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**DOCTORAL THESIS**

**Abstract**

**How Does One Become a Christian?**

*Søren Kierkegaard's Philosophical Journey  
from German Idealism to the Critique of Christianity*

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### **Abstract**

Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy emerged from German idealism—more precisely, from a critique of Hegel. By now, this has become a commonplace regarding the Danish author. However, by the end of the 20th century, interpretive voices gained strength that argued that not only Hegel, the great system-builder of idealism, but also Schelling and Fichte had an equally significant influence on Kierkegaard's thought. These various sources of inspiration converge in Kierkegaard's thought in the form of an innovative conception, one that is motivated by a question coming from outside philosophy: "How does one become a Christian?"

The **aim of my dissertation** is to examine the relationship between Kierkegaard and German idealism in light of the paradoxical definition of Christianity which, in Kierkegaard's

thought, leads—through the concept of love – to the suspension of the constitutive principle that defines the totality of immanence. In the course of this reconstruction, I could not avoid drawing on the works of the authors of German idealism – Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling. In my view, following this methodological principle is useful because these comparisons not only clarify the formulation of the problems, but also shed greater light on Kierkegaard's positions. In my research, I have tried to complement and align these comparative methods with the innovative interpretative efforts that have emerged around Kierkegaard's body of work. Traditional interpretations of Kierkegaard's work, which examine existential theory through the concept of paradox, have recently been replaced by novel approaches. The strength of these interpretations lies in their ability to go beyond the twentieth-century existentialist framework, interpreting Kierkegaard's thought as a kind of open-ended becoming, while closely linking this idea to the Danish author's concept of paradoxical Christianity.

My **research topic** is therefore twofold: on one hand, I examine the relationship between Kierkegaard and German idealism, and on the other hand, I explore the existential theory of being as understood in Kierkegaard's thought. The two directions converge in Kierkegaard's critique of Christianity, based on his concept of love.

My **research method**, in line with the topic under investigation, is primarily historical-philosophical, as I attempt to place the questions I examine within the problem contexts of Kierkegaard's time. At the same time, the course of the investigation follows the ever-deepening movement of the hermeneutic circle, through which my research gradually penetrates the core theses that define Kierkegaard's thought. In our investigation, the concept of critique also plays an important role. Kierkegaard asserts his own critical stance precisely against Hegel, as he compares the abstract generality of the German philosopher's theory of existence with its concrete realization. According to Kierkegaard's critique, Hegel's total worldview and monistic principle initiated the same abstracting tendencies in everyday life and society – but most notably in religion – as those that were also launched in the philosophy of modernity. His critique, at this point, also anticipates the critical attitude later adopted by the Frankfurt School in their own work.

My doctoral thesis is structured into three main chapters, each of which is divided into three independent subsections.

In the first chapter of my thesis – *Critique of the Monist System of Identity* – I aim to present Kierkegaard's critique of modernity, in which I argue that, according to Kierkegaard, modern philosophy has created a logically understood monist system, which, by placing existential being at the center, inevitably falls into contradiction. As a result, I demonstrate that the Danish author develops a philosophical stance, viewing the incarnation as its archetype, which fundamentally critiques the concept of reality inherent in the monist system of identity.

In the first subchapter, titled *The I as the Basis of the Philosophy of Identity*, I focus on Kierkegaard's concept of the self, which, while resembling the Fichtean notion of the self in many aspects, nevertheless contradicts the assumption that a purely rational foundation of the self could exist in the sense of existential understanding. Furthermore, I demonstrate how Kierkegaard's interpretation of the self leads to a conceptual shift, where the self perceives its existence through relationality. This relational existence is posited in the foundational concept of God, which lies outside the possible realm of conceptualization.

In the second subchapter, titled *Doubt as the Foundation of Modern Philosophy*, I aim to demonstrate that, in contrast to the epistemological paradigm of modern philosophy, where the concept of doubt holds a prominent place, Kierkegaard made the existential starting point the possible realm of thought. I argue that the Danish thinker did not intend to override the validity of the scientific approach with this, but rather sought to make a correction that would exclude such an approach to philosophy in the realm of existential questions. I also show that he placed ethics at the center of his existential thought, where, as a philosophical mode of questioning, the interest in existence in an existential sense stands at the horizon, culminating in the category of decision.

In the third subsection titled *The Nature of Reality and the Becoming of the Existent*, I aim to demonstrate that the problem context of Kierkegaard's concept of reality can be grasped through the late Schelling's concept of reality, which includes a critique of Hegel. Here, we can also see that Kierkegaard's conception of reality points to the radical externality of transcendence, through which the Danish philosopher aimed to present the category of becoming as a free act, insofar as it can be traced back to agents that transcend the immanence of existence.

In the second chapter of the dissertation – *Critique of Speculative Christianity* – I aim to demonstrate that the philosophical anthropology, which places existence at the center, as discussed by Kierkegaard, can be grasped through a particular interpretation of Christianity, in

which the categories of Christian theology hold decisive philosophical significance. Furthermore, as a consequence of this, I also highlight that the legitimacy of these categories inclusively entails a critique of the existing form of Christianity, which, in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, appears as a variant of Christianity that contains pagan reminiscences.

In the first subchapter, titled *Sin as the Foundation of the Second Ethics*, I aim to demonstrate that, through the introduction of the category of sin, Kierkegaard attempted to find a new starting point for philosophical anthropology within the context of the philosophical tradition. In this section, I conduct a comparative analysis of the concept of anxiety and Schelling's freedom essay, with the aim of highlighting Kierkegaard's philosophical goal of placing existence at the center, within the context of the philosophical anthropological turn that already appears in Schelling's work. In my view, Kierkegaard sought to find a foundational concept within the notion of sin that, in contrast to the rationalizing tendencies of modern philosophy, could ground ethics in a transcendent concept. As we have seen, the transcendence of sin, according to Kierkegaard, plays a key role in developing a possible interpretative path that, rather than relying on potentially closed interpretative fields in the philosophical understanding of humanity, captures the concept of existence from the perspective of the ethically conceived excess. However, this requires an ethical actor understood as open. For the Christian interpretation, sin, as a transcendent concept, can serve as the basis for this.

In the second subsection – *Humor as Perspective* – I aim to demonstrate that, in the interpretation of the concept of sin by another pseudonymous author, Johannes Climacus, the speculative philosophy's immanent ontological model can be critiqued not only in a negative sense but also in a positive one. I argue that the distinctive Kierkegaardian humor, which exists as a form of existential incognito between the ethical and the religious stages, creates an opportunity to provide a kind of totality-definition of immanence through the experience of guilt. This also leads us to the correct understanding of religion, according to the Danish author. At its center is not the dialectical experience of truth, as conceived by speculative philosophy, but rather the paradoxical experience of truth, which, according to the author, Christianity has always preached. This experience is radically situated in externality, being possible only in the encounter between the absolute and immanence. In religious terms, this means the experience in which God has revealed Himself in history.

In the third subchapter – *Becoming Christian as a Task* – I attempt to present the experience of truth discussed in the second chapter from a new perspective, in terms of existential questioning. As we have seen, according to Johannes Climacus’ statement, “one must become a Christian”, which implies a practical philosophical call for the individual. This question brings us back to the previously mentioned problem of becoming, but this time we can approach the issue not from an epistemological standpoint, but from a strictly practical philosophical perspective. As can be seen, the entire problem of becoming revolves around the concept of repetition, which simultaneously addresses the temporal existence of being and the original experience of openness required by the Christian way of life. In this chapter, I aim to demonstrate that repetition describes the existential mode of movement in Kierkegaard’s thought, one that reconciles the question of the selfhood of existence with the emerging manifestation of the divine incarnation.

In the final chapter of my dissertation – *Paradoxical Christianity* – I aim to demonstrate that the idea of Christianity in Kierkegaard’s thought, which for him constituted the central philosophical goal of his work, cannot be separated from the constitutive significance of the concept of love. In this context, I aim to demonstrate that love appears as the expression of Christianity’s attitude toward the world, manifesting in the suspension of the existing order.

In the first subchapter – *Love as the Distinguished Concept of Religion* – I aim to demonstrate how the concept of love emerged in the philosophy of religion of German Idealism. For this, I used J. G. Fichte’s late philosophy of religion as a basis. In many aspects, Fichte’s concept could have served as a precursor to Kierkegaard’s notion of love. Next, I examined Kierkegaard’s religious stage through the question of what kind of movement Abraham undergoes during the leap into the religious. In the context of this question, it became clear that for Kierkegaard – even in his pseudonymous works – the concept of love plays a fundamental role in relation to the question of transcendent movement.

The second subchapter, titled *Demonic Love in Kierkegaard*, is an excursus aimed at illustrating how Theodor W. Adorno criticized Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy, particularly his concept of love. As we have seen, Adorno pointed out that, contrary to the traditional interpretations of the Danish thinker – who is often portrayed as an anti-idealistic philosopher – the true driving force of his work is, in fact, a hidden intention to continue the aims of German

idealism. To illustrate this thesis, one of Adorno's lectures on Kierkegaard's concept of love serves as a key example.

In the third subchapter – *Critique of Kierkegaard's Concept of Love* – I return once more to the central idea of the Danish thinker highlighted in my dissertation, the confrontation between immanence and transcendence. I aim to demonstrate that the seemingly radical subjectivist stance that characterizes Kierkegaard's mode of thinking does not, in fact, represent a humble submission to the overwhelming power of objectivity. Rather, it signifies the transcendence of this subjectivity, which is expressed in the radicality of the faith in the historical concreteness of the incarnation. Furthermore, I reflect on the critical observations raised by Adorno, and using the conclusions that emerge from this, I aim to demonstrate that the Kierkegaardian stance, which we have captured through the concept of the paradox, signifies nothing other than the simultaneity of God's presence and absence.

Continuing this line of thought, in the final chapter of my dissertation, titled *The Paradox of Love*, I argue that the paradoxical experience of the presence of absence provides the transcendence concept with the distinguished position from which Kierkegaard believes that the suspension of the immanent concept of totality can be effectuated through the acts of love. Thus, the operative mode of active love, which suspends the ethical order, is not based on replacing the immanent principle with another substantial principle of God's love. Love is the repetition of the existent as new; that is, it is not the negation of the law, but its fulfillment. Love represents an existential surplus that always overflows the existing definitions, and through its mode of operation, it inherently calls into question the total validity of these definitions.

My **individual contribution** to the researched topic primarily lies in the perspective from which I approached the question. The traditional approach to Kierkegaard's oeuvre has interpreted it from the concept of existence, whereas I attempted to reverse the perspective and examine the whole through the concept of paradox. My contribution is also realized in the fact that, as a result of this perspective shift – the view from the concept of paradox – the interpretation of love as a critique of metaphysics was developed.



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