JÜRGEN HABERMAS ON THE WAY TO A POSTMETAPHYSICAL READING OF KIERKEGAARD

Klaus Viertbauer
University of Innsbruck

Abstract. Habermas's postmetaphysical reading of Kierkegaard is paradigmatic for his understanding of religion. It shows why Habermas reduces religion to fideism. Therefore the paper reconstructs Habermas's reception of Kierkegaard and compares it with the accounts of Dieter Henrich and Michael Theunissen. Furthermore it demonstrates how Habermas makes use of Kierkegaard's dialectics of existence to formulate his postmetaphysical thesis of a cooperative venture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Of course, Jürgen Habermas, to whom this special issue is dedicated, is really not well known as a Kierkegaardian scholar. Indeed, from time to time, Habermas is strongly referring to the Danish mastermind in order to point out what human selfhood can mean. In an interview with Martin J. Matustik from 1991, Habermas admitted that he is working on a "secular reading of Kierkegaard".[1] Although Habermas never finished this project, it is paradigmatic for his rethinking of religion between the 1980ies and the millennium. In my paper, I will try to explain why Habermas still supports a fideistic understanding of religion. As I see it, in his reading of Kierkegaard, Habermas does not distinguish between Religiousness A and B. Furthermore, he connects religion immediately to the fideistic description of Religiousness B. Therefore I divide my paper into two main parts: In the light of the critiques against the model of representation (2.1), I show how Habermas refers to Kierkegaard in his debate with Dieter Henrich in the early 1990ies (2.2) and how Kierkegaard supports

1 Martin B. Matuštík, "Habermas's Reading of Kierkegaard: Notes From a Conversation", *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 17, no. 4 (1991): 318

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AUTHOR: KLAUS.VIERTBAUER@UIBK.AC.AT

Habermas in his debate about genetic enhancement at the end of the decade (2.3). In a second step, I point out how Habermas makes use of Kierkegaard's dialectics of existence for translating religious validity claims to a secular audience (3). My thesis is: Because Habermas confuses Religiousness A and B with each other, he immediately links religion to the fideistic paradigm of Religiousness B, which is characteristic for his view on religion as well.

II. FROM TIME TO TIME: HABERMAS AS A SECULAR READER OF KIERKEGAARD

One of the first contexts wherein Habermas refers to Kierkegaard in a systematical manner is his reply to Dieter Henrich entitled "Metaphysics after Kant" (1987).[2] The discussion between Henrich and Habermas deals with the question which type of philosophy is adequate with regard to the ongoing critique of reason by postmodernity (e.g. Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard) and relativism by theory of science (e.g. Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos and in particular Paul Feyerabend).[3] Habermas already dedicates his foregoing monograph *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985) to this topic: "The new Critique of reason suppresses that almost the 200-year-old counter-discourse inherent in modernity itself which I am trying to recall."[4] Habermas seems to be astonished that Henrich can pass over these forms of critique and continue in his argumentation. Habermas characterizes Henrich's philosophy as a form of metaphysical thinking, which ignores the problems of the model of reflection: This model refers to a theory of representation, which is based on a distinction of a subject, wherein a subject has to split itself into a reflecting or representing (and thereby "subjective") and a reflected or represented (and thereby "objective") part, in order to identify itself *as* itself.[5]

2 Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (MIT Press, 1992), 10-27.

3 Cf. Volker Gerhardt, "Metaphysik und ihre Kritik: Zur Metaphysikdebatte zwischen Jürgen Habermas und Dieter Henrich", *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung* 42, no. 1 (1988); Placidus Heider, *Jürgen Habermas und Dieter Henrich: Neue Perspektiven auf Identität und Wirklichkeit* (Alber, 1999); Klaus Müller, "Habermas und die neuen Metaphysiker: Konvergenz und Divergenz mit Dieter Henrich und Michael Theunissen", in *Habermas und die Religion*: *Zweite, erweiterte Auflage*, ed. Klaus Viertbauer and Franz Gruber (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2019).

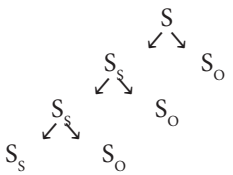
4 Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (MIT Press, 1987), 302.

5 Cf. Manfred Frank, "Fragmente einer Geschichte der Selbstbewußtseins-Theorie von Kant bis Sartre", in *Selbstbewußtseinstheorien von Fichte bis Sartre*, ed. Manfred Frank (Suhrkamp

II.1 Three problems

The model of representation is confronted with at least three critiques: (i) the infinite regress, (ii) its timeless character and (iii) the interpretation of the subject as a *causa sui*.

Ad i: The use of the model of representation leads into an infinite regress. This critique is sparked by the distinction of the subject into a reflecting or representing (S_S) and a reflected or represented (S_O) part.[6]



By doing so and making use of the representation paradigm, a subject S will never grasp itself in a whole as a pure subject, but only a part of it (namely S_S). Although S_S tends towards 0 and S_O towards 1, in any case will $S_S = 0$ or $S_O = 1$.

Ad ii: The second critique adds the timeless character to this argument. The act of reflection or representation, by which S distinguishes itself into S_S and S_O, cannot be synthesized in a single moment. Furthermore, the distinction takes some time, which can be illustrated by the difference of a time t_1 before and a time t_2 after the act of reflection or representation.

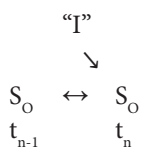
Behind every nomination, a gap between the word and the object labeled by the word is concealed.[7] In our case, the gap appears between the word "I"

Verlag, 1991), 433-435.

6 The romantic philosophers mainly expressed this critique against their idealistic counterparts, especially in the quarrel between Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Hölderlin. In his *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* Fichte tries to defend — against this critique by Hölderlin in *Urtheil und Seyn* — his insight from the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794 that the identity "I = I" embodies the first principle of thinking which cannot be gone behind: There is no infinite regress, so Fichte, because "the thinking subject and the object one is thinking of, the thinker and the thought, are here one and the same. […] The concept or thought of the I arises when the I acts upon itself, and the act of acting upon oneself produces the thought of the I and no other thought." Johann G. Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre Nova Methodo 1796/99)*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992), 111 f.

7 Jacques Derrida coins the difference between t_1 and t_2 *différance*. But Derrida's *différrance* is much more than a simple period of time. It stands for an ontological difference between becoming aware of something and being something. Although prima facie *S* seems to become aware of itself in *tn* , there is a *différrance* between *S* (in t_{n-1}) and the awareness of *S* (in t_n). Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and difference* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978).

and the self-consciousness structure as its corresponding object. In the performative act of saying "I" at t_n, we refer to a temporal forgoing t_{n-1} structure of self-consciousness, which is not the same as in t_n.



For this reason, the model of reflection or representation is unable to grasp one and the same self-consciousness by saying "I".

Ad iii: The third critique focuses on the interpretation of the subject as a *causa sui*. In traditional ontology a *causa sui* embodies the highest principle. Therefore, especially in Christian theology, God is often characterized in this way.[8] By referring the *causa sui* to the subject, we try to explain how we are able to grasp ourselves by saying "I" in spite of the above mentioned problems. But this strategy goes hand in hand with some serious problems: In particular the relation between the subject, the world and other subjects becomes asymmetric. If a subject is defined as a *causa sui*, it has not only to be the reason for itself, but for the world, God and all other subjects as well.

II.2 Three accounts: Habermas, Henrich, and Kierkegaard

Both Henrich[9] and Habermas[10] refer to these critiques in their works: While Henrich does it in his examination of post-Kantian philosophy, Habermas combines a Hegelian reading with the insights of ordinary language philosophy. Thereby Habermas not only tries to cope with these critiques, but rather offers a solution, adequate in his eyes, with his theory of communicative action. In his own words:

8 Cf. Pierre Hadot, "Causa sui", in *Historisches Wörterbuch für Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter et al. (Schwabe, 1971).

9 Cf. Dieter Henrich, *Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht* (Klostermann, 1966); Dieter Henrich, *Fluchtlinien* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982); Dieter Henrich, *Selbstverhältnisse* (Reclam, 1982); Dieter Henrich, "Was ist Metaphysik was Moderne? Thesen gegen Jürgen Habermas", *Merkur* 40, no. 448 (1986); Dieter Henrich, "Die Anfänge der Theorie des Subjekts (1790)", in *Zwischenbetrachtungen*, ed. Axel Honneth (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989); Dieter Henrich, *Der Grund im Bewusstsein: Untersuchungen zu Hölderlins Denken* (Klett-Cotta, 1992).

10 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Heinemann, 1984); Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Chap. I, II, XI and XII; Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*.

> A different, less dramatic, but step-by-step testable critique of the Western emphasis on logos starts from an attack on the abstractions surrounding logos itself, as free of language, as universalist, and as disembodied. It conceives of intersubjective understanding as the telos inscribed into communication in ordinary language, and of the logocentrism of western thought, heightened by the philosophy of consciousness as a systematic *foreshortening* and *distortion* of a potential always already operative in the communicative practice of everyday life, but only selectively exploited.[11]

At the very end of the above-mentioned paper, Habermas links Henrich's position to Kierkegaard.[12] Habermas thus tries to diagnose a paradigm shift by Henrich from philosophy back to metaphysics. By arguing so, Habermas identifies two concepts of a self in Kierkegaard's masterpiece *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), and applies the *first* concept to the model of reflection and its problem of distinguishing a self into a subjective and an objective part.[13] He argues that a self in the sense of a performative action is unable to fill the gap: "The subject that relates itself to itself cognitively comes across the self, which it grasps as an object, under this category as something already derived, and not as it-itself in its originality, as the author of spontaneous self-relation."[14] This concept of a self is based on two premises: The first one claims that a self is only accessible within self-consciousness. By arguing that way, "it is impossible to go behind this self-relation in reflection", because "the self of subjectivity is only the relation that relates itself to itself."[15] This insight leads immediately to the second one, which adds that such a self "must either have posited itself or have been posited by something else."[16] By choosing the first path, you will end in an infinite regress. Therefore Henrich hand in hand with Kierkegaard tries the second one and grounds the self in an "other":

> This other that precedes the self of self-consciousness is, for Kierkegaard, the Christian God of Redemption, while for Henrich it is the prereflexively

11 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 311.

12 This is remarkable, because Henrich himself hardly referred to Kierkgaard before and never linked Kierkegaard to the tradition of romantic philosophy. Cf. Klaus Viertbauer, *Gott am Grund des Bewusstseins?* (Pustet, 2017), 15-21.

13 Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Penguin, 1989), 43 f.

14 Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 24: "Kierkegaard adopted this problem from Fichte by way of Schelling and made it into the starting point for a meditation that propels whoever existentially reflects upon himself into the 'Sickness unto Death.'"

15 Ibid., 25.

16 Ibid.

> familiar anonym of conscious life, which is open to Buddhistic as well as Platonistic interpretations. […] Both interpretations refer to a religious dimension and thereby to a language that may be derived from the old metaphysics but also transcends the modern position of consciousness.[17]

On the one hand, as the quote indicates, Habermas refuses any metaphysical postulates, but, on the other hand, he tries to reinterpret the "other" through "language":

> If, namely, the self is part of a relation-to-self that is performatively established when the speaker takes up the second-person perspective of a hearer toward the speaker, then this self is not introduced as an object, as it is in a relation of reflection, but as a subject that forms itself through participation in linguistic interaction and expresses itself in the capacity for speech and action. […] Prelinguistic subjectivity does not need to precede the relations-to-self that are posited through the structure of linguistic intersubjectivity and that intersect with the reciprocal relations of Ego, Alter, and Neuter because everything that earns the name of subjectivity, even if it is a being-familiar-with-oneself, no matter how preliminary, is indebted to the unrelentingly individuating force possessed by the linguistic medium of formative processes-which do not let up as long as communicative action is engaged in at all.[18]

In line with Henrich and Kierkegaard, Habermas chooses the second way of grounding a self in an "other"; but in contrast to them, he identifies the "other" neither with "God", nor with a "prereflexively familiar anonym of conscious life", but with "language".

II.3 An intensification: How to deal with unborn life?

But what is to be done if a person is not yet born and therefore unable to participate in social contexts in order to develop an identity in the interactive process of socialization? Against this backdrop, Habermas focuses on the discussion about genetic engineering and liberal eugenics, which reaches Germany at the end of the 1990ies.[19] A heavy debate in the German *Bundestag* aims to overthrow the *Embryonenschutzgesetz* and to legalize pre-implantation diagnostics.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Of course, there is not enough space left, to refer in a serious sense to the fine-grained and overwhelming discussion in the Anglo-Saxon world. Cf. Ronald Dworkin, *Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom* (Vintage Books, 1994); Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (Picador, 2003), Chap. 5; Michael J. Sandel, *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic*

The political discussion is framed by an intellectual dispute in the *Feuilletons* of the leading newspapers, like *Die Zeit*[20] or the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*[21]. In this discussion, Jürgen Habermas plays a significant role: On the one hand, Habermas truly fights for keeping the *Embryonenschutzgesetz* as a kind of protection for unborn life. On the other hand, he cannot do this by referring to the embryo's state of consciousness like others do, without making a paradigm shift back to metaphysical thinking and thereby contradicting himself. But, so Habermas's strong conviction, a human being is an end in itself, and this means much more than just being a bearer of certain qualities, e.g. self-consciousness or intelligence: "How we deal with human life before birth […] touches on our self-understanding as members of the species. And this self-understanding as members of the species is closely interwoven with our self-understanding as moral persons."[22] Against this backdrop, Habermas focuses on the relation between the unborn life and its parents. In this relation, birth marks an important caesura: "For a person to be himself, a point of reference is required which go back beyond the lines of tradition and the contexts of interaction which constitute the formation through which personal identity is molded in the course of a life history."[23] Parents or even teachers might initiate a certain interest, like making children learn to play an instrument or do some kind of sport. When grown up, the child has the opportunity to judge for himself if this interest belongs to his identity or not and to dissociate himself from it if he wants to. This opportunity is not given, so Habermas, if the interest is devised prenatally in the form of a genetic enhancement, by which the genome of the child is going to be modified in a way which enables him to do things much better than under ordinary circumstances, e.g. perfect pitch, a muscular physique etc. Therefore Habermas argues:

Engineering (Belknap Press, 2009); Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), Chap. 6 and many others more.

20 Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, "Die kritische Theorie ist Tod: Peter Sloterdijk schreibt an Assheuer und Habermas", *Die Zeit*, no. 37 (1999); Peter Sloterdijk, "Regeln für den Menschenpark", *Die Zeit*, no. 38 (1999); Jürgen Habermas, "Post vom bösen Geist", *Die Zeit*, no. 38 (1999); Manfred Frank, "Geschweife und Geschwefel", *Die Zeit*, no. 39 (1999); Ernst Tugendhat, "Es gibt keine Gene für die Moral", *Die Zeit*, no. 39 (1999).

21 All papers are collected in Christian Geyer, ed., *Biopolitik. Die Positionen* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001); cf. Sigrid Graumann, ed., *Die Genkontroverse* (Herder Verlag, 2001).

22 Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Polity Press, 2003), 66.

23 Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 59.

> A previously unheard-of interpersonal relationship arises when a person makes an irreversible decision about the natural traits of another person. This new type of relationship offends our moral sensibility because it constitutes a foreign body in the legally institutionalized relation of recognition in modern societies. […] When one person makes an irreversible decision that deeply intervenes in another's organic disposition, the fundamental symmetry of responsibility that exists among free and equal persons is restricted.[24]

To solve this problem, Habermas strongly refers to Kierkegaard in his book *The Future of Human Nature* (2002). This also marks a milestone within the discussion about Habermas's Kierkegaard reception. Especially the first essay, entitled "Are There Postmetaphysical Answers to the Question: What is the 'Good Life'?" turns out to be a treasure trove for Habermas's understanding of Kierkegaard. Aforesaid paper consists of three parts, with a focus on Kierkegaard in the second and third sections. There Habermas deals with the question whether there is a postmetaphysical answer to the question of a good life. With respect to Theodor W. Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1951), Habermas is critical of such an answer: "Ethics has now regressed […] and become the 'melancholy science', because it allows, at best, only scattered, aphoristic 'reflections from damaged life.'"[25] Against the backdrop of social changes beginning in the mid of 19th century which go hand in hand with an acceleration of individualization, ethics can no longer provide a theory of the good life. Furthermore, as John Rawls points out, "the 'just society' ought to leave it to individuals to choose how it is that they want to 'spend the time they have for living.'"[26] This development, so Habermas fears, opens the door to a more and more egotist society, in which the law is abused as a weapon to push through one's very own interests against others and the society.[27] This path of argumentation starts from Kant up to modern moral philosophy: "Deontological theories after Kant may be very good at explaining *how* to ground and

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 2. — Allthough in the common discussion "morality" stands for norms, values or principles and "ethics" for a philosophical reflection on them, Habermas separats "ethics" and "morality" in a different manner, so that in many cases "ethics" focuses exclusively on the detailed question of an individual life stage or "good life" and "morality" on the broader question of grounding norms and justice.

27 Cf. Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (Ignatius Press, 2006), 19-52.

apply moral norms; but they still are unable to answer the question of *why* we should be moral *at all*."[28]

In this essay, Habermas refers to Kierkegaard as a counterweight to the banning of the question of the good life from moral philosophy: "Kierkegaard was the first philosopher who answered the basic ethical question regarding the success or failure of one's own life with a postmetaphysical concept of 'being-able-to-be-oneself'."[29] Especially in the confrontation of the aesthetical and ethical life stages in his monograph *Either/Or* (1844), Kierkegaard demonstrates that, in order to regain autonomy as his original freedom, the individual has to pull himself out of the scattered, anonymous life of the aesthetical life stage. Within the ethical life stage, the individual orientates his interests not to pleasure, but to values and norms. This turn from aesthetical to ethical life stage goes along with the shift from freedom of choice to autonomy. According to Habermas, the self of the ethical life stage embodies a basis for a postmetaphysical grounding of the good life:

> Rather, all his attention is on the structure of the ability to be oneself, that is, on the form of an ethical self-reflection and self-choice that is determined by the infinite interest in the success of one's own life-project. With a view toward future possibilities of action, the individual self-critically appropriates the past of her factually given, concretely re-presented life history. Only then does she make herself into a person who speaks for herself, an irreplaceable individual.[30]

The only way to stabilize the self of the ethical life stage, so Habermas's reading of Kierkegaards late work *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), is to ground it in God. This has less to do with a "deficit in *knowledge* but of a corruption of *will*."[31] Habermas identifies the grounding in God a hinge between "an unconditionally demanding morality and care for oneself."[32] The good life as an undespairing state of an authentic being-oneself can only reached by accepting, that the self itself depends on something other. Whereas Kierkegaard connects the other with God in the religious life stage, Habermas tries to connect it with language:

> The linguistic turn permits a deflationary interpretation of the 'wholly other.' As historical and social beings we find ourselves always already in a

28 Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 4. (Italics by K.V.)
29 Ibid., 5.
30 Ibid., 6 f.
31 Ibid., 8.
32 Ibid.

> linguistically structured lifeworld. In the form of communication through which we reach an understanding with one another about something in the world and about ourselves, we encounter a transcending power. […] The *logos* of language embodies the power of the intersubjective, which precedes and grounds the subjectivity of speakers.[33]

In other words: In line with Kierkegaard, Habermas identifies the dependence of the self on the other. But while Kierkegaard interprets it as "God" within the religious life stage, Habermas connects it immediately to "language". Habermas's shift from "God" to "language" is founded in the linguistic turn from metaphysics to philosophy of language:

> The logos of language escapes our control, and yet we are the ones, the subjects capable of speech and action, who reach an understanding with one another in this medium. […] From this perspective, what makes our being-ourselves possible appears more as a transsubjective power than an absolute one.[34]

Like in *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, Habermas makes use of Kierkegaard's modes of being-able-to-be-oneself in a postmetaphyscial sense also in *The Future of Human Nature*. The change from "God" to "language" goes hand in hand with his change from "metaphysics" to "philosophy of language".

II.4. Current results

Summing up, all three — Habermas, Henrich and Kierkegaard — cope with the above-mentioned problems:

Ad i: All three avoid the infinite regress by deducing the link between "I" and "self-consciousness", which constitutes identity, no longer immediately from the "I", but from another authority: "language" (Habermas), "prereflexively familiar anonym of conscious life" (Henrich) or "God" (Kierkegaard).

Ad ii: Henrich and Kierkegaard avoid the "gap of time"-problem by transcending the constellation in a timeless, prereflexive sphere. Habermas, on the other hand, separates the self of a person, following Georg Herbert Mead[35], in an "I" and a "me": While the "me" stands for the objective reflected forms of a self and its socialization in different contexts of life, like family, hobby or work, the "I" stands for the subjective instance which coordinates

33 Ibid., 10 f.

34 Ibid., 11.

35 George H. Mead, *Mind, Self & Society* (Chicago Univ. Press, 2015); — Cf. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Chap. V; Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 149-204.

and assembles them to a person. By this separation of "I" and "me", Habermas is able to ward off the critique.

Ad iii: By joining the second self-model, all three do not encounter the *causa sui* aporia.

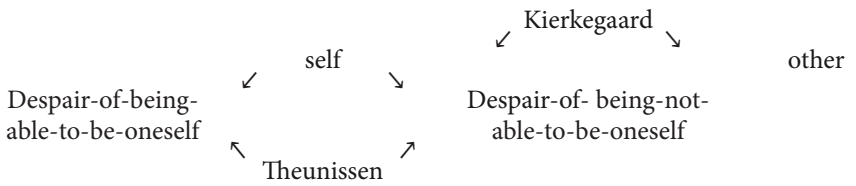
In a nutshell: The difference between Habermas and the metaphysical frameworks of Henrich and Kierkegaard consists in his interpretation of the "other" as "language". By doing so, Habermas combines a secular with a post-metaphysical reading. He opens an originally metaphysical (Henrich) or even religious (Kierkegaard) discussion to social science: It is no longer God or a certain state of consciousness, but the description of the social and communicative interaction between persons that explains the nature of a self.

EXCURSUS: MICHAEL THEUNISSEN'S SECULAR RELECTURE OF KIERKEGAARD

The task of a secular reading of Kierkegaard is first and foremost connected with the late work of the German philosopher Michael Theunissen (1932-2015). Theunissen, who has worked on Kierkegaard since his doctoral thesis *Der Begriff Ernst bei Søren Kierkegaard* (1958), is recognized as an expert on Kierkegaard not only in Germany.[36] After doing studies in the fields of German idealism, social philosophy and philosophical psychology, Theunissen refers again to the Danish mastermind in his late work. But he no longer offers a historical reconstruction. Rather, he is working on a relecture of Kierkegaard in the form of correcting his main premises in order to open his insights for a secular audience.[37] Theunissen's goal consists in a separation of the dialectic of despair and the dialectic of existence between "self" and "other".

36 Cf. Michael Theunissen, *Der Begriff Ernst bei Søren Kierkegaard* (Alber, 1958); Michael Theunissen and Winfried Greve, eds., *Materialien zur Philosophie Søre Kierkegaards* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979).

37 Cf. Michael Theunissen, *Das Selbst auf dem Grund der Verzweiflung* (Anton Hain, 1991); Michael Theunissen, *Der Begriff der Verzweiflung: Korrekturen an Kierkegaard* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991) and especially his detailed discussion Michael Theunissen, "Für einen rationaleren Kierkegaard", with Niels J. Cappelørn, "Am Anfang steht die Verzweiflung des Spießbürgers"; Hermann Deuser, "Grundsätzliches zur Interpretation der Krankheit zum Tode"; Arne Grøn, "Der Bergriff Verzweiflung"; Arne Grøn, "Kierkegaards Phänomenologie"; Alastair Hannay, "Basic Despair in The Sickness Unto Death"; Heiko Schulz, "To Believe is to Be" all collected in the *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* of 1996 or the later critique of Marius G.



According to Theunissen, the dialectic of existence is only reasonable in reference to theological premises. If there is no other — which is only a cipher for God[38] — then the self has to cope with his despair alone. Against this backdrop, Theunissen changes the original question of the relation of a self to the other in how a self has to deal with despair in his daily life. Thereby Theunissen makes use of Kierkegaard's dialectics of despair and tries to synthesize it with his insights of social philosophy to a paradigm of negativism.[39] In his eyes, Kierkegaard provides an analysis of despair which is not only detailed, but also still fruitful for the topical systematic debate today. Although we are confronted with despair in our daily life, we are able to develop an idea how a despairless life has to look like. In contrast to Kierkegaard, Theunissen argues, that we can develop such an idea even without the ideal of "God" or an "other". In his argumentation, Theunissen isolates the dialectics of despair from the Kierkegaardian self-concept in an eclectic way and reimports it in his own theory. Let us face Theunissen's proposal with the three critiques above: (i) the infinite regress, (ii) its timeless character and (iii) the interpretation of the subject as a *causa sui*.

Ad i: In Theunissen's account a self interprets itself by oscillating between the despair-of-being-able-to-be-oneself and the despair-of-being-not-able-to-be-oneself. By doing so, he gets entangled in the regresses and circles of the model of representation: A self relates to itself and thereby to the relation and thereby to the relation of the relation and so on ad infinitum.

Ad ii: Hand in hand with the first critique, a self cannot cope with the timeless character of identity. In every act of the infinite self-reflection a gap

Mjaaland, "Alterität und Textur in Kierkegaards »Krankheit zum Tode«", *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 47, no. 1 (2005).

38 Theunissen brings the proof that Kierkegaard substitutes "God" through "other" in the final version of *The Sickness Unto Death*. Cf. Theunissen, *Das Selbst auf dem Grund der Verzweiflung*, 36.

39 Cf. Axel Honneth, "Unverfügbarkeiten des Dialogs: Zum Lebenswerk von Michael Theunissen", *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 64, no. 1 (2016).

of time appears, which can be interpreted as a *différance* and therefore as an ontological difference. In other words: A self tries to grasp itself in every act of reflection, but fails because the reflecting self (tn-1) is not identical with the reflected self (tn). A closer look shows that the outlined difference of time is an ontological difference, like Derrida's *différance*.

Ad iii: Due to the fact that Theunissen — in opposition to Habermas, Henrich and Kierkegaard — links the self to the first model, he sketches the self as a *causa sui*. There is no other instance on which it depends, so that it has to be its own reason. Against this backdrop, Theunissen's self also is confronted with the questions of how to describe the relation to others and the world.

Summing up, in contrast to Habermas, Henrich and Kierkegaard, Theunissen's account has serious problems to deal with the above-mentioned critiques. Therefore it does not seem to be an alternative for a secular relecture of Kierkegaard.

III. A POSTSECULAR, NOT A METAPHYSICAL TURN

As we have seen, Henrich tries a metaphysic way, Kierkegaard chooses a religious one and Theunissen follows a secular relecture. In this second step I want to demonstrate how Habermas combines a religious with a postmetaphysical reading and how Kierkegaard influences him. Therefore Habermas separates "moral" from "ethical" and links religion to the second instance. In contrast to the mainstream of moral philosophy, Habermas identifies the ethical as a narrow discourse about the question what makes a good life. Thereby he fears, that people more and more lose their motivation for orientating their lives according to moral virtues and principles. He sees the upcoming debates of genetic enhancement, cloning and designer babies at the end of the 1990ies as paradigmatic for a more and more egoistic society.[40] Against this backdrop Habermas intensifies his communication with religious communities, in which he thinks something is conserved which is on the one hand "opaque" for postmetaphysical thinking, but on the other hand neces-

40 A short glance at the ongoing debates on "transhumanism" and "moral enhancement" — which Habermas never directly faces — offer a different picture. Cf. Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2016); Ingmar Person and Julian Savulescu, *Unfit for the Future?* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2014); John Harris, *How to be Good?* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2016).

sary to motivate the members of society to live a moral life. Religion contains a driving force which Habermas labels "an awareness of what is missing".[41] Although Habermas refuses the metaphysical or ontological grounding of religion, he is strongly interested to salvage its "semantic potential" and transform it for postmetaphysical thinking.

III.1 A cooperative venture

In this context, Habermas's Friedenspreisrede *Faith and Knowledge* (2001) is discussed as the turning point from secularization to a so-called "postsecular society".[42] In this paper Habermas formulates three principles, how religious insights can be translated into validity claims:

> First of all, the religious conscience must handle the encounter with other confessions and other religions cognitively (1). Second, it must accede to the authority of science, which holds a social monopoly on knowledge (2). Finally, it must participate in the premises of a constitutional state, which is based on a non-sacred concept of morality (3).[43]

By arguing that way, Habermas finally breaks with the idea of secularization, but still continues with the postmetaphysical line of his argumentation: In the public sphere, religious semantics have to be translated into a secular language, not only by believers, but also by agnostics and atheists. Habermas names this process a "cooperative venture"[44] for both sides — religious and secular people: "Democratically enlightened common sense is not a singularity, but is instead the mental constitution of a public with many different voices."[45] But, as the quote above indicates, even at this stage, Habermas still distinguishes religious insights from secular ones. I refer directly to Habermas's demands:

Ad 1: In order to include religion in the process of building a public common sense, different religions, like Christianity and Islam have to respect and get along with each other in daily life. Thereby their theological claims of absoluteness cannot be an obstacle or a disruptive element for democracy.

41 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Polity Press, 2010), 15-23.

42 Cf. Klaus Viertbauer, "Einleitung", in *Habermas und die Religion*: *Zweite, erweiterte Auflage*, ed. Klaus Viertbauer and Franz Gruber (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2019).

43 Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge (Acceptance Speech for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade 2001)" (2001), 3.

44 Ibid., 5.

45 Ibid.

Against this backdrop they have to find ways how to esteem religious (including agnostic and atheistic) convictions of others.

Ad 2: According to Habermas, there is a strict distinction in the competence of religion and science. Religions have to accept the insights of science and include them in their own worldviews. This demand is immediately connected with Habermas's idea of a postmetaphysical thinking: Worldviews are based solely on the insights of science, like the paradigm of evolution, and cannot be challenged or even interpreted by religious or metaphysical theories.[46] Against this backdrop, Habermas seems to be extremely reserved against the ongoing debates in the field of Philosophy of Mind. This rigid attitude causes serious problems in his debates on free will and its consequences for the responsibility of human action.[47]

Ad 3: The constitutional state embodies the basis and forum to which every instance — both religious and secular — have strictly to refer. In this point Habermas makes clear that the frame of the discourse is set by the secular state and its constitution. In other words: No religious authority can ever question the constitution and has therefore to subordinate its own claims under its demands. Especially this aspect of Habermas triggered a heavy discussion in political philosophy. It revealed, so the critiques, Habermas's implicit prejudice (still affected by the theory of secularization) which is his understanding of religion as a premodern instance.[48]

46 As Julian Nida-Rümelin, *Unaufgeregter Realismus: Eine Streitschrift* (Mentis, 2018), 38 f. fleshes it out, Habermas splits his early view on metaphysic insofar that in his later writings, he no longer connects science to a theory of consensus, but to a paradigm of realism. — Cf. the early critique of Ansgar Beckermann, "Die realistischen Voraussetzungen der Konsenstheorie von J. Habermas", *Zeitschrift für allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 3, no. 1 (1972).

47 Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (MIT Press, 2008).

48 This critique includes the proposals of somewhat different thinkers like Maeve Cooke, Francis Fiorenza or Jonas Jakobsen. — Cf. e.g. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Church of a Community of Interpretation: Political Theology Between Discourse Ethics and Hermeneutical Reconstruction", in *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, ed. Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (Crossroad, 1992) or the papers of Maeve Cooke, "Transcendence in Postmetaphysical Thinking", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 4 (2019) and Jonas Jakobsen, "Moderate Inclusivism and the Conversational Translation", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 4 (2019).

III.2 The role of Kierkegaard

As we have seen, except the first claim, Habermas's demands of the *Friedenspreisrede* are exposed to serious critiques. These critiques object that Habermas is neither able to deal with the topical questions of metaphysics (like free will), nor can he sketch a suitable picture of religions (like Christianity or Islam). Against this backdrop, I want to sum up my paper by showing how Habermas tries to interpret religion as a form of ethics by referring to Kierkegaard.

As we have already mentioned, Habermas connects ethics to the comparatively narrow question of what makes a good life. He sees Kierkegaard's dialectics of existence, especially his explanations in *Either/Or* (1844), as a suitable framework for this. In this masterpiece, Kierkegaard sketches characters who disagree about the principles of a good life. By doing so, Kierkegaard depicts three different forms of life which he labels as an aesthetical, an ethical and a religious existence.[49] The relations of these stages or forms of existence are dialectally structured.

The *aesthetical* existence marks the lowest level of self-understanding. Therein Kierkegaard sketches a self as someone who interprets himself by the values of pleasure and love. Love is understood in a widespread sense. In the first section, entitled "Diapsalmata", love is characterized in form of aphorisms as a mixture of vague feelings like boredom, melancholy, cheerlessness, sadness, or loneliness.[50] The second part of the aesthetical existence sketches a picture of love in form of the awakening of desire against the background of the main characters of Mozart's operas Cherubino (in *Le nozze di Figaro*), Papageno (in *Die Zauberflöte*), and Don Juan (in *Don Giovanni*). According to Kierkegaard these characters are paradigmatic for a more and more intense or reflected form of love. Cherubino marks the lowest level of the awareness

49 In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard lies the focus especially on the difference of an aesthetical and an ethical stage. The religious stage is separated in his Climacus-Writings (one of his pseudonyms) in *Religiousness A* and *Religiousness B*. While *Religiousness A* marks a self which becomes aware of its existential contingency, *Religiousness B* describes a self which has an immediate relation to God — like Abraham, Mary or Jesus.

50 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A fragment of Life* (Penguin, 1992), 39-57: "My reflection on life altogether lacks meaning. I take it some evil spirit has put a pair of spectacles on my nose, one glass of which magnifies to an enormous degree, while the other reduces to the same degree. […] What is to come? What does the future hold? I don't know, I have no idea." (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 46).

of desire. Love is still vague and without any object.[51] Papageno on the second stage finds his concrete object of desire in Papagena and, finally, Don Juan at the third stage does not love a concrete girl, but is attracted by womanhood.[52] In the third section, labeled "The Seducer's Diary", Kierkegaard draws the picture of a Dandy as a counterpart to Don Juan: While Don Juan is regarded as an "extensive seducer", who tries to seduce as many girls as possible, the author of the diary is regarded as an "intensive seducer". His aim consist of seducing a girl to seduce him.[53]

The *ethical* existence is constructed in opposition to the aesthetical. Freedom does not mean freedom of choice in order to expand the range or intensity of one's desires, but to coordinate one's actions autonomously. Autonomy stands for a self-orientation of one's actions according to self-chosen norms. Against this distinction, Habermas focuses on the ethical existence:

> The self which is the aim is not just a personal self, but a social, a civic self. So he has himself as a task for an activity through which, as this determinate personal being, he intervenes in the affairs of life. Here his task is not to mould himself, but to exert an influence, and yet he does at the same time mould himself, for, as I remarked above, the way in which the ethical individual lives is by constantly translating himself from one stage to another. Unless

51 "The sensual awakens, though not to movement but to motionless rest, not to joy and gladness but to deep melancholy. Desire is not yet awake, it is moodily hinted at. In desire there is always the desired which rises out of it and comes to view in a bewildering twilight. […] Desire possesses what will become its object but does so without having desired it, and in that way does not posses it." (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 85).

52 "Desire awakens, and as one always first realizes one has been dreaming at the moment of waking, so here too the dream is over. This arousal in which desire awakens, this tremor, separates desire and its object, gives the desire an object." (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or,* 89); "The contradiction in the first stage lay in the fact that desire could acquire no object, but was in possession of its object without having desired it, and therefore could not reach the point of desiring. In the second stage, the object appears on its multiplicity, but since desire seeks its object in this multiplicity, in a deeper sense it still has no object, it is not yet specified as desire. In *Don Giovanni,* on the other hand, desire is specified absolutely as desire, is connotationally and extensionally the immediate unity of the two preceding stages." (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 93).

53 "Most men enjoy a young girl as they do a glass champagne, in a single frothing moment. […] But here there is more. […] No, when one brings matters to the point where a girl has just one task to accomplish for her freedom, to surrender herself, when she feels her whole bliss depends on that, when she almost begs to submit an d yet is free, the for the first time there is enjoyment, but it always depends on a spiritual influence."(Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 282).

> the individual has originally apprehended himself as a concrete personality in continuity, he will not acquire this later continuity either.[54]

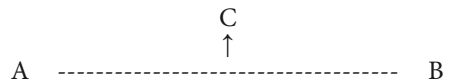
Habermas immediately refers to this civic self when he sketches a self which

> in the social dimension […] can assume responsibility for his or her own actions and can enter into binding commitments with others [...] concern for oneself makes one conscious of the historicity of an existence that is realized in the simultaneously interpenetrating horizons of future and past.55

According to Habermas "such an individual regrets the reproachable aspects of his past life and resolves to continue only in those ways of acting in which he can recognize himself without shame."[56] As the quotation indicates, the aesthetical as well as the ethical point of view are immediately connected with the question how the structure of a self looks like. This question arises in Kierkegaard's book *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849):

> The self is a relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation's relation to itself. A human being is a synthesis [… and] a synthesis is a relation between two terms.[57]

According to Kierkegaard, a relation consists of at least three elements: Two terms (A, B) and a line (C) in between which connects them.



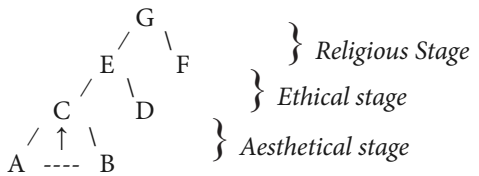
The main question is how C shall be interpreted. There are — as Habermas already mentioned in his discussion with Henrich — two options:

First: If C is interpreted as unconsciousness, then the relation of A-B is dichotomic. In this case the relation of A-B is the relation of A and ¬A. Such a relation is indicated in Kierkegaard's examples of a synthesis like "the infinite and the finite", "the temporal and the eternal", or "freedom and necessity".[58]

Second: If C is interpreted as consciousness, then the relation of A-B is trichotomic. In this case C is "interested" in a double sense: On the one hand, "interest" stands for "being in between" (from the Latin "inter-esse") A and B; on the other hand, it stands for being conscious of its relation to the terms.

54 *Kierkegaard, Either/Or,* 553.
55 Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature*, 6.
56 Ibid., 7.
57 Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 43.
58 Ibid.

Kierkegaard refers to both, the first and second interpretations: The unconscious relation builds the basis of the aesthetical existence like he describes it in the Diapsalmata of *Either/Or.* But, as we have seen, even within the aesthetical stage of existence the self becomes aware and conscious of itself, when desire awakes. According to Kierkegaard, the state and intensity of consciousness becomes more and more fine-grained in moving on from the aesthetical to the ethical to the religious stage of existence.



Kierkegaard describes this in the form of a Hegelian dialectic with its principle of *Aufhebung*. The German noun *Aufhebung* combines the seemingly contradictory meanings of the Latin words *tollere*, *conservare* and *elevare*. Hegel is playing with this ambivalence: The verb "tollere" expresses that in C, A and B are nullified; "conservare", that A and B are conserved; and "elevare", that A and B are reformulated in a broader sense.

III.3 Habermas's reference to the "civic self"

Against this backdrop it is interesting to see that Habermas focuses by no means on the religious, but on the ethical self. This is remarkable, because, on the one hand, the ethical self is connected to the model of representation and cannot cope with the three problems mentioned above. On the other hand, in his foregoing book *Postmetaphysical Thinking,* Habermas offers a postmetaphysical reading of the religious self. Therein Habermas links the "other" to "language" and shows how a postmetaphysical interpretation of the self can look like. How can these two divergent arguments be brought in line with each other? In some foregoing papers, I argued that Habermas is making a category error and mixes up the ethical with the religious existence — which is maybe caused by a too superficial reading of Kierkegaard.[59]

59 Klaus Viertbauer, "Monophone Polyphonie? Kritische Anmerkungen zu Jürgen Habermas' Variation des Religiösen", in *Religion in postsäkularer Gesellschaft*: *Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven*, ed. Franz Gmainer-Pranzl and Sigrid Rettenbacher (Peter Lang, 2013); Klaus Viertbauer, "Authentizität und Selbst-Bestimmung: Die Aporetik des 'ethischen Selbst' bei Habermas mit einem Seitenblick auf Taylor", in *Authentizität — Modewort, Leitbild, Konzept*: *Theologische und*

In this paper, I want to go a step further and state my original hypothesis more precisely: The difference is not between ethical and religious existence, but within the religious stage, namely between Religiousness A and B. In my opinion, Habermas chooses the civic self only because he identifies the religious self with Religiousness B.

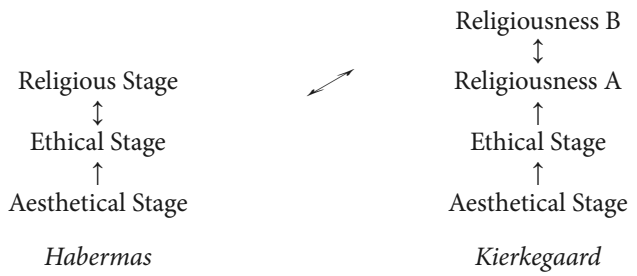
But what exactly is the difference between Religiousness A and B? There are two definitions which are not absolutely congruent. The first definition Kierkegaard develops in his book *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), and the second he works out in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1846). According to the first book, Religiousness A stands for a general or universal religious feeling which is open for interpretation by all religions and worldviews. It describes a human being who becomes aware of his or her existential contingency and realizes that his existence appeals to an indefinite instance of an "other". Religiousness B, by contrast, refers to Christianity as the ultimate form of religion. In his *Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard keeps the definition of Religiousness A, but narrows Religiousness B down to a fideistic paradigm of faith. Therein the relation of a believer and God is described as immediate which is only possible for religious figures like Abraham (so Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*), Mary or Jesus (so in *Philosophical Fragments*).[60] Against this backdrop,

humanwissenschaftliche Erkundungen zu einer schillernden Kategorie, ed. Ansgar Kreutzer and Christoph Niemand (Pustet, 2016); Klaus Viertbauer, "Zwischen Natur und Sozialisierung: Jürgen Habermas und die Begründung des moralischen Status des Embryos", in *Jahrbuch für Praktische Philosophie in globaler Perspektive 2*, (Alber, 2018); Klaus Viertbauer, "Ist Religion Opak? Zu einer missverständlichen Formulierung von Jürgen Habermas", *Cahiers d'Études Germaniques*, no. 74 (2018); Klaus Viertbauer, "Jürgen Habermas und der Versuch, den moralischen Status des Embryos diskursethisch zu begründen", in *Habermas und die Religion*, ed. Klaus Viertbauer and Franz Gruber (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2019).

60 Of course, Kierkegaard's account is faced with many theological problems, like the rising questions of religious fundamentalism or the ontological difference between Abraham and Mary — on the one hand — and Jesus as God — on the other. Cf. Adam T. Diderichsen, "On the Teleological Suspense of the Ethical", *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 7 (2002); Elmer H. Duncan, "Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension of the Ethical: A Study of Exception-Cases", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 1, no. 4 (1963); Michael Olesen, "The Climacean Alphabet: Reflxions on Religiousness A and B from the Perspective of Edifying", *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 10 (2005); Thomas Pepper, "Abraham: Who Could Possibly Understand Him?", *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 1 (1996); Ettore Rocca, "If Abraham is not a Human Being", *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 7 (2002); Brian Söderquist, "The Religious 'Suspension of the Ethical' and the Ironic 'Suspension of the Ethical': The Problem of Actuality in Fear and Treamblin", *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 7 (2002).

Religiousness B is not an existential stage, but a regulative ideal which demonstrates the power of faith.[61]

As it appears, Habermas is not aware of the distinction of Religiousness A and B and for this reason identifies the religious existence directly with Religiousness B. This leads to an asymmetry between Kierkegaard's dialectic of existence and Habermas's reading of it.



Owing to the fact that Habermas is not aware of Religiousness A, he immediately refers religious speech to the fideistic paradigm of Religiousness B. Against this backdrop religion always has a strong fideistic structure for Habermas. He marks the relation between a secular discourse (independent whether from an aesthetical or ethical point of view) and a religious one as "opaque" and labels this as a form of "dialectic".[62] It is obvious that this "dialectic" can no longer the dialectic of *Aufhebung* which integrates the aesthetical and ethical stage into a religious one. Furthermore Habermas postulates — for the ontological discussion — an insuperably dualistic basis of the relation between faith and reason:

> If we want to avoid the latter two presuppositions must be fulfilled: the religious side must accept the authority of natural reason as the fallible results of the institutionalized sciences and the basic principles of universalistic egalitarianism in law and morality. Conversely, secular reason may not set itself up as the judge concerning truths of faith, even though in the end it can accept as reasonable only what it can translate into its own, in principle universally accessible, discourse.[63]

Habermas's idea of a translation refers exclusively to the subordinated epistemic discussion which is embedded in the ontological framework. In this

61 According to the doctrine of original sin, mankind only can reach Religiousness A and admire the faith of such figures like Abraham or Mary.

62 Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing*, 15.

63 Ibid., 16.

sense, "secularization functions less as a *filter* separating out the contents of traditions", so Habermas, "than as a *transformer* which redirects the flow of tradition."[64] By arguing so, Habermas connects every form of religion to Religiousness B, which is regarded as fideistic.

IV. CONCLUSION

Habermas draws a fideistic picture of religion. In my paper, I argued that Kierkegaard plays an important role in this process: On the one hand, Kierkegaard offers a postidealistic account of self-consciousness that is able to cope with the problems of modernity (2.1) and even genetic enhancement (2.3); on the other hand, Kierkegaard's dialectic is suitable to overcome Habermas's difference of moral and ethics as well as to deal with the question of a good life (3.2). But, with all due respect to Habermas, he oversimplifies Kierkegaard's account, by reducing religion to Religiousness B. Against this backdrop we have seen that Habermas's does not refer to Kierkegaard's religious, but to the civic self. Thereby Habermas's understanding of religion as fideistic becomes apparent. He still thinks of religion as a premodern cult or rite. If Habermas becomes aware of Kierkegaard's Religiousness A, so my thesis, he has to reformulate his idea of religion completely.

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64 Ibid., 17.

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