

TOMASZ KUPŚ

KIERKEGAARD ON DESCARTES:
DOUBT AS A PREFIGURATION OF EXISTENTIAL DESPAIR

The philosophy of existence, especially the philosophy of Kierkegaard, which from the very beginning was shaped in a dispute with the speculative philosophy manifested in the Hegelian system, is out of Descartes's way (GORDON 1999, xi). It even seems that Descartes—the initiator of modern philosophy—is completely outside the sphere of interest of the philosophy of existence.¹ It is even more surprising for a reader of Kierkegaard's writings that one of the programme books of existentialism, *Fear and Trembling* (=KIERKEGAARD 1983), begins with a preface filled with quotations from Descartes' writings, and that the "praise of Abraham" is preceded by no less fervent praise of Descartes! Kierkegaard writes:

In the world of ideas everything can be had at such a bargain price that it becomes a question whether there is finally anyone who will make a bid. Every speculative monitor who conscientiously signals the important trends in modern philosophy, every assistant professor, tutor, and student, every rural outsider and tenant incumbent in philosophy *is unwilling to stop with doubting everything but goes further*. (KIERKEGAARD 1983, 5; emphasis mine)

What does he praise Descartes for? For honesty ("he did what he said and said what he did" [2]), for modesty ("his method had significance only for

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¹ "The absolute 'certainty' of the *cogito* exempted him from the question of the meaning of the being of this being" (HEIDEGGER 1996, 21).

him” [6]), and for loyalty (“he did not doubt with respect to faith” [5]²). It seems that Kierkegaard would be looking for the same qualities in a man representing a religious attitude. Therefore, by analogy to the accusations against contemporary philosophers, who disregard genuine philosophical effort and that which is expressed, among other things, in methodic doubt, Kierkegaard criticizes the recklessness of how contemporary religious issues are addressed: “In our age, everyone is unwilling to stop with faith, but goes further” (KIERKEGAARD 1983, 7). Even more so, as Kierkegaard writes, “no one has the right to lead others to believe that faith is something inferior or that it is an easy matter, since on the contrary it is the greatest and most difficult of all” (52), it is a “paradoxical movement” (51), a passion of will (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 102), preceded by the movement of infinite resignation (KIERKEGAARD 1983, 52).³ Let us strongly emphasise it once more: Kierkegaard forms these thoughts by analogy to Descartes’s effort of philosophizing (the confirmation of which can be found on the pages of *Meditations on First Philosophy*).⁴ The seriousness with which Descartes treated philosophy (as an infinitely difficult personal task of life) is for Kierkegaard the prototype which he applies in a completely different sphere—in the field of religious faith. My claim is that Kierkegaard transfers the formal structure of acquiring knowledge through methodic doubt (involvement) from the sphere of cognition to the sphere of religion, in which the pursuit of faith is based on an analogous, formal structure of radicalised, preparatory “reductions”.

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Fear and Trembling (KIERKEGAARD 1983) was published in 1843, in the time when Kierkegaard’s writing activity erupted. At the same time, most likely shortly after his father’s death, when Søren was 29 or 30 years old (GRIMSLEY 1966, 33–34; KIERKEGAARD 2007, 15), an essay entitled *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est* (=KIERKEGAARD 1985) was written. In

² For Heidegger, this will mean remaining on the ground of traditional metaphysics. It is true that this is done through criticism, but through criticism that takes over the notions of one’s opponent (Hegel in this case). For Heidegger, therefore, Kierkegaard remains a “religious writer” (PÖGGELER 1990, 154–55).

³ Of course, “the movement of infinite resignation”, as a never-ending procedure of challenging the points of view, shows the weakness of a reflection that seeks the ultimate foundations. The ultimate foundations are unattainable through reflection (MACKEY 1972, 140–41).

⁴ “And it cannot be imagined that Descartes has doubted for all of us, as Christ has suffered for all of us. For then philosophy would not begin with doubt for everyone, but only for Descartes, while the rest of us would begin by believing that Descartes truly doubted; just as only Christ descended into Hell, while the rest of us ride to Heaven on faith in his merits” (MACKEY 1972, 145).

autobiographical terms, it is a tribute paid to the father by a loving son. Formally, Kierkegaard follows the model of *Discourse on the Method* (including autobiographical themes into his essay—GRIMSLEY 1966, 34), but he directly refers to the content of Descartes' first book *Principles of Philosophy*, where the main ideas of methodic doubt have been summarized. The phrase "one should try to doubt everything"⁵ that was used there becomes the title of the essay.

The references in *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est* to the writings of Descartes and Spinoza only appear to be polemics with 17th-century philosophy. Researchers of Kierkegaard's legacy clearly show that the main target of the allusion is Hegel's philosophy, which Søren came into contact with at university and under whose strong influence he initially remained (GRIMSLEY 1966, 31). If, therefore, over time he referred to this philosophy polemically, and even went on to criticise it, we have reason to believe that this change is a practical application of the recommendations contained on the pages of the Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*. Not only does Kierkegaard understand philosophy as a personal commitment, but also he actually applies its recommendations ("doubt everything") (MACKEY 1972, 142):

But as soon as I had finished the entire course of study, at the close of which it is customary to be admitted into the order of the learned, I completely changed my opinion. For I found myself involved in so many doubts and errors, that I was convinced I had advanced no farther in all my attempts at learning, than the discovery at every turn of my own ignorance. (DESCARTES 1901, 150)

As we know, the culmination of Kierkegaard's university education and his first publication was a dissertation on Socrates. The last, fifteenth, thesis was: "Just as philosophy begins with doubt, so also a life that may be called human begins with irony" (KIERKEGAARD 1989, 6).⁶ Irony remains in contrast

⁵ "De iis omnibus studeamus dubitare, in quibus vel minimam incertitudinis suspicionem reperiemus" (DESCARTES 1644, 1)—"to doubt of all those things in which we may discover even the smallest suspicion of uncertainty" (DESCARTES 1901, 301).

⁶ On p. 247 of the same treatise we read: "But even if irony is far from being the distinctive feature of our age, it by no means follows that irony has totally disappeared. Our age is not an age of doubt, either, but nevertheless many manifestations of doubt still survive, in which one can, as it were, study doubt, even though there is a qualitative difference between speculative doubt and common doubt about this or about that. In oratory, for example, there frequently appears a figure of speech with the name of irony and the characteristic of saying the opposite of what is meant." Descartes did what he said.

between the irresponsible gibberish of philosophers who declare their readiness to doubt, and the honest effort of man to really doubt everything. For the first time, the unreal realm of speculation (philosophy, theology, etc.) is contrasted here with the realm of true life, will and passionate involvement (MACKEY 1972, 147).

Kierkegaard did not publish his essay on doubt, but after his death the researchers of his legacy did. The content of the unfinished essay, however, amazes with the multitude of motifs that were later developed or transformed to fill the pages of Kierkegaard's well-known writings. Even if there are no longer any references to Descartes, many of them have an indirect connection to this early "Cartesian" essay (RUDD 1998, 71). It seems as though someone else's (Cartesian, philosophical) point of view stimulated Kierkegaard to formulate original thoughts, whose new theme irretrievably erased any traces of their original.

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As mentioned above, we have to assume the Hegelian context for the essay in question, as Kierkegaard, when he wrote about philosophy even in the most general way, always had Hegelian philosophy in mind. He does so in *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est, Fear and Trembling* and other works from 1843. It is the Hegelian philosophy that is the subject of his criticism and, personally, the source of his Tantalean suffering.

For this reason, we find a prototype for Kierkegaard's assertions that point to doubt as the source of philosophy, not in Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy*, but in Hegelian *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*: "In Philosophy Descartes struck out quite original lines; with him the new epoch in Philosophy begins, whereby it was permitted to culture to grasp in the form of universality the principle of its higher spirit in thought" (HEGEL 1896, 223–24). This was, however, prepared and preceded by a radicalised form of scepticism which claims that "thought must necessarily commence from itself; all the philosophy which came before this, and specialty what proceeded from the authority of the Church, was for ever after set aside" (224). Hegel also says that "Descartes expresses the fact that we must begin from thought as such alone, by saying that we must doubt everything (*De omnibus dubitandum est*); and that is an absolute beginning. He thus makes the abolition of all determinations the first condition of Philosophy" (224).

In explaining the effects of using this principle, Hegel stresses that it is not an expression of scepticism, but a fulfilment of the postulate of "a total

absence of presupposition” (HEGEL 1975, § 78; HEGEL 1896, 224). Hegel equates Descartes’s doubt with “making no hypotheses” (HEGEL 1896, 225), which he considers to be a condition fulfilled only by mere thinking, by “pure thinking” (HEGEL 1975, § 78), as we read in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. Only thinking can begin from itself (HEGEL 1896, 226). Therefore, the assumption made by thinking is not something “different” for thinking, or different from it, and thus alien—it is thinking itself. When thinking thinks this assumption, it still is and remains “at home”.

Let us keep in mind this remark for one reason: doubt is presented here as part of the field of thinking, abstraction, or speculation. And closed in this area, however, it cannot be used outside speculation.

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Therefore, post-Kantian speculative philosophy seems unreal to Kierkegaard because it is a self-determining reality of thought, or, as Fichte expressed it, because it is complete—i.e. “in all seriousness, and not only in a manner of speaking” (FICHTE 1982, 469)—construction of an object by the cognitive abilities. According to Kierkegaard, however, these maximum goals of speculative philosophy cannot be attained: speculative philosophy itself does not follow what it proclaims (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 117; KIERKEGAARD 1989, 247). Even if Kierkegaard does not specify exactly what he means, with that sentence he certainly anticipates later existentialism, which would rather see philosophy as the practice of life. In fact, it is a reference, contrary to Descartes, to ancient scepticism as a means of achieving practical life goals, and not theoretical-cognitive ones (RUDD 1998, 72). Although what is speculated may be, and usually is, internally coherent (it creates a system based on principles), it remains only a mental experiment whose application to life (being) is not defined. Johannes Climacus (Søren Kierkegaard) confesses that “in love he was, ardently in love—with thought, or, more accurately, with thinking” (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 118). Using the alias Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard expresses his metaphysical views (JASPERS 1981) and it is this alias that he finally abandons, confirming his complete identification with his views (KIERKEGAARD 2009, 527ff.).

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Let us put aside the autobiographical and feature layer of the essay *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*, and pay attention only to the Cartesian thread. The introduction ends with a juxtaposition of possible

interpretations of the significance of Cartesian doubt for philosophy: “(1) *philosophy begins with doubt*; (2) *in order to philosophize, one must have doubted*; (3) *modern philosophy begins with doubt*” (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 132).

In formulating these statements, Kierkegaard distinguishes between doubt as a universal starting point for philosophy (source) and doubt as an episode in the history of philosophy (assertion 2). Philosophy and the history of philosophy are separated here: the third assertion, according to Kierkegaard, “seemed to be a historical report” (133). This is obvious, since the philosophy he talks about is placed on the (“modern”) timeline.⁷ The assertion of historicity is undoubtedly at the same time a questioning of its universality (absoluteness, as Hegel would say).⁸ There is a justified objection as to whether the historical (i.e. historically determined) starting point is valid in a different, be it an earlier or later, historical reality. “That is, if, because of its beginning, modern philosophy has excluded for all future time the possibility of another beginning, this suggests that this beginning is more than a historical beginning, is an essential beginning” (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 134).

This type of reasoning applied to a completely different topic (to different content) can be found in the first book published by Kierkegaard, signed with the alias Johannes Climacus, in *Philosophical Fragments* (1844): “Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure be of more than historical interest; can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?” (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 1). This issue is raised by Kierkegaard in reference to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the Christological controversies caused by the publication of Samuel Reimar’s writings and the disputes among Hegel’s followers and students.

In this context, the question whether Cartesian doubt is not simply a historical fact, i.e. an accidental event in history (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 135),⁹ an event that might not exist, is not surprising at all. Cartesian doubt, as Johannes Climacus suggests, can not only be historical (random), but also philosophical (eternal), and then it would be “a union similar to the union of

⁷ If one may use a certain example, this is the approach that one hundred years later would allow Nikolai Berdyaev to describe Heidegger’s existentialism as “academic philosophy”.

⁸ “Hegel had read the formula as a universal methodological imperative: the philosopher may not assume anything, he must isolate and think through all of his presuppositions so as to arrive behind them at an impregnable starting point for constructive speculation. In Hegelian hands the modest proposal of Cartesian scepticism became a charter of philosophical absolutism” (MACKAY 1972, 138).

⁹ Kierkegaard wonders whether we have a right to consider the discovery of doubt as an analogous case to the discovery of the colour magenta or the law of gravity.

the two natures in Christ” (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 139–40). Such a situation is considered by Kierkegaard not in theological, but... aesthetic terms! A historical event may have a universal (eternal) character.¹⁰ Johannes Climacus (Kierkegaard) takes up these considerations again in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, revealing the source of his inspiration (Lessing), although, yet again, these questions no longer refer to doubt and philosophy, but Christianity and its truthfulness. The form of posing problems remains identical to that in the early essay (in *Johannes Climacus...*), but their content is different; they refer not to philosophy, but to religious faith. This is the main change that occurred in the writings signed with the same alias, Johannes Climacus.

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Doubt, speculation, historical beginning—all these issues previously considered in *De omnibus dubitandum est* as intra-philosophical problems, in later writings under the alias Johannes Climacus become problems of religion and faith. There is a complete change of perspective, a change of the “object”, yet the general formal scheme is retained: as “doubt” precedes cognition, then “infinite resignation” precedes faith.

Johannes Climacus in *Fragments...* and in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript...* considers thinking (speculation) as a “ladder of paradise” (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 118),¹¹ that is, as a means to salvation. In this way, he continues the connection between religion and philosophy, initiated by Kant and then developed by Hegel (in Kant it was limited to the content identity of religion and morality). In practice this means that religious goals can be accomplished through philosophy, and thus through speculation.¹² Kierkegaard in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, continuing

¹⁰ “Just as if a historical personage were so poetic that every word, every gesture of his were pure poetry—hence he would not need to undergo any transformation in order to go on stage, but could go right on from the street just exactly as he walked and stood, and without the least embarrassment” (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 140). There is no doubt that Kierkegaard refers here to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, that he understands “poeticalness” as “philosophicalness”, and the latter as an expression of eternal truth. “Going on stage”, on the other hand, he understands as entering that which is universal, eternal.

¹¹ Of course, this is a reference to John Climacus, the father of the Eastern Church, the author of the treatise *Scala Paradisi*.

¹² “The object of religion as well as of philosophy is Eternal truth in its objectivity, God and nothing but God, and the explication of God.... Philosophy is thus identical with religion ... what distinguishes them from each other is merely the kind and manner of religion we find in each” (HEGEL 1895, 19).

the thought of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (who, on the other hand, drew from Samuel Reimarus), questions the possibility of basing faith (and salvation) on knowledge (historical fact): “There is no follower at second hand” (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 104). On the one hand, he does not accept Hegel’s declared substantive identity of philosophy and religion, on the other, he postulates their formal identity: involvement in philosophy functionally corresponds to involvement in faith. In Kierkegaard’s treatises, the counterparts of methodic doubt (in the sense of Hegelian “assumptionlessness”) can be found in various forms of “reduction” (“resignation”), in “infinite resignation” or “despair”.

This difference in positions is expressed in a difference of aliases. The proponent of speculation, Johannes Climacus, is contrasted with Anti-Climacus, who in *Practice in Christianity* (1849) explicitly states that no accumulation of knowledge (about Jesus and his life), painstakingly collected like climbing a ladder, reaches its goal—heaven (salvation).¹³ In *Practice in Christianity* (=KIERKEGAARD 1991), there is a commentary that can even be treated as a summary of Kierkegaard’s attitude towards attempts to establish a meaningful identity between philosophy and religion:

In the works of some pseudonymous writers it has been pointed out that in modern philosophy there is a confused discussion of doubt where the discussion should have been about despair.... But just as there is a confused discussion of “doubt” instead of a discussion of “despair,” so also the practice has been to use the category “doubt” where the discussion ought to be about “offence.” The relation, the relation of personality to Christianity, is not to doubt or to believe, but to be offended or to believe. (74)

That is to say, assuming a religious attitude does not take place in the cognitive order (methodic doubt is part of the cognitive order); it is not even initiated on the basis of cognition.¹⁴ Faith and knowledge, if we were to find some analogy with Schopenhauer’s early work, occupy autonomous areas where independent principles of reasoning rule.¹⁵

¹³ The question posed in *Philosophical Fragments*, “Can eternal salvation be based on historical knowledge?”, is unambiguously answered by Anti-Climacus: no.

¹⁴ Kantian criticism of speculative proofs of God’s existence cannot be treated as a stage leading to religious faith: “Thus I had to deny **knowledge** in order to make room for **faith**” (KANT 1998, 117 [B xxx]). In the Kantian philosophical system, it is merely a preparation for rational faith.

¹⁵ Of course, in the four classes of objects mentioned by Arthur Schopenhauer, which are subject to the principle of sufficient reason (representation, concept, form of time and space, and

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Kierkegaard's writings became obligatory reading for existentialists after being forgotten for half a century, and more intensely only since the 1920s, i.e., since the first collective editions of his writings were published in German.¹⁶ Kierkegaard found his way into philosophy through Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, and later thinkers.¹⁷ Did the first readers notice his references to Descartes? At first it wasn't even possible. A fragment of the essay *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est* was first published in 1914 in the translation of Theodor Haecker (KIERKEGAARD 1959), but the entire text of the essay was not published until 1948, in the translation of Wolfgang Struve (*Johannes Climacus oder De omnibus dubitandum est* [Darmstadt: Claassen & Roether, 1948]) (KAMINSKI, SCHREIBER, and SCHULZ 2016). Only a year later, Jaspers gave a series of lectures on Basel radio entitled *Introduction to Philosophy* (JASPERS [1953] 1989), in which, arguably for the first time, a reference to Kierkegaard's *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est* was made.

It is puzzling why Jaspers, considering the sources of philosophy, places Descartes' doubt alongside surprise and boundary situations (JASPERS [1953] 1989, 16). This choice is probably not understandable from the point of view of Descartes' philosophy; it only becomes so in the interpretation of Hegel and Kierkegaard. When Kierkegaard comments on the first assertion, "*philosophy begins with doubt*", saying that "it did not speak of doubt as something preceding philosophy, but taught that in doubt one is at the beginning of philosophy" (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 144), he actually broadens Hegel's interpretation and enables Jaspers to consider doubt as one of the sources of philosophy in general. Jaspers obviously means not quite the same thing as Kierkegaard (referring directly to Hegel). Jaspers understands Descartes' doubt as criticism of the results of cognition to date, as "the discovery at every turn of my own ignorance" (DESCARTES 1901, 151). Thus, doubt is related to knowledge and it is doubt that is evaluated, and this, according to Kierkegaard, distinguishes doubt from another, much older source of philosophy, from astonishment, which relates to things. Kierkegaard describes

will), there is no faith. However, I believe that Kierkegaard assumes the autonomy of faith, as a matter of principle, just like Pascal does when he contrasts the heart with the reason.

¹⁶ *Collected works* by Kierkegaard in the translation of Christoph Schrempf published by Eugen Diderichs between 1909 and 1914.

¹⁷ Karl Jaspers was certainly the most important figure in the twentieth-century reception of Kierkegaard's work, in the sense that he initiated a strictly philosophical reception of his work (CHAKÓ 2011, 155).

this difference in *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est* as follows:

Wonder is plainly an immediate category and involves no reflection upon itself. Doubt, on the other hand, is a reflection-category. When a later philosopher said: Philosophy begins with wonder—he was straightway in continuity with the Greeks.... But every time a later philosopher repeats or says these words: Philosophy begins with doubt—the continuity is broken, for doubt is precisely a polemic against what went before. (KIERKEGAARD 1985, 145)

Thus, doubt is the “suspension” of earlier knowledge, it is the archetype of the “reduction” preparing the place for what is to happen, the purification of the spot where something is to happen. But doubt is limited only to the element of thinking: it is an effort that precedes knowing the truth, while faith is not cognition (religion is not philosophy), and cognition is not a path to faith, it is not, to use the metaphor used by Kierkegaard, a ladder providing access to heaven. This is why Anti-Climacus in *Practice in Christianity* says that “in modern philosophy there is a confused discussion of doubt where the discussion should have been about despair” (KIERKEGAARD 1991, 74). Therefore, on religious and existential grounds, despair would be a functional equivalent of doubt on the grounds of philosophical speculation. We read in *Either/Or*: “Despair is precisely a much deeper and more complete expression; its movement is much more encompassing than that of doubt. Despair is an expression of the total personality, doubt only of thought” (KIERKEGAARD 1987, 212).

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KIERKEGAARD ON DESCARTES.
DOUBT AS A PREFIGURATION OF EXISTENTIAL DESPAIR

S u m m a r y

In his early, unfinished essay entitled *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est*, Søren Kierkegaard enters into a polemic with Hegel's interpretation of the methodic Cartesian doubt. Kierkegaard questions the philosophical absolutism of Cartesian scepticism and his methodological universalism. For the first time in Kierkegaard's writings, the sphere of speculation (thinking) is confronted with personal involvement (will). Kierkegaard never published this work (it came out posthumously), and did not make any direct reference to Descartes in the same form ever again. However, certain subjects and themes remained: doubt (contrasted with despair) and the alias (Johannes Climacus), used when writing that early essay.

Keywords: Søren Kierkegaard; Descartes; doubt; despair; rationalism; scepticism; infinite resignation.

KIERKEGAARD O KARTEZJUSZU.
WĄTPIENIE JAKO PREFIGURACJA EGZYSTENCJALNEJ ROZPACZY

S t r e s z c z e n i e

We swoim wczesnym, nieukończonym eseju zatytułowanym *Johannes Climacus albo De omnibus dubitandum est* Søren Kierkegaard wdaje się w polemikę z Hegłowską interpretacją metodycznego Kartezjańskiego wątpienia. Kierkegaard kwestionuje filozoficzny absolutyzm Kartezjańskiego sceptycyzmu i jego metodologiczny uniwersalizm. Po raz pierwszy w pismach Kierkegaarda sfera spekulacji (myślenia) zostaje skonfrontowana z osobistym zaangażowaniem (wołą). Kierkegaard nigdy nie opublikował tego dzieła (wydano je pośmiertnie) i nigdy więcej nie odniósł się bezpośrednio do Kartezjusza w tej samej formie. Pozostały jednak pewne tematy i wątki: zwałtpienie (przeciwwstawione rozpaczy) i pseudonim (Johannes Climacus) używany podczas pisania tego wczesnego eseju.

Słowa kluczowe: Søren Kierkegaard; Kartezjusz; wątpienie; rozpacz; racjonalizm; sceptycyzm; nieskończona rezygnacja.

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