

**Katarzyna Krawerenda-Wajda\***

## KIERKEGAARD AND THE CONCEPT OF NEGATIVE DIALECTICS OF THEODOR ADORNO

The main subject of this paper is the influence of Kierkegaard's philosophy on the concept of Adorno's dialectics. This article is focused on the analysis of Adorno's work published in 1966 titled *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno's concept of dialectics, which is based on undefined experience, is broadly similar to the "negative" concept of existential philosophy of Kierkegaard. Although Adorno uses the Hegelian dialectics to expose the ways in which Kierkegaard's thoughts fall into idealism. Finally, Adorno adopts Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegelian identity of thinking. Adorno, in *Negative Dialectics* refers to Kant, Hegel Heidegger, but seldom to Kierkegaard. A careful analysis shows that a number of themes and concepts of its predecessor have been assimilated to his philosophy.

Key words: Kierkegaard, Adorno, dialectic, synthesis, mind

Theodor Adorno was fascinated by the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard since his university studies. The result of this was the book entitled *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Aesthetischen* (Adorno 1933) which was published in 1933. It was a modified version of his *Habilitationsschrift* that had been written several years earlier. This book is a critical reference of the Dane's thought. It should be considered that his book was published in a crucial period in the history of Germany and the world. It appeared in bookstores on February 27, 1933 – the day the Reichstag burnt down, and "Hitler declared a state of emergency, suspended the freedom of the press, and the chancellor became the dictator"<sup>1</sup>. The book aroused intense interest among readers. The reason for this was that *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Aesthetischen*, was to a great extent a critique of existentialism, the sense of the individual and freedom – all of which Søren Kierkegaard was an advocate<sup>2</sup>. Theodor Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard was based on the acceptance of the system of Hegel's philosophy and despite his critical approach to it, showed inclination towards the philosophy of Hegel. The work of Adorno described unifying and totalitarian tendencies present in Germany at that time. This incident which was completely unintentional for Adorno had a tremendous influence on his

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\* Jagiellonian University; katarzynakrawerenda@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> The translator Hullor-Kentor pointed out the importance of the historical background in the introduction to the English translation of *Konstruktion des Aesthetischen* (Adorno 1989: 9).

<sup>2</sup> David Sherman, who extensively studied Kierkegaard's influence on Adorno's concept of dialectics, dedicated a full chapter of his book to this subject (Sherman 2007: 17–36).

later philosophy, in particular, the claim that every concept was shaped in a particular historical context and was dependent on it. The book was sold in large quantities due to the fact that it had been given political and ideological sense.

However, according to Adorno, *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Aesthetischen* should primarily be understood as an accusation against the German intellectual movement of the early twentieth century. This movement appropriated the religious and philosophical thought of the Dane as Marci Morgan claimed (Morgan 2003). This appropriation took two forms: the theory of dialectics and existential philosophy. Hence, this undertone of opposition; towards Kierkegaard in Adorno's work.

Twenty years later, Adorno published another work in which he put strong emphasis on issues such as personal experience, individuality, non-identity – themes so close to the Dane. This subject matter is discussed in the work *Negative Dialectics* which was written in the years 1956–1966. The author in this work directly refers to the philosophy of its predecessor only a few times. In general, Adorno's relationship to the Dane was ambivalent. On the one hand, it was one of continuous interest in this philosophy, on the other hand – criticism of his views. The Dane was a source of constant fascination and inspiration to the author of *Minima Moralia*.

The theme of this article is an analysis of the impact which Kierkegaard had on the concept of negative dialectics of Adorno. However, I will focus on the conclusions that can be drawn from the reading of one of the last of his works – *Negative Dialectics*. My study will cover four issues: the identity of thinking, the negation of synthesis, critical thinking and anti-systemic thinking. Kierkegaard's influence on Adorno in these areas is obvious, but I have not found any publications on this topic so far.

To begin, let me present a few general comments concerning the relationship of these two philosophers. It seems that Adorno takes some aspects of Kierkegaard's dialectics which are to restore the significance of subjectivity. However, the dialectical framework for Adorno is more significant as it is based on mediation. Adorno uses the Hegelian dialectics in his work to show those instances in which the Dane falls into idealism. Simultaneously, what seems to be interesting is the fact that he approves of Kierkegaard's attack on Hegel's identity of thinking.

## 1. THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY OF THINKING

According to Kierkegaard, Hegel unified life with the intellect by treating development of the world as an incarnation of a number of philosophical concepts. Kierkegaard rejected Hegel's identity of thought and being – the Dane's claim that abstract thinking was useless from the point of view of human existence was well known<sup>3</sup>. Adorno thought likewise, yet his conclusions were not so radical. For him the actual process of cognition was always burdened

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<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard rejects the idea of "over-situational mind", which is detached from the complete and socially determined existence of a human being. "The abstract mind – as he claimed in *Journals and Papers* – is something unreal and it remains as the unreal lack of boundaries, where there are no negative notions" (Kierkegaard 2000: 243).

by subjective excess of thinking, which the subject of cognition brought through their own conceptual structures which are disproportionate to their content<sup>4</sup>.

Cognitive experience always tries to cross the limits of its own abstract forms and reach that which is non-identical, which is individual and specific. Such ideas were close to the Dane, for whom abstract thinking ignored the concrete and did not reveal that which constituted difficulty for existence and the existing human being. The contents of that which was individual is then pumped into the network of illusory abstraction, because only then could discursive fullness of reality description be obtained. This fullness is rejected by Adorno as cognition failure and the manifestation of speculation at what is non-conceptual. Hence, what is non-conceptual exposes the illusiveness of all permanent conceptual identifications and it points to constant movement. Therefore, Adorno comes to the project of negative dialectics. Philosophical reflection is for him meant to show willingness to reach non-conceptuality by means of concepts, without identifying with them. In *Negative Dialectics* he writes: "Dialectics is consistent consciousness of non-identity. It is not related in advance to a standpoint" (Adorno 1970: 7). This philosophical thinking should be oriented in such a way, which in its internal dynamics accurately goes for the object of cognition and honors the dialectical development of content, including places where it is beyond the rule of discourse. (Wawrzynowicz 2000: 42). As Adorno claims, negative dialectics should follow the footsteps of non-identity and seek the truth in everything which is specific and that was excluded as irrelevant by the mechanism of abstraction. Thinking itself is a negation, resistance against all that is imposed upon it. An outline of thinking as a negation is present in the work of the Dane although it is used in a different context. For the author of the *Either-Or*, issues of mind, understanding and thinking are always considered in the context of faith. For several scholars<sup>5</sup>, some formulations such as: to believe against the mind or the well-known alternative either mind, or faith, are the basis for the perception of Kierkegaard as an irrationalist. However, the Dane shows the active role of the mind against faith. Kierkegaard explains in the *Unscientific Concluding Postscript* that a believer uses their mind to be certain that they believe against the mind. Their mind perceives that something is nonsense and thus it warns against its acceptance<sup>6</sup>. Mind contributes to the development of faith by denying the content of faith, thus confirming the truth of the object of faith. Thus, speculation controls faith – what is the object of faith in a given moment is so because it is not an object of mind.

It seems that Adorno refers to Kierkegaard's thoughts in his concept of negative dialectics. This dialectic shows many similarities to the negative existential philosophy of Kierkegaard by highlighting the importance of an undefined experience. It seems that this is due to

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<sup>4</sup> In general 'thinking' means 'identifying'. Therefore, conceptual order slides out before what that meaning wants to comprehend, as Adorno claims. However, the conceptual totality appears to be a pretence (Adorno 1988: 10).

<sup>5</sup> i.e. Karol Toeplitz or Kai Nielsen.

<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard distinguishes nonsense from the Christian absurdity. The absurd is not meaningless for faith. Faith gives it meaning (Kierkegaard 1967: 7). The object of faith is a paradox for Kierkegaard, but the paradox is not understood in a logical sense. The Greek *paradox* (which precisely means 'being beyond the mind') corresponds to Latin phrases: *contra rationem* and *supra rationem*. Being beyond the mind appears to be closer to the Dane's thought.

the fact that the Dane hopes to open this space by breaking the relationship subject – object in which the individual meaning is paramount. It is inseparably connected with the concept of truth as subjectivity<sup>7</sup>.

## 2. NEGATION OF SYNTHESIS

Another issue that was crucial for Adorno's dialectics, is that of elimination of the synthesis. Qualitative dialectics, which concern an existing, individual being, are subjective according to Kierkegaard. The Dane focuses his attention on the indispensability of a dilemma and the maintenance of a paradox in cognition. This refers to the Absolute Paradox, which is the object of faith – it is, for example, the Paradox of Jesus Christ, the God-Man. Regarding this paradox, the mind is not able to bear contradiction, and so tensions occur. The paradox goes beyond the system. Mind wants to reconcile this contradiction<sup>8</sup>, but denial or removal of these two opposites cannot take place, as in Hegel's philosophy<sup>9</sup>. Kierkegaard's paradox is a sign of objection to the Hegelian philosophy which recognizes the consensus of mind and faith. For Kierkegaard, Hegel tried to rationalize Christianity to such an extent that there remained no space for faith, and this was his main complaint against the Makers of the systems. Both Kierkegaard's and Adorno's dialectics grew out of polemics against Hegelian dialectic. Like Kierkegaard, Adorno questions the third moment of the dialectics of Hegel called negativity of negativeness, which Adorno interprets after Marx as a synthesis.

In the Hegelian idealism, dialectical contradiction is recognized as an objective point of that which is real. Thus the dialectic becomes more than just a way to explore the subject of philosophy in the sense of philosophical method. The content of Hegel's thinking is integral to its form, which also gives the sense of Hegel's dialectics epistemological and ontological sense (Wawrzynowicz 2000: 40). According to Hegel, "what is rational, is real; and what is real is rational" (Bieliński 1956: 153). Adorno's main objection to the Hegelian synthesis is that it destroys the aspect of inalienable non-identity of the object of cognition, of which Adorno was a proponent, because the object of knowledge is incorporated into the framework of a stable and permanently fixed whole of knowledge. This synthesis implies thinking in a logical consequence (Adorno 1970: 194–195), and with that Adorno could not agree.

Adorno's negative dialectics project stems from his conviction that the object which is being recognized is never identical with itself and the theoretically determined conceptual unity always ignores the non-conceptual rest of this which, according to Adorno, is the foundation of all essential content. His project of a new dialectic is based on the dynamics of thinking as a continuous movement of transformation of already existing concepts, without going into

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<sup>7</sup> This problem, which is fundamental for Kierkegaard's philosophy, is included and discussed in the second chapter of his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Kierkegaard 2011: 200–259).

<sup>8</sup> The paradox as a logical contradiction appears in the mind's domain. It is a point in which mind collides with itself and as a consequence becomes immobilized. When the mind uses different techniques of melting the power of logical paradox it is stated that there is no escape in the case of the logical paradox (Prokopski 2002: 114).

<sup>9</sup> In Hegelian philosophy the mind could treat the God-Man paradox as a relative contradiction, which will be solved in the process of cognition, in the case of assumption of the pantheistic character of the divine. Kierkegaard could not agree with this interpretation.

the closing phase of the positive synthesis. In describing this project Adorno writes that “the thought which may positively hypostasize nothing outside of the dialectical consummation, overshoots that which no longer has the illusion of being one with it; it becomes more independent than in the conception of its absoluteness, in which the sovereign and the provisional shade into one other, each dependent of the other” (Adorno 1970: 36). Adorno’s negative dialectics imply even a anti-system (Adorno 1970: 2). Its design shows the characteristics of the binary dialectic. When Adorno uses the term ‘negative dialectics’, he even refers to the anti-system (Adorno 1988: 4). His project of dialectics shows binary characteristics.

A similar project of dialectics is represented by Kierkegaard. In his concept of the dialectic of quality he assumes that the thesis – antithesis is equal to the lack of synthesis (Sontag 1979: 104) or as Tadeusz Płużański claims – paradoxical synthesis (Płużański 1970:107). In Kierkegaard’s philosophy this transition is made through a qualitative leap, *salto mortale* of the human mind and a clear understanding of the concept of mind which Kierkegaard has<sup>10</sup>. Kierkegaard’s object of cognition is the Absolute Paradox. For the speculative mind such a Paradox, for example the idea of God-Man, does not need to be contrary to mind, because it can treat it as a relative contradiction, attributing pantheistic character to the deity. Such a measure of thought implies that the Absolute Paradox which is the basis of absolute Christianity would be resolved and with this Kierkegaard could not agree. As we read in *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs* – a paradoxical passion of mind constantly collides with what is unknown and cannot abandon approaching it and managing it. The experience of this border is the experience of that which is radically different (*det Absolute – Forskjellige*). Mind has no way of thinking that which radically differs from it, because it would be self-negating. Mind therefore must accept the paradox. Hegel implies absolute identity of thought with the object in the discussion concerning cognition, while according to Adorno and Kierkegaard, free thought requires the possibility of exceeding the object to invoke what might be found even outside the system of thought.

Taking into account the arguments of Adorno and Kierkegaard against the synthesis in thinking we have to note that the object is always the object of thinking, and exists only in conjunction with the subject which thinks about it. However, in cognition, there is also the reality that emerges from outside of the object. It is the reality of myself, what is unique in myself and paradoxical reality of the Absolute, which is beyond the range of knowing.

### 3. ANTI-SYSTEM

The anti-system is another groundwork of negative dialectics. For Adorno, the inability to provide uniform rules governing reality, induces him to rule out a system of aspiration

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<sup>10</sup> The Dane seems to assume Leibniz’s understanding of mind as a consequence of the truths, consequences of principles (Leibniz 2001). From this concept of mind, he introduces the statement that faith could not be founded, concluded or understood because there is no link allowing for this connection and leads to the situation that faith is the paradox. Acceptance of such assumptions explains understanding faith as a ‘leap’. The *leap of faith* fills the lack of the continuity caused by the loss of this link (Kierkegaard 2000: 369). It is worth mentioning that what Kierkegaard says by stating that Christianity expressed itself in paradox, speculative philosophy (expressed itself) in mediation, Leibniz expressed by distinction between what is above the mind and what is against the mind (Collins 1962).

with its own philosophical program. In the *Negative Dialectics* he writes: “The form of the system is adequate to the world in which the content eludes the hegemony of thought, unity and unanimity are however in the same time an oblique projection of a contented, no longer antagonistic condition on the coordinates of the dominating, repressive thinking” (Adorno 1970: 31). Adorno fears totalitarian and reductionist tendencies, which may owe their strength to displacement of contradictory elements, opposites. Adorno’s main objection to the system is that it does not explain what you refer to, and tries to fix its own assumptions by reducing to one principle the whole diversity of the real world. Thinking, according to Adorno, should continuously break established conceptual schemes and at the same time release all that is heterogeneous and non-identical. Mind always was a pure method which was superior to all content and the system-creating principle of I for the author of *Dialectics of the Enlightenment*. This mind eliminates all that is heterogeneous. Adorno criticized the Hegelian system and wrote: “If the system really is in fact closed and tolerates nothing outside of its magic circle, then it becomes, be it ever so dynamically conceived, finite as a positive infinity, static. That it sustains itself as such as Hegel praised his own for doing, brings it to a halt” (Adorno 1970: 34).

It seems that Adorno borrowed from the Dane the idea of an anti-system. Kierkegaard rejected a system due to the fact that it gave greater significance to notions and abstractions than to all that is present and concrete. Kierkegaard criticized Hegel’s statement that philosophy must be the mirror image of a system which gives us absolute knowledge (Hegel 1967: 17–20). There lies a conviction in the center of this systemic philosophy that a thought is a personal mediation captured only by rational thought. Therefore, it can be concluded that the truth is rational. In the Hegelian system an individual discovers real nature only by being the reason or expression of any current development stage of the great dialectic process. An individual is the most important for the Dane, their individual will and the process of making a decision. He also rejects abstract thinking due to the fact that it lacks a thinking subject. Hegel asks about reality in general – in an abstract way; in contrast, the Dane – in a concrete way, about the reality of an individual. The reply of Kierkegaard – as Henry Diem writes – is not covered by the ontological system, the system of reality, but in extreme fulfillment of existential being (Diem 1966: 71–76). According to the Dane, existence can be only recognized in subjectivity rather than in objectivity. He also criticizes Hegel’s system due to the fact that abstract thinking as he claims neglects temporariness of the concrete and its creation (Kierkegaard 1988: 88). Therefore, it may be concluded that the system and abstract language are not able to capture concrete reality and the uniqueness of human existence which never is without motion.

Hegel used abstract thinking which lacked a thinking subject. That is why it seems that Kierkegaard narrowed the object of his research to problematic aspects of man in which the fact of their own existence is directly captured while neglecting abstract-conceptual cognition.

Adorno’s basic objection to systems is that in the system thinking, hidden searching for identity with oneself destroys the deepest nature of thinking, which is based on the fact that each aspect of reality and each description occur in limited relation with others and each moment of description has meaning only in integral relation. On the other hand, according to the author of *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Aesthetischen*, philosophical thinking has to direct against itself, if it does not want to preserve existing dominance structures in a conscious way and

express consent for compulsion of binding ideologies. Thinking should break the dominance of fixed schemes. As Adorno claims, it allows for a true image of a philosophical discourse.

#### 4. CRITICISM OF RATIONALISM

What links Adorno's concept and the author of *Either – Or* is also criticism of rationalism and, in particular, criticism of the modern mind that broke its relations with religion and myth. Adorno perceives here a danger for mind which became the instrument of emancipation of man from all natural conditions. It simultaneously activated the process of dependence on abstract principle of rational comprehension. These ideas are presented by Adorno in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (Hokheimer, Adorno 2010) and continued in *Negative Dialectics*. He stipulates a complete break with the modern model of rationality from culture. He gives the example of Auschwitz, which represents the defeat of culture for Adorno (Adorno 1970: 451–456). This mass extermination of people, which was rationally organized and centrally managed, did not leave the appearance of generality for the victims and the object of this extermination was not an individual person but a particular human being.

Adorno knew and accepted Kierkegaard's criticism of modern rationalism and mind. The Dane assumes the concept of the modern mind in his philosophy, *Cartesian ratio* – natural reason, deprived of mystery. He also criticizes the mind as the one who mediates everything, uncovers a mystery and the autonomy of an individual. Therefore, he clearly differentiates between the speculative mind and faith, marking the field of science as the field of activity for the former.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Kierkegaard was the first thinker to reveal very strongly the significance of subjectivity and existence by seeing a system and rationalism as a danger for the existence of man. However, Adorno developed this idea bearing in mind the victims of totalitarianism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was for him the consequence of system thinking. Adorno was permanently inspired in his scientific creation by the Dane, going from criticism to some assimilation of his thoughts in later works, either in *Negative Dialectics* or *Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love*, giving us – in my opinion – one of the most fascinating and at the same time most problematic interpretations of Kierkegaard in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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#### KIERKEGAARD A KONCEPCJA DIALEKTYKI NEGATYWNEJ THEODORA ADORNA

Tematem artykułu jest analiza wpływu filozofii Kierkegaarda na koncepcję dialektyki Theodora Adorna na podstawie wydanej w 1966 roku książki *Dialektyka negatywna*. Koncepcja dialektyki Adorna, która opiera się na niezdefiniowanym doświadczeniu, wykazuje wiele podobieństw do „negatywnej” koncepcji filozofii egzystencjalnej Kierkegaarda. Chociaż Adorno używa Heglowskiej dialektyki do pokazania dróg, na których myśli Kierkegaarda popadają w idealizm, ostatecznie Adorno adoptuje od Duńczyka krytykę Heglowskiej tożsamości myślenia. Adorno w *Dialektyce negatywnej* powołuje się na Kanta, Hegla, Heideggera, rzadko zaś na Kierkegaarda. Dogłębna analiza pokazuje, iż liczne wątki i koncepcje poprzednika zostały przyjęte w jego filozofii.

Słowa kluczowe: Kierkegaard, Adorno, dialektyka, synteza, rozum