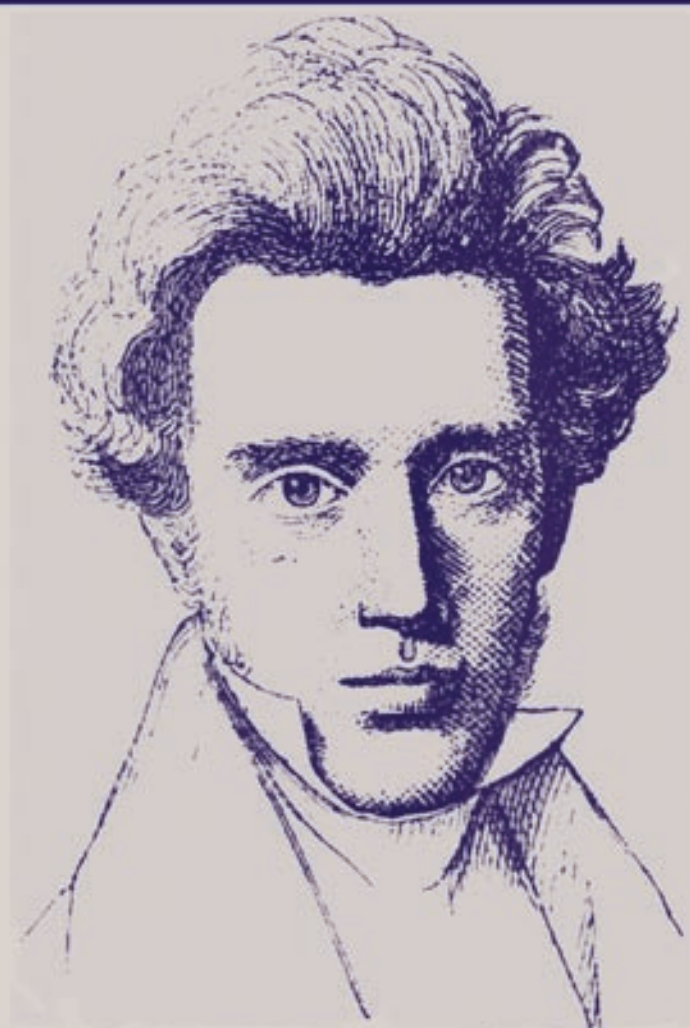


# KIERKEGAARD's *PHILOSOPHY of BECOMING*



MOVEMENTS and POSITIONS

*Clare Carlisle*

# Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming

SUNY Series in Theology and Continental Thought

Douglas L. Donkel, editor

# Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Becoming

*Movements and Positions*



CLARE CARLISLE

*State University of New York Press*

For Jemima



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I wasn't sorry to see something move, it was a change from all those motionless existences which watched me like staring eyes. I said to myself, as I followed the swaying of the branches: "Movements never quite exist, they are transitions, intermediaries between two existences, unaccented beats." I got ready to see them come out of nothingness, gradually ripen, blossom: at last I was going to surprise existences in the process of being born.

☺ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*



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## Introduction



### The Place and the Path

**M**ovements and Positions first began, and now begins again, with questions about inwardness. This is an essential category for Kierkegaard: “in inwardness” qualifies many of his descriptions of personal, existential truth or authenticity, and applies specifically to the sphere of religious faith. “In a spiritual sense, the place and the path are within a man, and just as the place is the blessed state of the striving soul, so the path is the striving soul’s continual transformation.”<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of “the task of becoming a Christian” invoked by Kierkegaard’s writing, inwardness is, it seems, the most important part of a human being.

So I started to wonder, *what is inwardness?* What kind of place is it, and where does its path lead to? What exactly happens there, and how? If we could ‘get inside’ and explore inwardness, what would it look like? These are not easy questions, because one of the most important features of Kierkegaardian inwardness is its privacy—its secrecy, its incommunicability, its solitude. “True inwardness demands absolutely no outward sign.”<sup>2</sup> Inwardness is where the individual relates to God; it is the hidden inner sanctum of the self where the truth of Christianity is appropriated. For Kierkegaard, this religious idea of inwardness also has profound philosophical significance, as opposing Hegel’s claim that truth involves a process of externalization—as opposing, in short, the theory of mediation.

Does the very notion of inwardness imply that we can understand it only negatively—as distinct from all external things; as inaccessible through

sensation, reflection or language; as inarticulate subjectivity? If so, there seems to be a danger that at the heart of Kierkegaard's interpretation of human existence lies a kind of philosophical black hole, empty of meaning and unyielding to our enquiries about the 'how' of Christian faith. It is certainly true that Kierkegaard places inwardness in some sense *beyond* reason—and many readers do, indeed, dismiss him on the grounds of his "irrationalism." As it turns out, what follows is an attempt to illuminate inwardness; to uncover the processes of its articulation through Kierkegaard's writing; and to find form or structure—or even logic—in this expression. I have discovered that *inwardness is a kind of movement*: a movement that opposes philosophical thinking, but which, nevertheless, has its own coherence and integrity.

I first came to the question of movement when I was trying to make sense of Kierkegaard's opposition to Hegel's account of the relationship between "the internal" and "the external." While considering the reasons for Kierkegaard's vehement and sustained attack on Hegel, I was drawn to one particularly intriguing criticism: the suggestion that *there is no movement in Hegel's philosophy*.<sup>3</sup> What, I wondered, could Kierkegaard mean by this? What kind of movement might be expected of a philosophy—and why is this important?

Reading Kierkegaard's *Repetition* with these questions in mind, I soon began to see movements everywhere. *Repetition* starts with a reference to a debate among ancient Greek philosophers about the possibility of motion and then introduces the idea of repetition as a movement that opposes the Platonic doctrine of recollection. In this text, movement is not only a subject for philosophical discussion (a discussion that includes explicit criticism of Hegelian mediation), but is also employed in a more literary way to describe different forms of consciousness and the transitions between them. In *Fear and Trembling*, again, Kierkegaard speaks of faith as a "leap," and tells the story of Abraham's journey to illustrate the "double movement" of resignation and faith. What, then, is the connection between these metaphors of movement and the suggestion that there is no movement in Hegel's philosophy? What does movement signify for Kierkegaard, and where—and how—do his movements take place? Strangely enough, these questions lead back to my enquiry about the meaning of inwardness: Kierkegaardian movement expresses intensification, and this dynamic intensity turns out to be synonymous with inwardness. Man's inner place is "the blessed state of the striving soul," and his path is this soul's "continual transformation." If inwardness is not really a "place" at all (since it is opposed precisely to anything extended), but a movement, then exploring the

theme of movement will reveal something of the hidden interiority that constitutes, for Kierkegaard, the sphere of “becoming a Christian.” What follows is an attempt to address the question, *what is the significance of movement in Kierkegaard’s writing?*



In a way, it is not at all surprising to find metaphors of movement in Kierkegaard’s texts, for the idea of an individual’s relationship to God as a kind of inward journey or pilgrimage has prevailed throughout the Christian tradition. Augustine, for example, begins his *Confessions* by proclaiming that “Our hearts, O Lord, are restless until they find their rest in you.” Furthermore, the historical consciousness that infused philosophical and theological thinking at the beginning of the nineteenth century drew attention to the way in which the truth is *in process*; to the way in which truth is affected—and perhaps even *effected*—by time. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, published in 1807 (six years before Kierkegaard was born), describes the dialectical development and expression of collective self-consciousness, the “Absolute Spirit.” So when Kierkegaard writes about “the stages on life’s way” this echoes a metaphor running through both the Christian tradition and the most recent philosophy.

The “existentialist” perspective that Kierkegaard brings to the spheres of philosophy and faith accentuates the priority of becoming over being: the priority of freedom and action (“the ethical”) over reflection and knowledge (“the aesthetic”). “Ethics does not have the medium of *being* but the medium of *becoming*.”<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard is profoundly influenced by Hegel’s emphasis on temporality as the form of truth, but he insists that this is most significant from the point of view of the particular individual’s self-consciousness, rather than the universal consciousness of Absolute Spirit. “I live in time. An existing individual is himself in a process of becoming,” insists the pseudonym Johannes Climacus.<sup>5</sup>

Nowhere is this process of becoming more important to Kierkegaard than in the sphere of Christian faith. For Kierkegaard, indeed, Christianity only has truth as a way of living in relationship to God, as the individual’s subjective faith. He speaks not of *being* a Christian, but of *becoming* a Christian. Given that questions about becoming have, at least since their articulation by ancient Greek philosophers, led to questions about motion and change, we might expect Kierkegaard to be interested in movement.

In Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* movement is thematized in a much more complete way than in texts such as Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*,



Augustine's *Confessions*, or Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In *Repetition*—one of three quite astonishing pseudonymous works which, published in 1843, mark the beginning of Kierkegaard's authorship—movement is significant at every level of the text. This book introduces itself as concerned with a kind of movement called repetition, which is supposed to constitute a new philosophical category. Historically, in raising the question of motion it addresses itself to ancient Greek metaphysics (in particular to Aristotle) and to Hegelian philosophy, and also to more recent debates about Aristotle and Hegel among Kierkegaard's contemporaries. On a more poetic level, the theme of movement (and stasis) is expressed through the text's metaphors, characters, and dramatic structure. The communicative techniques of Kierkegaard's writing—that is, the way in which he addresses his readers and seeks to affect them—are again concerned with certain kinds of movement. From a biographical perspective, too, movement emerges as having a personal significance for Kierkegaard: metaphors of movement and questions about motion pervade his journals during the early 1840s, often in the context of reflections on love, on studying philosophy, or on becoming a Christian. Kierkegaard's grasp of his own inner life *in terms of the question of motion* helps to illuminate his personal relationship to his published writings.

Kierkegaard's interest in movement reflects his ambivalent attitude toward philosophy. He opposes existential becoming to intellectual reflection, but in raising questions of motion he steps into an ongoing philosophical debate that is rooted in the Greek origins of metaphysics. This means that in order to understand the significance of the theme of movement that recurs throughout Kierkegaard's work, we must first consider why and how movement became a question for philosophy. As it turns out, the two thinkers who are most pivotal within the tradition opened up by this question are also those philosophers who influenced Kierkegaard most strongly: Aristotle and Hegel.

I have divided *Movements and Positions* into three parts that can broadly be described as "History," "Commentary," and "Analysis." The three chapters in part 1 provide the historical, philosophical, and biographical background that a proper understanding of the theme of movement in the 1843 texts requires. Chapter 1 considers how movement first became a question for philosophy, exploring pre-Socratic debates about motion before discussing in some detail the concepts that were created by Aristotle in order to make sense of becoming. Chapter 2 traces the development of the philosophical question of movement after Aristotle, racing very selectively through medieval, early modern, and enlightenment thought to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Here we pause to consider more carefully

the impact of Hegel's dynamic logic. In chapter 3 the historical focus is narrowed to Denmark in the 1830s, when Kierkegaard was studying philosophy and theology at the University of Copenhagen—an experience that affected him emotionally, even spiritually, as well as intellectually, for he often complained of the stasis and incapacity of academic life. During this period several of Kierkegaard's teachers and acquaintances were engaged in debates about Hegel's principle of mediation and Aristotelian logic, and recently translated contributions to these debates help to illuminate the significance of movement in Kierkegaard's writing.

Because addressing our question involves considering the various aspects of the theme of movement, and the ways in which they cohere, quite a substantial proportion of this book is devoted to close readings of particular texts. The historical and biographical perspectives illuminated by the question of motion have encouraged me to focus on the year 1843—for this enables us to grasp how Kierkegaard's authorship develops in response to both academic and personal concerns with movement. Concentrating on the 1843 texts also accentuates the way in which *Either/Or*, *Repetition*, and *Fear and Trembling* form a trilogy connected by the theme of movement, and by a preoccupation with “the task of becoming a Christian” which on the whole remains implicit. In part 2, chapters 4, 5, and 6 present readings of these three texts, and in each case Kierkegaard's writing is approached primarily as literature rather than as philosophy or theology. This helps to maintain an openness to the texts which, in the end, affords a deeper appreciation of the religious and philosophical questions that they raise.

Questions, metaphors, and dramatizations of movement continue to resonate in Kierkegaard's writing after 1843, so that the commentaries in part 2 illuminate the variations on the theme of movement that appear in subsequent texts, and the research presented in part 1 provides a context for the authorship as a whole. This allows us to return, in part 3, to the notion of inwardness with new insight into its coherence, its truth, and its power as the reciprocal movement of divine grace and finite love. The movements uncovered in Kierkegaard's writing at once subvert philosophy's traditional project of knowledge and create a new metaphysics of the heart. The inward essence that empowers beings—the ‘thing-in-itself’ that Hegel had expelled from thought—is rediscovered by Kierkegaard in the intensive and yet relational movement of spiritual passion. As Deleuze suggests, Kierkegaard's project is “to put metaphysics in motion, in action”—and this movement has since been repeated, in very diverse ways, by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Deleuze himself.

The aim of this book is, above all, to present a coherent interpretation of the 1843 texts, informed by their intellectual context, that brings clarity to Kierkegaard's enigmatic and often difficult authorship. Focusing on the theme of movement illuminates many of the questions raised by this authorship: questions about Kierkegaard's relationship to the philosophical tradition and to philosophical thinking in general; about the meaning of the famous claim that "subjectivity is truth"; about the "how" of Christian faith; about the polemical and edifying intentions of Kierkegaard's writing—for as existing individuals, we are invited to think about movement in order to encounter ourselves in a new way, according to a new mode of valuation, a new form of truth.