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# Hegel as a ‘backward-looking prophet?: Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel’s philosophy of history

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## Abstract

Kierkegaard presents his critique of a Hegelian philosophy of history in the works of his Climacus pseudonym, the *Philosophical Fragments* and the corresponding *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. It has been contested whether he addressed his arguments toward Hegel directly. In this paper, I argue that these arguments are systematically pertinent to central issues both of Hegel’s as well as any other philosophical engagement with history. To make this point I proceed in three steps. First, the basic outlines of Hegel’s philosophy of history are given concerning its exact subject matter, what the aim of history is, and whether the reason inherent in it allows us to conceive of historical events as necessary. Second, I will show that, though agreeing with Hegel on some points, Climacus holds that we can ascribe neither a determinist nor a conceptual kind of necessity to historical events. Finally, I will expand on Climacus’s account of radical metaphysical contingency and its ethical implications which prompt some objections against philosophy of history in general.

## I. Introduction

Among the pseudonymous works of Kierkegaard, his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* presents the fiercest criticism of Hegel. The main aim of his pseudonym Johannes Climacus, in both the *Postscript* and the *Fragments* themselves, is to save the genuinely Christian form of religiousness from what he sees as its speculative misunderstanding. In doing so, he both rejects a reductionist view that accounts for the volitive mode of believing in terms of a simple epistemic deficiency and is intent on providing a lively depiction of what it really means ‘to become a Christian’ (*CUP*: 587).<sup>1</sup> His attack is occupied in large parts with a broadly Hegelian understanding of Christianity, though

he is dealing with more particular issues of the *Logic* as well. Since, for Climacus, Christian faith essentially relies on a very specific historical event, namely the divine act of Incarnation, he is predominantly interested in Hegel's notion of history and its account of this event. As I would like to argue, Climacus's critique of said notion is not only instrumental to his overall project. The main argument he uses to support his critique is also a remarkable piece of metaphysics on its own: Climacus denies that there is any kind of necessity at work in historical processes. Instead, he opts for what I call *radical contingency* in history, thereby making room for personal as well as divine freedom.

In formulating his critique, Climacus poses relevant objections to any kind of systematic apprehension of history within a philosophical framework. Not only does he, in contrast to Hegel's supposed account of history, contest the occurrence of necessary historical events. He also raises a concern regarding the methodology of the philosophy of history: Climacus holds that there are non-trivial implications of the purely retrospective access to its subject matter. To give substance to these general objections and the problems that are, according to Climacus, inherent to philosophical considerations especially of world history, I will relate the published text to corresponding entries in Kierkegaard's journals dating to the time before and around his conception of the respective pseudonymous works.

This paper has two systematic aims. The first aim is to show why and how the concept of necessity at work in Hegel's philosophy of history is the focus of Climacus's critique. Though it has been proposed that much of Climacus's criticism is in fact targeting contemporary Danish Hegelians instead of Hegel himself (Stewart 2003), I would like to present an account of this critique coherent enough to support the view that it is indeed directed against assumptions I take to be characteristic of Hegel's notion of history.<sup>2</sup> The second aim is to make explicit the benefit of seriously examining this critique: though its critical arguments are directed against a specific way of philosophically engaging with history, I hold that it presents us with a general case against any such engagement that is of interest in itself *and* with respect to a Hegelian understanding of history.

To achieve those aims, I will proceed in three steps. A preliminary outline of the basic assumptions at work in Hegel's philosophy of history are provided first for which I will mostly rely on the introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. I will do so in Section II, approaching the problem of how necessity enters the picture that Hegel himself draws. This outline, I hope, will suffice to show that, interestingly, Climacus's own conception of history is in agreement with Hegel's on several decisive points before parting ways with him: both of them identify the development of 'objective spirit' as the philosophy of history's subject matter; both deny that there is a meaningful conception of natural

history; and both stress the intrinsic limitation that philosophy can only get a hold of historical facts in hindsight as opposed to drawing any conclusions from the past with regard to future developments, even if the former were or might be reasonably interpretable. In Section III, I will spell out these points of agreement and then go on by arguing that, for Climacus, we must nevertheless answer the question negatively whether our understanding of the past can rely upon any kind of accessible reason inherent to history itself. He argues that if this were the case, then we would indeed be able to ascribe necessity to historical events and, in consequence, to derive future events from them since determination goes both ways. The singular event he is most apt to save from being understood thus is the ‘most improbable’ one of the Incarnation (*PF*: 52). In Section IV, however, I would like to expand this special case to the generalized argument for radical contingency I take Climacus to defend. In doing so, I hope to clarify what can be learned from his critique of a systematic philosophy of history, even in the case that he should have failed to correctly assess Hegel’s version of it.

## II. Basic outline of Hegel’s philosophy of history

Since we are accustomed to the idea that history, broadly construed, is the subject matter of a separate, relatively autonomous, and largely empirical science, the question arises what the *philosophy* of history is about and what its method is as opposed to the approach employed by the individual scientific discipline. In answering this question, both Climacus’s partial agreement with Hegel and the kind of conceptual necessity that offends him will be specified.

To arrive at Hegel’s full notion of history as a philosophical matter, we must first discard what according to him lies outside the interest of philosophy in general. At the outset of his lectures on the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel distinguishes three kinds of looking at and interpreting the past. The first kind he calls ‘original history’, which proceeds simply by keeping a record of what was and is happening around the historian whose ‘narrative’, as he is more or less contemporary with what he writes about, belongs to the same cultural environment: ‘The influences that have formed the writer are identical with those which have moulded the events that constitute the matter of his story’ (*PH*: 2/40). A standard example for a historian of this kind, whom Hegel regards as ‘an actor, or at any rate an interested spectator’ of the story he is telling, is Herodotus (*PH*: 2/40). Such annalists provide large amounts of factual or at least anecdotal material, even if their perspective is limited and perhaps says equally as much about their time’s view on history as it does about their particular subject matter. Though records of this kind can be instructive for the later interpreter and should be admired

for their rich material, they do not reflect upon history in any philosophically meaningful way:

They simply transferred what was passing in the world around them, to the realm of re-presentative intellect', and such an historian's aim 'is nothing more than the presentation to posterity of an image of personal observation, or life-like descriptions. Reflections are none of his business, for he lives in the spirit of his subject; he has not attained an elevation above it. (*PH*: 1f./39f.)

Not only is he not elevated above the events and the state of society he describes; if he was in a position of power, he might even have been so deeply involved *in* them that his account served his very own interests: 'If, as in Caesar's case, he belongs to the exalted rank of generals or statesmen, it is the prosecution of *his own aims* that constitutes the history' (*PH*: 1f./39f.). Accordingly, we might assume that some of these records additionally suffer from a distortion through bias. But since, for Hegel, philosophy is occupied with concepts and their realization and presupposes a kind of reflective, elevated stance, mere direct or indirect observations in the form of 'representations' of historical facts as found in the accounts of original history do not qualify themselves as philosophical approaches to history anyway.

The second kind of dealing with the past proceeds more methodically, is able to abstract to a certain degree from its own, not-yet historical present, and therefore moves one decisive step closer to an eventual philosophy of history. Hegel subsumes the different versions of it under 'reflective history' whose 'mode of representation is not really confined by the limits of the time to which it relates, but whose spirit transcends the present' (*PH*: 4/42). Though this peculiar notion of history might not seem as self-explanatory as Hegel makes it out to be (cf. *PH*: 8), especially to our modern understanding, it does become clearer when one looks at the subdivisions between which he distinguishes. Since all of them cover potentially greater distances in time, the respective accounts they produce of their historical subject matter naturally become more abstract, too. This is most apparent in the case of 'universal history', which proceeds in a similar manner to the one employed by the annalists of original history but does treat a longer period in the history, for example, of an entire country. It does zoom out, as it were, and thus leaves out a lot of details, sometimes even treating major incidents with lapidary comments, such as when a war is being mentioned in passing with just a 'brief announcement' (*PH*: 4f./42–44). The three further subdivisions belonging to reflective history make it obvious in their own way why they are called thus. While there are 'pragmatical' or 'didactic' records of history, intended but mostly failing to provide lessons to be learned from the past, there is

also ‘critical’ history which is a reflection on the ‘truth and credibility’ of historical narratives themselves (*PH*: 5–7/44–46). Hegel has a rather limited appreciation for both, since they are prone to either failing to recognize the difference of their own time to the one they are giving an historical account of or to trail off into vain criticism, respectively. Finally, the fourth kind of reflective history, which he noticeably calls ‘history of ideas’ (*Begriffsgeschichte*), also ‘adopts an abstract position; yet, since it takes general points of view (e.g. as the History of Art, of Law, of Religion), it forms a transition to the Philosophical History of the World. [...] Such branches of national life stand in close relation to the entire complex of a people’s annals’ (*PH*: 7f./47). What it presents by analysing the ideas prevalent in certain areas and epochs of a people is a history of a constituent part or ‘branch’ of its society, the latter being more narrowly conceived as a particular nation or state. The relevance of nationality or the respective spirit of a nation is evident in the introduction already and continues throughout the actual chapters of the *Philosophy of History*. It serves as a hint as to what Hegel then goes on to consider the subject matter of such a genuinely philosophical history of the world.

We have now arrived at what will become the target of Climacus’s critique: a picture of history that can be reasonably interpreted. We have to spell out the conditions for such an interpretation to discern those that specifically bother Climacus from those he is willing to accept. Hegel starts out his characterization of this third relevant approach by a broad definition of the philosophy of history which, at first sight, does not appear sufficient to give it its proper domain and distinguish it from the more traditional or straightforward historical methods discussed so far: ‘The most general definition that can be given, is, that the Philosophy of History means nothing but the *thoughtful consideration of it*’. To the question of what kind of thinking exactly is employed here, Hegel gives an answer that also helps in discerning it especially from the more fragmentary nature of reflective history:

The only Thought which Philosophy brings with it to the contemplation of History, is the simple conception of *Reason*; that Reason is the Sovereign of the World; that the history of the world, therefore, presents us with a rational process. (*PH*: 8f./48f.)

The entire methodological outline and philosophical reflection on history that the introduction then goes on to provide can be taken to be the successive unfolding of this very basic, though by no means self-evident or uncontroversial, claim. I will now summarize the most important of those that can be derived from this starting point before engaging with Climacus.

First, it is still not clear what the philosophy of history is about exactly. It is obvious by now that it must be akin to a universal history understood verbatim

and in the singular. It is neither concerned with just a specific time period nor an isolated geographical region or political unity. As I have already hinted at, though, Hegel puts emphasis on the relevance of nationalities and their peculiar spirits. Indeed, such peculiarities belonging to the people of a certain nation in its different eras are so idiosyncratic as to be influenced even by the natural environments those people inhabit. However, it is not because of their immediate character or ‘National genius’ as such that a nation or people are interesting to the philosophical account of world history, respectively serving as ‘One individual in the process of Universal history’ (*PH*: 53/104). Since the claim that served Hegel as a starting point and general definition has been that philosophy occupies itself with reason or spirit in history, and since the state as the institutionalized form and most adequate realization of what in Hegel’s system is designated as the concept of objective spirit, it is the states with their constitutions that make up the true subject matter of such a philosophy. In a central passage of the introduction, he concentrates this line of thought which again needs a bit of disentanglement to become fully clear:

It is the absolute interest of Reason that this moral Whole should exist; and herein lies the justification and merit of heroes who have founded states—however rude these may have been. In the history of the World, only those peoples can come under our notice which form a state. For it must be understood that his latter is the realization of Freedom, *i.e.* of the absolute final aim, and that it exists for its own sake. It must further be understood that all the worth which the human being possesses—all spiritual reality, he possesses only through the State. (*PH*: 39/86)

The ‘moral Whole’ (*Sittlichkeit*) that Hegel is talking about here is the official acknowledgment in state laws of a set of moral rules that governs a society; it reconciles the individual will and demands of a citizen as a person and, therefore, a bearer of rights with the public’s order and interests. The intrinsic connection between individual morality and *Sittlichkeit* is dealt with by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right* to which he points here, too (cf. *PH*: 40/87). The role of subjective spirit, *i.e.* the setup of faculties of an individual’s mind, is only relevant to the philosophy of history in as much as there are the state-founding ‘heroes’ mentioned above or, more generally, ‘world-historical individuals’ whose deeds, aims, and even passions at crucial points in time serve the advancement of the greater good (*PH*: 32f./78f.).<sup>3</sup> This greater overall good and ‘absolute final aim’ of history has now been identified as *freedom*. For Hegel, the more developed a state is, the more of its citizens enjoy a constitutionally guaranteed and, therefore, generally acknowledged freedom. He brings this basic idea to a formula which also guides

the overall structure of the executed philosophy of history: ‘the Eastern nations knew only *one* is free; the Greek and Roman world only that *some* are free; while *we* know that all men absolutely (man *as* man) are free’ (*PH*: 19/61). I will come back to freedom as the idea successively being realized in history.

Second, what we can now further infer from the initial proposition that philosophy assumes reason inherent to history is that everything which by default neither belongs to the realm of objective spirit nor, consequently, is designed to be at least potentially free is not part of the philosophy of history either. On the one hand, this excludes nature from it. For Hegel, nature does not undergo veritable change: ‘The changes that take place in Nature—how infinitely manifold they may be—exhibit only a perpetually self-repeating cycle; in Nature there happens “nothing new under the sun”, so that ‘only in those changes which take place in the region of Spirit does anything new arise’ (*PH*: 54/105). Nature does not qualify itself to be of historical interest to the philosopher since its processes do neither yield a vertical development with a distinctive result or even final aim other than the reproduction of its forms nor a change of its underlying ‘stable character’, whereas man has a ‘*real* capacity for change, and that for the better—an impulse of *perfectibility*’ (*PH*: 54/105). Nature plays a role in philosophical history, as I pointed out before, only in so far as certain of its features like the topology or the climate of a country influence the customs of its inhabitants. However, this capacity for change in the eminent sense is not realizable under any circumstances people are subjected to by this self-same nature. What is therefore excluded from the philosophy of history on the other hand are loose and wild social groups not yet forming a constitutionalized community in the form of a state and without any ‘subjective history’ in the form of a kept written record.<sup>4</sup> In short, what falls outside of history as preceding it is prehistory, which is exactly what the word says. Hegel denounces any attempts to fill in the blank void of ‘the periods—whether we suppose them to be centuries or millennia—that were passed by nations before history was written among them’, especially with the phantastic images of a paradisiacal Golden Age (*PH*: 61/115. Cf. also 57–60/109–14). Man must step out of the boundaries of his natural condition to become for himself what he truly is, namely spirit, which allows him to pursue his own ends and makes him free to recognize those of others and be recognized himself. Not everything, therefore, that *is* part of the past also *has* a past in the eminent sense that will be relevant for Climacus.

Third and last, we are now in a position to spell out what the implications of this philosophical picture of history are. It is here that things get trickier. Two major issues have been brought up regarding Hegel’s basic assumptions. The first Hegel himself has already been confronted with by one of his pupils, Christian Hermann Weisse, in 1829. Weisse contests that, following his views about the development of ‘universal Spirit’, Hegel was unable to admit and account for any

further possible advancements beyond his own age (Berthold-Bond 1989: 133). This contention has experienced a long history itself thereafter as it poses the manifest question whether history comes to a definite end. Though it has been argued that history indeed ended for Hegel with the universal recognition of all individuals as free in the post-Napoleonic modern states (cf. McCarney 2000: 171–76), there also remains a more open reading (McCarney 2000; Houlgate 2005). This reading suggests that Hegel merely wanted to present a horizon or general direction in which history will advance without coming to a definite and full stop. This direction is intelligible to us since it belongs to the inert structure of how spirit comes to know itself, and it also becomes apparent in history as it has happened thus far. Whatever position one adopts, though, one must account for the implications of the notions both of perfectibility of man in his institutions and his constitutional freedom as history's 'final aim', since together they provide us with a reasonable interpretation of universal history. Given that such an interpretation is not only accessible to us at all but also that Hegel's very own version of it operates with at least the general idea of observable progress, it seems difficult to evade the consequence that history should be thought of as eventually coming to an end. Otherwise, there would seem to be a dilemma: either history, having reached the stages of a modern understanding of the state, perpetuated itself analogously to nature and was occupied solely with the continuation of the *status quo*; or it would indefinitely be striving toward the realization of its true 'capacity for change' which, though distinguishing it from nature, would thereby fall victim to what in Hegelian terms would be a bad infinity.

The lectures close out with a short metaphysical retrospection that leaves it open whether it is articulated from the standpoint of such a purported end but leads to the consideration of the second major issue of Hegel's conception of history:

That the History of the World, with all the changing scenes which its annals present, is this process of development and the realization of Spirit—this is the true *Theodicaea*, the justification of God in History. Only *this* insight can reconcile Spirit with the History of the World—viz., that what has happened, and is happening every day, is not only not “without God”, but is essentially His Work. (*PH*: 457/605)

Since the whole project started out with the claim that there is reason in history, and since the executed proof of this claim is then to be regarded as one great theodicy argument, the question arises why this 'justification' was necessary in the first place and what kind of necessity it is that is at work in historical processes. Thus, there is a practical as well as a theoretical dimension to this second issue of necessity in history. Hegel makes it clear at the outset, when he is talking about



‘World-historical individual[s]’, that ‘so mighty a form must trample down many an innocent flower—crush to pieces many an object in its path’, even though this might seem ‘obnoxious to moral reprehension’ (*PH*: 32/78). Similarly, albeit on a greater scale, especially considering the ending passages of the *Philosophy of Right* that Hegel points to in the lectures, the advancement of the *Weltgeist* in history’s progress cannot be halted by moral reflections on the fate of the individuals and people that serve as its vehicle.<sup>5</sup> If the overall aim of history is the realization of freedom in the modern state, and if the stages leading up to this realization (such as the early ‘Oriental’ stage with its limited, despotic understanding of only the emperor being free and Graeco-Roman slavery) are necessary to achieve this aim, then the general course of their respective development seems to be necessary, too, even if philosophy is not concerned with specific historical details. It is this general form of ‘Ideal necessity of transition’ (*Begriffsnotwendigkeit der Veränderung*) to a ‘higher principle’ and, finally, the ‘universality’ of a nation’s spirit which is at the heart of this conception of history (*PH*: 78/136). Moral judgements about those stages and what happened in them are not then in themselves legitimate if they imply that certain things should not have happened at all.

As we will see, Climacus does take issue with the moral detachment inherent to such a philosophical view on history. For now, though, it poses a question that leads us to the theoretical side of the issue at stake which chiefly concerns Climacus. The kind of necessity we can ascribe to historical processes is ‘Ideal’: if something is a constitutive part of a concept, i.e. if for the concept of spirit the idea of it recognizing itself as such and, therefore, as free, is constitutive, its corresponding adequate realization in history necessarily has to be arrived at by going through the limited forms of real freedom. However, this kind of necessity does not seem to go top-down all the way to singular historical facts; it is a kind of regional necessity of which we can say that it is operative only on the same ‘genus’ level on which the national spirits themselves dwell (cf. *PH*: 75/132). The difficulty now is in assessing how exactly this abstract, conceptual kind of necessity is related or applies to factual history, since the line dividing the two appears somewhat blurry. This becomes especially evident when dealing with the case that will be most important for Climacus, namely, the historical reality of Christianity. For Hegel, the state and its respective religion are neither conceptually nor historically separable from each other; religious truths as they are arrived at and become manifest within those states, therefore, also have a historical dimension (cf. *PH*: 50f./101f.). Now, alluding to the appearance of Christianity within the Roman Empire, Hegel speaks of suffering as a ‘necessary instrument for producing the unity of man with God’ that has brought ‘peace and reconciliation to the world’. He then goes on by saying that there can only be one Incarnation, since ‘[t]he appearance of the Christian God involves further its being *unique* in its kind; it can occur only once, since God is realized as Subject,

and as manifested Subjectivity is exclusively One Individual' (*PH*: 324f./447). Neither the historical circumstances of the Roman Empire with its laws and the expectation of a Messiah nor the reality of His coming and instantiating the conceptual unity of man and God are coincidental: the former was a necessary condition to provide a 'place of birth' (*PH*: 318/440) for Christ who Himself was the instantiation of this unity that had to take place. It is difficult then to see whether this allows us to conceive of the Incarnation itself as well as of its circumstances as historical necessities, what this would tell us about other facts that are world-historical turning points, and what it would tell us about necessity in history in general. I will now turn to Climacus who took up these issues.

### III. Agreements and the point of departure: Climacus's special case for contingency in history

We have zoomed deep enough into Hegel's conception of history to tackle Climacus's critique of it. Before going into this critique, however, it is important to sketch out the parts of that conception he was agreeing with and how much the background for his critical assessment is still indebted to it. There are three main lines of argument briefly to highlight here.

First, Climacus shares with Hegel the basic considerations of what the philosophy of history is about and how it proceeds. The dense and intricate metaphysical analysis of becoming and historical facts that he presents in the *Fragments* makes every advanced concept of history depend on the freedom of (rational and moral) agents. Even though '[e]verything that has come into existence is *eo ipso* historical', which trivially holds for every fact that is part of a chain of cause and effect (even if this chain were determined), the 'more special historical coming into existence comes into existence by way of a relatively freely acting cause, which in turn definitively points to an absolutely freely acting cause' (*PF*: 75f.). This 'relatively freely acting cause' is the human agent, whereas the 'definitively freely acting cause' can be identified as God who initiated the chain of events in the first place and upon whose free primordial act our own are consequently based. If we are talking about history at all, it only makes sense to talk of the history of such agents, since they are free to choose their acts among a plurality of options to be potentially realized, as opposed to processes within which merely a predisposed potential is being actualized. I will expand on this point next, since there follows from it an argument similar to Hegel's as to what cannot genuinely be part of history properly speaking. However, while there are critical implications already of this fairly general scheme, and though it might appear to be a bit of a stretch, taking into account what Climacus goes on to

say about world history in the *Postscript* we can see his reasoning behind saying that ‘if the world-historical is to amount to something it must be the history of the human race’ (*CUP*: 154). It deals only with individuals in so far as they are of world-historical importance, but mainly with the ‘great portions’ of kingdoms and empires among which Climacus often mockingly mentions China and Persia. He was certainly not of the opinion that one *should* engage with such a project; but it would nevertheless be about what Hegel calls objective spirit *if* one were to undertake it. That the ‘world-historical’ is about objective spirit, then, is for him precisely a moral reason *not* to engage with it, since we should not abstract from the interest in and reality of being finite subjects. Their agreement of such a philosophy’s content is a premise for Climacus’s critique of it.

Second, even though everything that partakes in the extension of time and, therefore, ‘has come into existence’ with the potential to vanish again does have a history or a past, not everything does have a history in what Climacus calls the ‘special’ sense of the word. What is excluded by adopting this narrower understanding which recalls Hegel’s own argument for dismissing them from a philosophical view on history are natural processes. ‘Nature as a spatial determination exists only immediately. Something that is dialectical with respect to time has an intrinsic duplexity [*Dobbeltbed*], so that after having been present it can endure as a past’ (*PF*: 79). Not only is nature seen here, too, as the domain of spatial entities that during their span of existence do not experience any development or undergo any significant changes beyond being subject to motion or carrying out movements themselves;<sup>6</sup> it is also thought of as having no eminent past, as existing ‘only immediately’, i.e. as being without a history. This is because it has no ‘intrinsic duplexity’: what happens in nature is the realization of a potential to which there are no alternatives. It is the unfolding of events that, even though they point back in time toward that primordially free and contingent act of creation, are linked together and ruled by natural laws, like the release of kinetic energy or the growth of a plant. There is no memory of this whole past, let alone a record. As opposed to this, the truly historical past is the endurance of something that was once present but was not determined so as to be without alternatives even then. On the contrary, what has historically come about through the choices made by people is only one reality out of a vast array of possibly real worlds.

Third, Climacus holds that we can only fully understand our own past as well as history in general from a retrospective point of view. Trivially, this follows from the fact that something must be past in order to become the potential object of any kind of historical research we distinguished above as well as of any philosophical insight into history. But for both Hegel and Climacus there are further, non-trivial implications of such retrospection. In his famous dictum about the Owl of Minerva spreading its wings only in the dusk, Hegel alludes to

philosophy grasping the spirit of a certain past only after its having laid bare all its constituent parts. Otherwise, we would not be in the position to see what the particular conditions were that had to be fulfilled in order for it to come about, what made it uniquely distinguishable as a time of its own, and in what way it figures in the reasonable interpretation of universal history as such. Similarly, for Climacus the fact that we as finite minds belonging to their own, still running present try to arrive at such an interpretation stands in stark contrast with the requirement of completion for understanding anything, let alone the past. ‘Existence is the spacing that holds apart; the systematic is the conclusiveness that combines. [...] [W]hen an existence is a thing of the past, it is indeed finished, it is indeed concluded, and to that extent it is turned over to the systematic view’ (CUP: 118). By asking the rhetorical question for whom this view is accessible (cf. CUP: 118), though, Climacus makes it clear that the mutual exclusiveness of systematic understanding and still being part of what is to be understood, namely one’s own ‘existence’ with its inherent relation to human history, is another occasion to question such an understanding. I will now turn to his critique.

The reason for Climacus to broach the issue of historicity in the first place is to rescue a specific notion of the Incarnation. In his *Fragments*, the belief in this singular historical fact serves as a kind of minimalist definition of the Christian faith. What he wants to consider in the ‘Interlude’ of the text is whether we can ascribe any sort of necessity to this or, indeed, to any other historical event. The singularity of the Incarnation according to Climacus consists in it being ‘based upon a self-contradiction’, namely, upon this unique ‘historical’ that ‘the god *has come into existence*’ (PF: 87). That which, by its very nature, is infinite and eternal has become part of the extension of time that is occupied by finite beings. It seems irritating then that Climacus would want to show the overall contingency that rules this temporal extension of causally related events and finite beings by relying on a purported historical fact that contains a self-contradiction. However, it is important to note two things. First and again in agreement with Hegel, it is an extraordinary event that occurred only once and under specific historical circumstances. Kierkegaard is stressing the importance of the Incarnation as the central motive of the genuinely Christian faith throughout his work; to deprive it of its ‘historical truth’ would be to misunderstand it as an ‘abstract truth’ with no inherent relation to the occurrence of the actual object of that faith (JP: 232). And second, though it is Climacus’s intention behind the Interlude to show the contingency of the Incarnation (as a freely chosen divine act), the latter is argued to be an implication of the thesis that *all* historical events are contingent—a metaphysical claim that can then be examined independently of his intention. Thus, we do not have to reverse the order of Climacus’s arguments when going about this examination with respect to its critical force in Section IV.

Before doing so, the notion of necessity from which Climacus wants to save the historical aspect of Christian dogmatics needs to be assessed. There seem to be two possible kinds relevant here. The first, which appears to be more easily dismissible, is necessity understood as a causal determination, the realization of a potential that is without alternatives. Historical events would then be akin to natural processes. Both Hegel<sup>7</sup> and Climacus are opposed to this view on history, the latter for the categorical reason that anything that exists necessarily cannot be the actualization of a possibility at all, since there would then have been a time when, contrary to its essence, it did not already exist in actuality.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, since the ‘transition’ from potentiality or possibility to actuality ‘takes place in freedom’, and since any such transition requires an agent to have different alternatives for acting to choose from, there would be no real freedom in history without the corresponding metaphysical contingency common to a plurality of such alternatives (*PF*: 74f., 78). Though Climacus himself does not advance this argument, there is a danger that any other kind of historical necessity might imply or eventually collapse into this basic causal or mechanistic determination. This is because an alternative course of history, it could be argued, would never amount to a real but only to a logical possibility.

The more general and radical case for contingency I take Climacus himself to make does not even seem to require a plurality of real possibilities. As we have seen, necessity exists in history for Hegel on the level of transitions from one developmental stage of (a nation’s) spirit to the next. We could call this the second, conceptual understanding of necessity. Accordingly, to reasonably interpret these transitions does not render every single historical event necessary, and neither does the assumption that through these transitions history eventually tends toward the realization of its ‘final aim’. However, for Climacus, one fails in applying even this more refined notion of necessity to history. ‘If the past had become necessary, the opposite conclusion could not be drawn with respect to the future, but on the contrary it would follow that the future would also be necessary’ (*PF*: 77). Understanding history in such a way that necessity enters into it at one point (i.e. through a ‘unique’ historical event like the Incarnation) to Climacus is not much different from apprehending the past as governed by more abstract necessary transitions; in a long polemical footnote of the Interlude, thus, he addresses Hegel directly, accusing him of owing an explanation for the ‘correctness of the method’ applied by philosophy to history while leaving unanswered decisive questions: ‘What does it mean that the idea becomes concrete, what is coming into existence, how is one related to that which has come into existence, etc.?’ (*PF*: 78). It is clear by now that Climacus wants us to understand that we can only relate to anything ‘which has come into existence’ through believing it to have happened: a belief that is never indubitably supported by evidence nor a form of

conceptual insight. What the Incarnation's self-contradiction does in addition to that is simply to warrant that it can only be believed *against* such possible insight. Any kind of insight into it, but especially the one conditioned by an understanding of this event as necessary, would undermine the character of the Incarnation, as Stephen Evans put it: 'The paradox of the god in time is a historical event. If it is possible to understand historical events as necessary, then reason might be able to remove the paradoxicalness of the paradox by coming to understand it as necessary' (Evans 1992: 126).

#### IV. The general case for contingency

What, then, is the *general* point of Climacus's critique of the philosophy of history?

The prophesying generation disdains the past, refuses to hear the testimony of written records; the generation busy with understanding the necessity of the past does not want to be asked about the future. The conduct in both cases is utterly consistent, for in its opposite each one would find occasion to perceive how foolish its own conduct is. (PF: 78, footnote)

He who wants to understand 'the necessity of the past' is what Climacus, borrowing a phrase from theologian Carl Daub, calls a '*historico-philosophus*' (PF: 80). Such a reverse or 'backward-looking' prophet, according to him, fails to grasp the essential uncertainty that is a fundamental feature of history. But what is more, it is not only constitutive for history as the succession of events brought about by freely acting agents choosing among a set of alternative possibilities, but even for *becoming itself*. The conclusiveness of what is past suggests to the systematic understanding discussed above, through having become inalterable, that it is necessary and could not have been any other way. This kind of necessity, however, is only brought forth by retrospection through a sort of optical illusion: 'Distance in time prompts a mental illusion just as distance in space prompts a sensory illusion'. To the 'contemporary', things appear to happen as contingently as they actually do, 'but when centuries lie between the coming into existence and the viewer—then he sees the necessity, just as the person who at a distance sees something square as round' (PF: 80). The metaphysics in Climacus's Interlude is designed to provide the corresponding disillusion: that the apparent necessity of the past that is resting on its inalterability is in fact just an apparition to the philosopher of history. For this reason, our historical knowledge is not only *about* contingent things or events, but is *itself* necessarily contingent; if it were necessary, as perhaps mathematical knowledge is, its object would also have to

be inalterable.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, Climacus, as we have seen, also rules out historical knowledge based on notions of higher-level necessity such as Hegel’s own.

An almost identical analogy to said optical illusion that Kierkegaard comes up with in his journals frames the central argument against engaging with the philosophy of history:

It requires a trained eye to see what is round, because it cannot be seen all at once and the inner sense must exercise diligent control over the external eye’s hasty, inquisitive, and desultory observations lest one mistake a sphere for a polygon. The same is true when considering the cycle of history—lest the observation of multiplicity weaken the impression of continuity. That everything is new is the angle of refraction (the infinite tangential possibilities of the periphery); that nothing is new is the bond of unity; but these must be in and with each other—only in this does the truth lie. Yet this likeness among the different is not to be conceived abstractly, not as the Sophist Protagoras did. A comparable sophism is the idea of mediation. (*JP*: 232)

Here, the idea of ‘mediation’ is straightforwardly called a ‘sophism’, much in the same way as Climacus dismissed the application of Hegel’s ‘method’ to historical transitions on whatever level of abstraction. However, Kierkegaard seems to concede to such an approach that there indeed is something like continuity in history that could perhaps be made explicit by philosophy and given the form of laws (or the structure of concepts) governing it. This impression would have further evidence in an earlier passage of *Either-Or* II when the pseudonymous Judge William asserts that though individual acts are the result of free inner deliberation, as external deeds they become part of the ‘word-historical process’ (*EO II*: 174). Climacus himself says of such individual acts that they are difficult to differentiate from ‘that objective order of things that is the spirit of world-history’ (*CUP*: 144). He does so, though, in an ironic manner; the position he effectively takes on this question, I argue, is one of radical contingency and thoroughly in agreement with the cited passage of the journals: Climacus too puts emphasis on the ‘infinite tangential possibilities’, even if they as metaphysical alternatives would never once be realized and regardless of whether there are entities such as free agents to make them come about instead of what is actually happening. This is the reason why, when ‘coming into existence is definitely reflected upon’, not even ‘an inference from natural law’ is ‘evidence of the necessity of any coming into existence’, since even this causal chain rests on a ‘freely acting cause’ (*PF*: 75). So radical is the contingency Climacus has in mind that it ascribes only hypothetical necessity even to natural processes: a simple organism such as a plant might not ‘choose’ to actualize any other possibility than to grow when the

sun shines; but the specific chain of cause and effect that it as well as the sun are a part of could have remained uninitiated or turned out completely different, depending on that first free cause. I do think that Climacus ultimately identifies God as this first cause, since it is God who also only qualifies as the necessary being which has never come into existence as the effect of any other act or cause. It is certainly advisable though to remain cautious not to infer from this identification a sort of cosmological argument for the *proof* of God's existence (cf. Evans 1992: 123f.).

For Climacus, it is in turning toward this first cause, namely God, and toward our own contingent existence that we recognize our ethical obligations which he sees as under constant threat by a (philosophical) engagement with world-history. Not only does the historical retrospection accessible to us fail in providing a Theodicy argument; Climacus asks exactly the question Hegel dismissed as motivated by 'moral reprehension': 'The world-historical drama proceeds extremely slowly. Why does God not make haste if that is all he wants? [...] And if that is all he wants, how horrible, tyrannically to squander myriads of human lives' (*CUP*: 159). This rejection of a Hegelian interpretation of history as a Theodicy argument adds another layer to the general rejection of there being any necessity at work in history. Not only do we have to conceive of all historical events as contingent: we also have to conceive of history as being without a final aim such as the freedom of all that Hegel envisaged. If the argument from contingency itself would not suffice already to make this point, the moral argument puts the case to rest for Climacus. Perhaps more interestingly, Climacus also concludes from the contingency we are facing that if we were to understand history, we would need to mistake our perspective on it as God's point of view; and if we wanted to learn something from the significance of great individuals' deeds in history—of which we are a continuation and which is therefore incomplete to us—we consequently would have to misunderstand ourselves as being dead (cf. *CUP*: 147). Even if, with this allegation of a double self-misunderstanding, Climacus's critique targets a Hegelian philosophy of history, together with its metaphysical premises it might make us rethink any such approach. In so far as one deems the overall reconstruction of his critical account convincing, it seems to put serious constraints on the very idea of a philosophy of history. Not even processes under natural laws could be considered necessary in the eminent sense, much less singular historical events or general developments. Furthermore, those events and developments could not be understood to be directed by a 'guiding principle' (such as the reasonable strive toward universalized constitutionally guaranteed freedom) toward a definite aim (i.e. a plurality of states or societies organized thus). If there *were* such a tendency in history, it would, in the given (Hegelian) example, never amount to more than a contingent anthropological constant. Even



though, in modern philosophy of history, there exist proposals to conceive of historic contingency and necessity as non-binary concepts that ‘span a spectrum of possibilities’ (Ben-Menahem 2008: 128), I argue there is no room in Climacus’s account for such quantifications. For him, it is already questionable to engage, before having dealt with the more pressing existential problems such as one’s own finitude, in any systematic approach to or undue interest in ‘world history, about which I still must always say: God knows if it actually does concern you’ (CUP: 166).

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used:

CA = Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. R. Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

CUP = Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments. Volume I*, trans. H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

EO II = Kierkegaard, *Either-Or. Part II*, trans. H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

EPH = Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse 1830* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989).

JP = Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers. Volume 2: F–K*, trans. H. Hong and E. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970).

PF = Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

PH = Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956) / *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> I refer to plausible reconstructions of Climacus’s critique by Evans (1992) and especially Knappik (2014). However, I hope to further elucidate both the specific problem of historical necessity in Hegel himself that Climacus addresses as well as the conclusions that can be drawn from his critique with regard to the philosophy of history in general.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Hegel concedes that a philosophy of history in the strictest sense should abolish even the consideration of this last remnant of subjective spirit: “The history of the world might, on principle, entirely ignore the circle within which morality and the so much talked of distinction between the moral and the politic lies—not only in abstaining from judgments, for the principles involved, and the necessary reference of the deeds in question to those

principles, are a sufficient judgment of them—but in leaving Individuals quite out of view and unmentioned' (*PH*: 67/122f.).

<sup>4</sup> Hegel makes use of the double meaning of the German word *Geschichte*, which 'comprehends not less what has *happened*, than the *narration* of what has happened' (*PH*: 60/114). For a society to have a history does then not only require that it has a shared past, i.e. objective history, but that this past has been recorded, too.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Houlgate might be right in dismissing a picture of Hegel's philosophy of history as the workings of 'the all-powerful puppet-master' that is the Absolute, as it 'does not exist in Hegel's philosophy, but only in the minds of his critics' (2005: 24). However, since spirit is the *subject* of history, the question is still valid why its development to self-consciousness was necessary for the *absolute* spirit by way of such means. I will come back to this in the discussion of Climacus's critique.

<sup>6</sup> This broadly Aristotelian classification of nature resembles Hegel's own: 'History in general is therefore the development of Spirit in *Time*, as Nature is the development of the Idea in *Space*' (*PH*: 72/128). It is also brought up by another pseudonym of Kierkegaard, Vigilius Haufniensis, in his *Concept of Anxiety*, who makes use of the same example of the growth of a plant: '[F]or a becoming by necessity is a state, as, for example, the whole history of the plant is a state' (*CA*: 21).

<sup>7</sup> I take Hegel's remark on necessity in history in the *Encyclopaedia* that is directed against such a possible misunderstanding of his philosophy to be a refutation of the applicability exactly of this first kind of necessity to historical events (cf. *EPH*: §147A).

<sup>8</sup> Climacus's point of mutual exclusion of necessity and actualized possibility or 'coming-into-existence' has been put forward by Fenves (1993: 143) and, in a more fine-grained argument, by Knappik (2014: esp. 174).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. again Evans (1992: 127): 'Thus anyone who claims to understand the necessity of a historical event in effect is claiming to have a knowledge of something historical that would transform it into something nonhistorical, a curious kind of knowledge indeed'. Evans is right, therefore, in stressing that Climacus intertwines epistemological with metaphysical issues (1992: 119f.).

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