in a different way than questions like Fermat’s last theorem. In fact, if ethical-religious questions are the paradigmatic instances of essential knowledge, mathematics and logic seem to be Kierkegaard’s favorite examples of objective knowledge: ‘In a mathematical proposition, for example, the objectivity is given, but therefore its truth is also an indifferent truth.’ (CUP1, 204 / SKS 7, 186-187). That is because concerning mathematics and logic ‘the certainty of these is absolute – here thought and being are one.’ (Pap. IV C 100 n.d., 1842-43 / SKS 27, 271).

However, I would like to argue that such distinction does not tell the whole story about what Kierkegaard seems to have in mind in some non-negligible excerpts of his work, some of which are quoted above. Yet that distinction between Objective-Inessential/Subjective-Essential Knowledge is only one of the consequences or instantiations of a higher order issue or ‘impasse’ faced by Kierkegaard when it comes to epistemological problems.

### 3 ‘*Existerende er tænkende*’ – subjective existence and reality of thought

What I have been calling the ‘standard reading’ assumes that the parting of ways between objective and subjective knowledge is Kierkegaard’s last word about the problem of the relation between subjectivity and objectivity. However, there are some very important blind spots in such a view. The main point usually ignored by Kierkegaardian scholarship is the Dane’s account on thought – not only about the nature of subjectivity – and, more precisely, what he has to say about its relations to the actual existent.

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<sup>5</sup> This is probably what Kierkegaard has in mind when says that such type of truth is “the highest truth there is for an *existing person*.” (CUP1, p. 203 / SKS 7, 186).

Such claims are not hidden or concealed, but, in fact, have a central place in a work like *Postscript*. Besides that, as far as I can see, the question about a proper account of that relation is not entirely answered by any of the two poles of that disjunction presented above.

If we go back to the ‘Introduction’ of the book and take a look at the very presentation of the main problem of *Postscript*, through the pseudonymous author who signs the book, Kierkegaard says:

To state it as simply as possible (using myself in an imaginatively constructing way: “I, Johannes Climacus, born and bred in this city and now thirty years old, an ordinary human being like most fold, assume that a highest good, called an eternal happiness, awaits me just as it awaits a housemaid and a professor. I have heard that Christianity is one’s prerequisite for this good. I now ask how I may enter into relation to this doctrine.” (*CUP1*, p. 15 / SKS 7, 25)

As it is stated in this excerpt, it seems like it entirely falls under the considerations of the essential knowing, since it is a matter of faith and ethical-religious conversion of one’s life. However, throughout the book, Kierkegaard himself puts forward the problem in other ways and connected to a broader view of it. Instead of that plain disjunction between subjective and objective knowledge, the question appears now in a more sophisticated fashion:

To objective reflection, truth becomes something objective, an object, and the point is to disregard the subject. To subjective reflection, truth becomes appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the point is to immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity. But what then? Are we to remain in this disjunction, or does mediation offer its kind assistance here, so that truth becomes subject-object? (*CUP1*, 192 / SKS 7, 176)

As it is clear, Kierkegaard rejects any sort of mediation or *Aufhebung* when it comes to this issue. As far as he understands it, any type of mediation would actually be a kind of trick, in which the actual subject would be, in fact, dissolved in any kind of transcendental subjectivity that converts it in something else, like a ‘fantastical I-I’ (*CUP1*, 193/SKS 7, 177). The problem is finally stated, then, in another way, much deeper philosophically speaking: ‘How an existing subject *in concreto* relates himself to the truth’ (*CUP1*, 192 / SKS 7, 177)? From this standpoint, the very central problem of *Postscript* – on how Johannes Climacus, a subject *in concreto*, relates himself to the truth – is remarkably expanded up to a very important and widely known problem of the

19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, namely, what is and how is the relation between an empirical subject and ideal – or eternal – truths?<sup>6</sup> This worry was already in Kierkegaard's journals during the years *Postscript* was being written, testifying at least that he was quite aware of it: 'What is the relation between the speculating subject [*speculerende Subjekt*] and historical existence [*Existents*]?' What is continuity? What is primitivity?' (*Pap.* IV C 92 n.d., 1842-43).

It is not a surprise, then, when Kierkegaard presents the same problem when it comes to his critique of Hegel's logic:

In order to shed light on logic [*over Logikken*], it might be desirable to become oriented psychologically in the state of mind [*Sjæstilstand: animic state*] of someone who thinks the logical [*det Logiske*] – what kind of dying to oneself is required for that purpose, and to what extent the imagination [*Phantasien*] plays a part in it. The following is again another meager and very simple comment, but it may be quite true and not at all superfluous: a philosopher has gradually come to be such a marvelous creature [*eventyrlig Væsen*] that not even the most prodigal imagination has invented anything quite so fabulous. How, if at all, is the empirical *I* related to the pure *I-P*? Whoever wants to be a philosopher will certainly also want to be somewhat informed on this point and above all not want to become a ludicrous creature by being transmogrified – *ein, zwei, drei, kokolorum* – into speculative thought. If the person occupied with logical thought is also human enough not to forget that he is an existing [*existerende*] individual, even if he has finished the system, the fantasticality and the charlatanry will gradually vanish. (*CUP1*, 117 / *SKS* 7, 113).

If in the first two earlier criticisms directed against Hegel's Logic in the previous pages of *Postscript* Kierkegaard explicitly imports some arguments by Trendelenburg on the nature of Negation and the presupposition of pure intuition, here his main point is stated having in mind the very critical relation between the 'animic state' of the one who performs the logical system<sup>7</sup>. Following Kierkegaard, one has to be aware that the subject who performs a logical system has such and such 'psychological' state or configuration which should be taken into account when we it comes to performing a logical system

<sup>6</sup> Such broader philosophical scenario will be explained later.

<sup>7</sup> On Kierkegaard's reception of Trendelenburg's argument, see FERREIRA, 2013.

with ideal entities<sup>8</sup>. Once again, the relation between the pure (transcendental)  $\mathbb{T}$  and the empirical  $\mathbb{T}$  is in the center of the question.

But beside that kind of more specific criticism of Hegel's logic, the point is so central that this question is not only present all the time in Kierkegaard's epistemological concerns, but is also crucial for his account of existence in *Postscript*. If we look closely, Kierkegaard not only does not dissolve the question of the relation between our being *in concreto* and real thought in a radical disjunction, but presents the difficulty as resting precisely on what we could call the non-coextensive simultaneity of those two realms in the existent. Let's consider these two quotations:

Just as existence has joined [*sammen*] thinking and existing, inasmuch as an existing person is a thinking person [*Existerende er Tankende*], so are there two media: the medium of abstraction and the medium of actuality. But pure thinking is yet a third medium, very recently invented. It begins, it is said, after the most exhaustive abstraction. Pure thinking is – what shall I say – piously or thoughtlessly unaware of the relation that abstraction still continually has to that from which it abstracts. (*CUPI*, 314 / SKS 7, 286)

And

To think actuality in the medium of possibility does not entail the difficulty of having to think in the medium of existence, where existence as a process of becoming will hinder [*forhindre*] the existing person from thinking, as if actuality could not be thought, although the existing person is nevertheless a thinking person [*Existerende er Tankende*]. (*CUPI*, 316 / SKS 7, 287-288)

Kierkegaard could not be clearer. On the one hand, due to the ontological heterogeneity between actual being and real (but not actual) thought, the existential condition seems to separate or detach existence from thought. On the other hand, there is the very actual existence of the subject that joins or assembles actuality [*Virkelighed*] and reality [*Realitet*] in the unity of the existent. In fact, the '*factum*' of the existence plays, at the same time, the roles of limit and of necessary condition for performing objective knowing. That Kierkegaard sees it as a very important component of his account of

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<sup>8</sup> For now, I would like to put aside the obvious question that arises here concerning Kierkegaard and Psychologism. However, it is a very rich theme that must be explored, especially if we have in mind how important Psychologism was in the main quarrels in 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy with Frege and Husserl.

existence can be seen in his description of what I use to call his ‘ontological map’ or Kierkegaard’s answer to the question ‘What is there?’<sup>9</sup>:

But surely an existing individual human being is not an idea; surely his existence is something other than the thought-existence of the idea? Existing (in the sense of being this individual human being) is surely an imperfection compared with the eternal life of the idea, but a perfection in relation to not being at all. Existing is a somewhat intermediate state [*Mellemtilstand*] like that, something that is suitable for an intermediate being [*Mellemvæsen*] such as human being is. (CUP1, p. 329 / SKS 7, 301).

And couple lines afterwards, the above partially quotation:

To exist as this individual human being is not as imperfect an existence as, for example, to be a rose. (...). Philosophy explains: Thinking and being are one – but not in relation to that which is what it is only by existing [*at være til*], for example, a rose, which has no idea at all in itself, thus not in relation to that in which one most clearly sees what it means to exist [*eksistere*] in contrast to thinking; but thinking and being are one in relation to that whose existence is essentially a matter of indifference because it is so abstract that it has only thought-existence. But in this way one omits an answer to what was actually asked about: existing as an individual human being. In other words, this means not to be [*Være*] in the same sense as a potato is, but not in the same sense as the idea is, either. Human existence has an idea within itself [*Den menneskelige Eksistens har Idee i sig*] but nevertheless is not an idea-existence [*Idee-Existens*]. (CUP1, p. 330-331 / SKS 7, 301-302).

The conceptual frame that emerges from such excerpts tells us, for my purpose here, at least three interesting things:

- a. There is a mode of being like that of things with an ‘imperfect existence’ or being (i.e. roses, potatoes etc.) and they are so due to their lack of ‘idea within itself’;
- b. There is a mode of being like ‘the eternal life’ of the idea (which is Real but not Actual);
- c. There is a mode of being which is somehow intermediate, which does not share that ‘eternal life’ but is not that ‘imperfect’ precisely

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<sup>9</sup> See INWAGEN, 2014, p. 191-192n.

because it is a temporal, finite and actual mode of being which nonetheless ‘has Idea within itself’ [*har Idee i sig*].

That is why Kierkegaard can assert, in a kind of *motto*, that ‘The subjectively existing thinker [*subjektivt eksisterende Tænker*] is therefore just as bifrontal [*bifrontisk*] as the existence-situation itself’ (*CUP1*, 89 / *SKS* 7, 88)<sup>10</sup>. The mode of being of the subject, the knowing subject, is somehow an indivisible fusion of the possibility of *performing*<sup>11</sup> knowledge of ideal/objective/eternal truths and an actual existence that intertwines such faculty with such and such ‘animic/psychological state’.

As I hope to have shown so far, there is a higher (or highest) order impasse concerning Kierkegaard’s account on knowing. Hence

1. First Order impasse (FOI): Kierkegaard does not have any epistemological commitment X Kierkegaard is a relativist/subjectivist;
2. Second Order Impasse (SOI): Subjective-Essential Knowledge X Objective Non-Essential Knowledge;
3. Third Order Impasse (TOI): Existent *qua* Actual who *performs* objective/real/intersubjective knowledge about Ideal/eternal entities/truths.

This Third Order Impasse is, finally, the real ‘impasse’ in Kierkegaard’s epistemology and, as far as I can see, shows both the peculiarities of his criticism (against the background of the project of Absolute Idealism)<sup>12</sup> and his proximity to one of the main topics of 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. Regarding what I have been calling ‘the standard reading of Kierkegaard’, its main point can be addressed by the question: Does the Essential Knowing fully answer the question of ‘*How an existing subject in*

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<sup>10</sup> “*Den subjektivt eksisterende Tænker er derfor ligesaa bifrontisk som Existentens-Forholdet er*”. Kierkegaard also uses a Latin expression to sum up it: *Inter-Esse* (see *Pap. IV C* 100 n.d., 1842-43 / *SKS* 27, 271; *CUP1*, 314-315 / *SKS* 7, 286-287).

<sup>11</sup> My use of the verb *to perform* is deliberately a way to avoid some other verbs like “to apprehend”, connected already with a solution of the problem (Fregean, for instance).

<sup>12</sup> For Hegel, the epistemological and ontological order must coincide. This is precisely what Kierkegaard denies.

concreto *relates himself to the truth?* (CUP1, 192 / SKS 7, 177). And as far as I can see, the answer is a sound ‘no, it doesn’t’.

#### 4 Kierkegaard’s epistemological impasse: widening the perspective

From what I have said so far, there are at least two problems or, rather, two facets of a deeper problem which remains unsolved and virtually untouched by the standard reading, namely, the possibility of true intersubjective knowledge whose elements are seen by Kierkegaard as having some sort of reality (*Realitet*) distinct from that of the actual (*Virkelig*) subject and, closely tied to that, how is it possible for an actual (*Virkelig*) subject to perform the knowledge of entities having a different ontological status?<sup>13</sup> Henceforth, I will not try to solve the question, but will try to shed some light on some features I think are as essential as ignored in understanding such problems.

It is absolutely essential to put Kierkegaard’s epistemological issues against the broader historical background of philosophical problems of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The characteristic turn away from the Hegel’s absolute idealism, mainly from 1840 on<sup>14</sup>, had as one of its main consequences the re-evaluation of the status of Logic and its relation to metaphysics and epistemology. If it was true that Hegel aimed for a re-foundation of Logic<sup>15</sup>, it is also true that the *Logische Frage*, started by A. Trendelenburg<sup>16</sup>, proved that not even dialectics could be grounded in the manner Hegel would like to. At the same time, the problem of grounding even the formal classic Logic was still open. Along such lines, a wide discussion on the role and scope of Logic had started. One of the main aspects of such a discussion, which had a massive importance for the further development of philosophy, both in its Analytic and Hermeneutic-Phenomenological trends, was the intrusion of the newborn empirical approach to psychology<sup>17</sup>. From an impulse that can be traced back to the earlier anti-Hegelian criticism by Jakob Fries, the question of the role

<sup>13</sup> Of course we can think of the most evident examples given by Kierkegaard– true knowledge in mathematics and logics– but we could expand the question for other kinds of intersubjective topics.

<sup>14</sup> See Beiser, 2014 and Freuler, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> “If logic has not undergone change since Aristotle –and in fact, judging from the latest compendiums of logic, the usual changes mostly consist only of omissions– then surely the conclusion to be drawn is that it is all the more in need of a total reworking; [...]” (HEGEL, 2010, p. 31)

<sup>16</sup> See Trendelenburg, 1842... For an overview of the Logical Question, see Vilkkko, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> On the anti-Hegel psychological shift and its consequences, see Peckhaus (2006, p. 100-111) and Kirkland (1993).

played by the actual psychological processes and their relations with Logic and its laws and concepts occupied the central stage of philosophical debate. What the neokantian philosopher Windelband later called *Psychologismusstreit* should be seen as, at least in its early lines, part of the whole story of the reaction to Hegelian idealism<sup>18</sup>.

Hence, despite the fact the problem knew its full development in the decades after Kierkegaard's death<sup>19</sup>, at least two things are important to keep in mind. Firstly, the philosophical context of the whole quarrel, which spans up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, started with problems that were on Kierkegaard's scope both in his ontological explanations on existence and in his criticism to absolute idealism presuppositions. Secondly, and most important, the subsequent history of such problems shows a development in directions that were themselves already among Kierkegaard's worries and whose knowledge would help very much to understand Kierkegaard's own position. To illustrate this second aspect, let us consider some points.

If we take one of Jakob Friedrich Fries' main statements on the problem he is dealing with in the Introduction of his *System der Logik*, we can see some interesting things:

In which way do concept [*Begriff*] and thinking [*Denken*] belong to the activity of human mind? How do they relate to the other activities of understanding [*das Erkennen*] and how do they combine with them [*zusammenstimmen*] to the unity of the vivid activity [*lebendige Tätigkeit*] of our mind? (FRIES, 1837, p. 3)<sup>20</sup>

Fries' so-called anthropological-psychological logic, which he puts forward as a sort of complement of Aristotle's 'demonstrative logic', stands in

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<sup>18</sup> As Porta (2014, p. 358) asserts, "Es necesario escribir una historia de la polémica antipsicologista, pues hasta ahora no existe ninguna. Una de las mayores dificultades de este 'libro futuro' sería, sin duda, encontrar un hilo conductor suficientemente abarcador o adecuadamente amplio, para exponer un proceso que, por un lado, recorre varias etapas, por otro, posee diversas vertientes. 2. De todas formas, de lo que no cabe duda es de que el 'libro futuro' debería comenzar con la frase: 'En el comienzo fue Hegel'".

<sup>19</sup> The term "Psychologism" (*Psychologismus*) was coined by Johann Eduard Erdmann in 1870. Frege published his *Begriffsschrift* in 1879 and Husserl would publish the first volume of his *Logische Untersuchungen* in 1900.

<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard makes only indirect references to J. Fries, but mainly in the context of his position in the history of recent philosophy from the point of view of I. Fichte's classification of general starting points – anthropological, theological, and speculative. In I. Fichte's categorization, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Jacobi, and Fries are part of the anthropocentric philosophical paradigm. See SKS 4, 243f; SKS 7, 25f. As far as I could find, the only nominal mention to Fries is in *Papirer* (II A 592 / SKS 27, 87) still on Fichte's interpretation.

opposition to absolute idealism program presenting precisely the question about the relation between concepts and thought in human mind (*Geist*). The distinctive aspect here is that ‘human mind’ is not understood as a synonymous of ‘absolute mind’ anymore, but as an actual mind with its actual psychological processes. The same can be seen in Benno Erdmann’s claim that ‘that the psychological knowledge of the matters of fact in the process of judging is a condition for the logical decision about their validity which always deserves consideration’ (1892, 5. 21). Hence, roughly understood, Psychologism can be defined as the identification between logical laws or entities with psychological laws or entities, started as a reaction to Hegel’s idealism.<sup>21</sup>

Now, as is well known, both Frege and Husserl developed major parts of their philosophical work fighting against psychologism. What interests us here is that, notwithstanding Frege, Husserl and others saw how psychologism threatens the objectivity of knowledge, (mainly in logic and mathematics), by denying such psychologist identification or reduction, those anti-psychologist philosophers had to give an account on how it is possible that we, actual knowing subjects, perform knowledge of extramental and ideal entities. It is worth remembering that for Hegel, as well as for psychologists, such a problem is not even raised, since there is an ontological identity between thought and reality as a whole (Hegel) or an intramental identity between the way we know and the knowable object and its laws (psychologism). The main aspect here is that the problem of how we apprehend or perform knowledge of entities or laws that are mind independent is one of the main questions of philosophy of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whether Frege and neokantians, or Husserl and Heidegger, all of them were eager to give that problem a solution that was neither a regress to absolute idealism, nor a commitment to psychologism.

I mentioned Heidegger because his case is particularly interesting. In fact, already in his doctoral dissertation (1913), entitled precisely *The doctrine of judgement in psychologism. A Critical-Positive Contribution to Logic*, Heidegger defended, against Wundt, Brentano, Maier, Marty, and Lipps, the (Lotzean) claim that logic is the realm of validity and cannot be conflated with psychological laws. But in *Being and Time*, we find Heidegger getting back to the problem of the relation between the act of judging and its content, but now stressing the urgency of a satisfactory solution to such a problem:

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<sup>21</sup> Psychologism has had many forms, both conceptually and historically. Thus, it is not my aim here to provide a comprehensive account on all its variants and details. For such purpose, see RATH, 1994; KUSCH, 1995; JACQUETTE, 2003; PECKHAUS, 2006; PORTA, 2014.

And is it not the separation of the real act and the ideal content thoroughly illegitimate with regard to the 'actual' judging of what is judged? Is not the reality of knowing and judging sundered into two kinds of being, two 'levels' that can never be pieced together so as to get at the kind of being of knowing? Is not psychologism correct in rejecting this separation even if it neither clarifies ontologically the kind of being that belongs to the thinking of what is thought, nor is even familiar with it as a problem? If we go back to the separation between the act of judgment and its content, we shall not further our discussion of the kind of being that belongs to the *adequatio*, but only make plain the indispensability of clarifying the kind of being of knowing itself. (1996, §44)

Even in 1927, Heidegger was still addressing the question that can be boiled down to the problem of how an actually existent subject can grasp or apprehend entities of a distinct ontological nature. Of course, the distinction between the actual judgement and the ideal content as mentioned by Heidegger comes from Hermann Lotze's seminal assertion of a realm of validity (*Geltung*) which cannot be conflated to the (psychological) act of making a judgement (see LOTZE, 1884, Book III, ch. 2)<sup>22</sup>.

Now, I think that if we turn back to Kierkegaard's points stated above and put it against such broader background, we can see some new ways of reading what I called the Third Order Impasse (TOI).

a) Thinking has some sort of *Realitet*, which cannot be confused with *Virkelighed* (from *CUP1*, p. 328 / *SKS* 7, 299; *CUP1*, p. 330 / *SKS* 7, 301);

b) Such *Tanke-Realitet* is some logical or ontological status which Kierkegaard calls 'eternal life of the idea' (from *CUP1*, p. 329 / *SKS* 7, 301);

c) It follows from 'a' that Kierkegaard would not espouse any standpoint which conflates or identifies *Tanke-Realitet* and any instance of *virkelig* or actual (thinking) activity. In other words, Kierkegaard's warning against that confusion seems to prevent him from psychologist solutions to TOI;

d) It follows from 'b' that Kierkegaard considers the 'real' status of ideas a different way of being. Hence, it seems that either Kierkegaard is assuming a type of Platonism which states a sort of mind-independent ontological status or he has something different in mind. Now, if we turn back

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<sup>22</sup> One of Lotze's reasons to deal with such problems was the quarrel against materialism (see BEISER, 2014, 53-96). Hence, it would be very interesting to examine Kierkegaard's position on it. We can have a glimpse of it in excerpts like *Pap. VII1 A 194 n.d., 1846*, and *Pap. VII1 A 186 n.d., 1846*.

to one of the main sources of antipsychologist standpoints, the above mentioned Hermann Lotze, we can see a very interesting position. In his *Logic* of 1874, Lotze famously puts forward his reinterpretation of Plato's theory of ideas in terms that are worthy to quote:

The truth which Plato intended to teach is no other than that which we have just been expounding, that is to say, the validity [*Geltung*] of truths as such apart from the question whether they can be established in relation to any object in the external world, as its mode of being or not; (...). But it was not Plato's intention to represent the ideas as independent merely of things while still depending for their special mode of reality upon the mind which thinks them. Reality of Existence it is true they enjoy only in the moment in which they become, in the character of objects or creations of an act of presentation now actually occurring, members of this changing world of Being and Becoming ; but on the other hand we all feel certain in the moment in which we think any truth, that we have not created it for the first time but merely recognized it; it was valid before we thought about it and will continue so without regard to any existence of whatever kind, of things or of us, whether or not it ever finds manifestation in the reality of Existence, or a place as an object of knowledge in the reality of a thought. (LOTZE, 1884, p. 441; 442)

In other words, Lotze is saying that what we should see in Plato's theory of ideas is not a quarrel regarding their ontological status – if they have existence or not –, but the affirmation of a realm of truths whose validity [*Geltung*] is, in themselves, mind independent. Turning back to Kierkegaard's statements, it seems quite interesting to see some similarities. Kierkegaard presents the indifference to the subject as the precise index of 'objective validity [*Gyldighed*]' (CUP1, 193 / SKS 7, 177). Accordingly, Kierkegaard seems to affirm that 'eternal life of the idea' in terms of an 'eternity of abstraction' [*Abstraktionens Evighed*] which is the way of being of the 'objective truth' (CUP1, 313 / SKS 7, 285). It is remarkable to see that such 'eternity of abstraction' is always pointed as the very opposite of the domain of actual existence (see also CUP1, 305 / SKS 7, 278). The same occurs with the famous expression, present throughout the *Postscript, sub specie aeterni* (see, for instance, CUP1, 80 / SKS 7, 81; CUP1, 226 / SKS 7, 207; CUP1, 301 / SKS 7, 274) Of course, I am not saying either that Kierkegaard foresaw Lotze's solution or that Lotze was 'inspired' by Kierkegaard in any reasonable sense. However, what I am saying is that putting Kierkegaard's positions against a background of problems that emerged from the very same vortex of the anti-

Hegel turn can substantively broaden the range of problems – and eventual solutions – that can be seen in Kierkegaard’s works.

e) Hence, TOI can be restated as the problem of how we, actual knowing subjects, perform knowledge of ‘eternally objectively valid’ entities or ‘*sub specie aeterni*’ objects which are not absolutely identical with the very actual act of thinking them. Seeing the issue under such a light helps us to understand the real meaning of Kierkegaard’s position regarding that problem. Kierkegaard’s formula can be summed up by the quote above (*Pap.* IV C 100), which finds echoes throughout the whole *Postscript*: concerning those objects, like logical principles or mathematical entities, there is a unity of (their) being and (our) thought, but not in a (psychologistic) way that conflates or identifies the (actual) thought and the (real/objectively valid) being.

f) However, it must be seen that Kierkegaard is absolutely not going back to a traditional Platonic way of solution. One of the most remarkable and important features of his way of dealing with that problem is how he stresses the necessity of paying attention to the fact that the knowing subject is an actually existent subject and how our ‘animic state’ imposes some limits and gives a shape to our cognitive faculties. In other words, at the same time Kierkegaard recognizes the impossibility of the psychologist answer, he anticipates Heidegger’s worry about how psychologists are right in denying a sharp separation between those two levels. Kierkegaard is not a psychologist, but neither is he an idealist. What then? I think this excerpt gives a good glimpse of how Kierkegaard saw the problem:

What is abstract thinking? It is thinking where there is no thinker. It ignores everything but thought, and in its own medium only thought is. Existence is not thoughtless, but in existence thought is in an alien medium. What does it mean, then, in the language of abstract thinking to ask about actuality in the sense of existence when abstraction expressly ignores it? What is concrete thinking? It is thinking where there are a thinker and a specific something (in the sense of particularity) that is being thought, where existence gives the existing thinker thought, time, and space. (CUP1, 332 / SKS 7, 303)

I would like, then, to put forward three conclusions that I think are the most important. Firstly, I made clear that the mere disjunction between objective and essential knowledge does not cover the whole range of Kierkegaard’s epistemological issues. Secondly, if it is true that Kierkegaard does not offer a detailed and definitive solution, it does not follow from this that he did not consider such problems as very important and, sometimes,

central to some parts of his existential reflections; rather, Kierkegaard was, at least, a kind of Moses who saw the problems, the necessary aspects of a satisfactory solution, but did not advance into it. Thirdly, if the account I present here is correct, it should open new and broader perspectives concerning Kierkegaard's relations to main aspects, problems and currents of late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries philosophy, since the myriad of related issues was also central to philosophers like Frege, Husserl, the Neokantians, and Heidegger. That is because, in spite of the little attention paid to Kierkegaard's account on the relations between existence and thought, it was not a brief and vanishing worry. Indeed, even in his last years, Kierkegaard still considered a truly worthy question:

To Relate Oneself to the Concepts

Plato teaches that only the ideas have true being [*Varen*]. Thus one can also, and more truly, say that only the human existing [*Existeren*] which relates itself to the concepts by primitively taking possession of them, by examining, by modifying, by producing new, only this existing [*Existeren*] interests existence [*Tilværelse*]. Any other human existing [*Existeren*] is merely mimicker-existence [*Exemplar-Existents*], a rummaging in the finite world, which vanishes without a trace and has never interested existence [*Tilværelsen*]. And this holds true just as much for a philistine-bourgeois's existing [*Existeren*] as, for example, for a European war, if it is not placed in relationship to concepts, in which case authentic existing is still due only to the individual through whom it occurs. (*Pap XI 2 A 63 n.d.*, 1854 / *SKS 26*, 236)

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