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ABSTRACT
In this article, I argue that Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Socrates’ daimonion in The Concept of Irony should be read in light of his notion of the demonic in The Concept of Anxiety, and vice versa. Whereas the first should primarily be seen as an exemplification of philosophical transcendental consciousness, the second assumes a more strictly ‘moral’ connotation (‘anxiety about the good’). If the notion of the demonic in The Concept of Anxiety draws upon the Socratic daimonion in The Concept of Irony, this will have implications for philosophy and science in so far as they take a transcendental consciousness for granted. However, Kierkegaard’s continued reference to, if not identification with, Socrates, prevents us from immobilising Kierkegaard’s ‘own’ philosophy, as though the Socratic position can ever be definitively overcome. The ‘enclosed reserve’ of the demonic is rather philosophy’s ‘sw e akspot’.

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Introduction
In his famous dissertation, The Concept of Irony (1841), Kierkegaard offers a highly original, promising interpretation of Socrates. This interpretation turns out to lay the basis not only for his subsequent philosophy but even for what would later be called ‘existentialism’. Kierkegaard develops his Socrates interpretation with continual, yet critical reference to Hegel’s thinking. To both Kierkegaard and Hegel, the figure of ‘Socrates’ represents a decisive position that demarcates a philosophical point of no return. Hegel highlights Socrates’ stance as a transition from self-consciousness to reason (Vernunft). Kierkegaard, while not rejecting this Hegelian view, emphasises that already Hegel himself had pointed out Socrates’ stagnation. For, so Hegel had claimed, Socrates does not put forward a political philosophy and continues to falter at the level of sole individuality, thereby impeding the self-unfolding of the Spirit. What Hegel ultimately takes to be a limitation, though, becomes essential to Kierkegaard. Socrates’ lingering in a position of subjectivity – finally overcome in the history of philosophy, according to Hegel – is decisive for Kierkegaard. Being-an-individual does not exemplify an irreversible passage to civil society; it is philosophy’s nec plus ultra.1

Since Antiquity there has been much speculation about Socrates’ daimonion, the mysterious warning voice preventing Socrates from what he was on the verge of doing; from Plutarchus and Apollodorus onward, until Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Carl du Prel,2 philosophers have tried to make sense of this remarkable phenomenon. I have not even...
mentioned contemporary scholarly research on the Socratic daimonion, which likewise greatly differs in its interpretations. While the relation between Kierkegaard and Socrates is prominent in the literature, no research has been done on Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Socrates’ daimonion. I believe the daimonion is crucial for understanding what Kierkegaard calls ‘subjectivity’. Whereas Hegel had denied the daimonion any *philosophical* relevance (for being purely private), to Kierkegaard it becomes something essential, something decisive for the Socratic philosophical position as such. The daimonion, in Kierkegaard, represents the major impediment for making a *leap*. It keeps the subject enclosed within itself. In this article, I want to argue that for Kierkegaard the daimonion exemplifies transcendental consciousness. The latter, while being Idealistic philosophy’s vantage point, in the eyes of Kierkegaard entails the disease of a de-historicised and de-realised human subjectivity. It will not be my aim in this article to *justify* Kierkegaard’s critique of transcendental consciousness; the notion itself rather enables identifying vulnerable spots in the philosophies of, e.g. Descartes, Kant, Fichte, and perhaps even Schelling and Hegel. Introduced by Kant, the term ‘transcendental’ refers to a supposedly *pure*, i.e. non-empirical, condition of possibility of contents of consciousness, whether perceptive or reflective. Hegel at least attempted to reconnect transcendental consciousness to empirical reality, yet in a way that left part of it unaffected. Kierkegaard’s philosophical posterity (Heidegger, Sartre, Marcel) explicitly endorsed the critique of transcendental consciousness, thereby implicitly drawing on the early Kierkegaardian analyses of the Socratic daimonion. Although ‘transcendental consciousness’ is not a term that infallibly always belongs to this or that philosophy, it can be safely assumed that what it stands for represents a relentless urge of Modern philosophy at large, both in its idealist-rationalist and in its empiricist-positivist versions: the urge to free itself from concrete self-experience. More clearly than Kierkegaard himself was able to do, post-Kierkegaardian vitalist or existentialist philosophers, especially Dilthey and Marcel, have explicitly addressed and criticised this urge as unrealistic and falsifying. Marcel, for example, complained that ‘the transcendental Ego was a monster, or at least a fiction’. Charles Taylor’s analysis of Modernity (in his magnum opus *Sources of the Self*) greatly draws on Kierkegaard.

In support of my claim that Socrates’ daimonion represents transcendental consciousness, I will resort to reading Kierkegaard’s interpretation in light of the category of the ‘demonic’ in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844). In this book, the demonic largely functions in the same way as Socrates’ daimonion in *The Concept of Irony*: it keeps the subject enclosed in itself. Kierkegaard defines it as *det Indesludede*, translated by Reidar Thomte as ‘enclosing reserve’. Separated by only three years, the two *concept*-books (Begrebet *Angest*, Begrebet *Ironi*) taken as my reference points here turn around the same central topic: enclosure, inner reserve, isolation. If, unlike the famous ‘three stages’ (aesthetic, ethical, religious), ‘the demonic’ is not assigned a systematic place in Kierkegaard’s thinking – as Manuela Hackel argues in a beautiful article –, this may well be due to the fact that it represents no positive, substantial way of living; rather, it is negativity itself.

**Concept of Irony**

The two topics that determined Kierkegaard’s thesis subject – irony and genius in Socrates – had previously been put on the Romantic agenda, by thinkers as Schlegel,
Tieck, and Hamann. ‘Philosophy’, Schlegel had stated in the 42nd of his Critical Fragments (1797), ‘is the true home of irony’ (Die Philosophie ist die eigentliche Heimat der Ironie). The ideological background of both topics was the notion of ‘infinity’, their supposed theoretical condition of possibility. Infinity unsettles or deconstructs finitude, e.g., finite statements. It is of note that, well before and coeval with Hegel, the Romantic tradition had already developed the motifs with which Hegelian thinking would posthumously be criticised. 

Without adopting all of its premises, Kierkegaard’s Hegel critique and Socrates reception are largely indebted to Romanticism. Somehow, the figure of Socrates is central in Kierkegaard’s confrontation with Hegel. Overcoming Hegel, to Kierkegaard, requires winning the battle about Socrates. What according to Hegel is Socrates’ weakness might not only be his essence but even the essence of philosophy. The core of Socrates’ performance, Kierkegaard affirms, regards his irreducible individuality, his reticence in advancing towards the universal (for example, in making absolute knowledge claims), his inexorable liminality. The renowned Socratic irony is crucial in testifying to this liminality, or, as Kierkegaard would put it, to ‘finitude’. Rather than being just a rhetorical trick that only adorns the Socratic argument, as Hegel had suggested, irony is of key importance. To refer to a 20th Century example that not only illumines but also underlines the modern-day relevance of Kierkegaard’s Socrates, I would like to mention Robert Musil’s Mann ohne Eigenschaften, Ulrich.

My point here is that a discussion of the daimonion – ‘the abstract category of inwardness (den abstrakte Inderligheds Bestemmelse (det Dæmoniske))’ (CI 168) – cannot be omitted when addressing the philosophical impact of irony. Though perhaps not in terms of page numbers, the topic of the daimonion does undeniably play a central role in The Concept of Irony. Placed at the very heart of the entire book (i.e., in Part I subsection ii), the daimonion subsections are presented in terms of irony’s actualisation. While the first subsection (i) of the actualisation part immediately addresses the daimonion, the corresponding subsection (ii) only does so indirectly; it pays attention to the two famous accusations brought against Socrates. But, as is well-known, the first of these two accusations directly regarded the daimonion (‘Socrates disrespectes the city’s gods by introducing new ones’). In his assessment of this accusation, Kierkegaard notes that it was legal, therewith not only partly subscribing to Hegel (who had even claimed that it was both legal and legitimate or justified), but also emphasising once more the key role the daimonion plays in the discussion of irony. From Kierkegaard’s framing of the first accusation we might infer that, for Kierkegaard, the daimonion (insofar as it was a divine gift) is related to Socratic irony: ‘he [Socrates] relished the joy of irony to its fullest [da nød han Ironiens Glede i fulde Maal], relished it doubly, because he felt himself divinely authorized [bemyndiget, “mouthed”], was convinced of his calling [følte sig i sit Kald].’ (CI, 175) God (Apollo) provides Socrates with the joy or enjoyment of using irony. Obviously, ‘God’ is not identical with the ‘daimonion’, but since God’s gifts to Socrates imply irony, the divinely ordained daimonion contributes to his irony. Below, I will come back to the problem of the daimonion’s internal or external origin. I will try to show that Kierkegaard’s claim as to its external origin finally underscores a growing inner awareness of freedom – which does not deny but rather ‘resituates’ the external.
Kierkegaard’s reading of Socrates will not only enable Kierkegaard to rebut Hegelianism ultimately and to gradually put forward his philosophical key terms (existence, inwardness, truth, moment, irony, etc.). First and foremost, it allows him to investigate his own lifelong affinity with the personality of Socrates. This affinity does not exempt Socrates from critique, as will become clear in Kierkegaard’s assessment of the daimonion. But since Kierkegaard did not so much develop a full-blown philosophy as perspectival viewpoints, his critique of Socrates can partly be taken as a self-critique. What is more, to the extent that the Socratic position (inasmuch as affected by the daimonion) characterises tendencies in Modern Idealistic philosophy (cf Musil’s Ulrich!), Kierkegaard’s Socrates criticism concerns the philosophy of his own time.

**Socrates’ daimonion**

Let us now take a closer look at Kierkegaard’s interpretation, in *The Concept of Irony*, of the daimonion itself. The subsection header of Part Lii (‘The Actualization of the View’) is entitled ‘The Daimon of Socrates’ (Socrates’ Demon). Drawing on a commentary by Friedrich Ast (*Platon’s Leben und Schriften*, Leipzig 1816) Kierkegaard reminds us that the Greek το δαίμονιον is neither an adjective nor a substantive. Kierkegaard’s English translators Howard and Edna Hong, therefore, render *det Dæmoniske* with ‘the demonian’. In my view, this rendition authorises the connection I will be making in this article between the ‘daimonion’ (in *The Concept of Irony*) and the ‘demonic’ (in *The Concept of Anxiety*). The Danish term used in the latter context is equally *det Dæmoniske*. Translations tend to ignore or overlook this.

Kierkegaard’s observation, based on Socrates’ apparent use of a neologism (το δαίμονιον, δαίμονιον τι), is as follows: ‘The first thing to note, then, is that this word denotes something abstract (noget Abstract), something divine, something that precisely in its abstraction (Abstraction) is above definition (over enhver Bestemmelse), is unutterable and indescribable, since it allows no vocalization.’ (CI 158) It is not my aim here to show whether Kierkegaard is justified in his reading. I only want to indicate that grounding the daimonion’s abstract nature on its apparent *unnameability* may offer a strong yet not a cogent argument (as something unnameable need not be abstract itself).

It is pivotal in Kierkegaard’s reading that anything about the daimonion is abstract (abstract). The first characteristic he mentions is immediately inferred from the Platonic and Xenophontic sources. As appears from these sources, in Kierkegaard’s understanding, the Socratic daimonion is a wordless voice that ‘functions altogether instinctively’ *(virker ganske instinctagtigt)*. (CI 158) Weighing Plato’s against Xenophon’s account – the first of which insists on the daimonion’s purely negative (i.e., warning) nature whereas the second believes it was positive, prompting, commanding, etc., as well – Kierkegaard sides with Plato. This is confirmed by his remarkably concise dismissal of Friedrich Ast who, following Xenophon, finds a purely negative interpretation of the daimonion simply unbelievable *(unglaublich)*: ‘But that is Ast’s problem’, Kierkegaard drily comments. (CI 159) As if Ast, just by being unable to believe that a purely negative phenomenon can manifest itself, is himself unable to sustain the negative and in addition to that, to comprehend. Neither Xenophon nor Ast is a match for Socrates, Kierkegaard seems to be implying. One could criticise Kierkegaard’s argument here for being *ad hominem*. Instead, I believe that, for all
its succinctness, it is truly philosophical; it invites the reader to comprehend what is said before treating it as a mere object of research.19

“As long as the difficulty of the daimonian in Socrates is dealt with separately, as long as it is considered from the outside (udvendig), it naturally remains inexplicable […]; but if one considers it from the inside (indenfra), then that which appears as an insurmountable barrier (uoverstigelig Skranke) proves to be a necessary boundary (nødvendig Grændse) that stops the rapid flight of the eye and thereby of thought, forces it back from the periphery to the center, and thereby to comprehend (og derved til at begribe).” (161)

In so far as this remark tacitly assumes that Kierkegaard himself is capable of comprehending Socrates’ daimonion, this does not necessarily make his position a better one, philosophically speaking. For, as will appear below, the daimonion’s sheer negativity contributes to the subject’s negative relation to actuality; it will be a stumbling block for the leap.

How to describe Socrates’ position, if it is negatively underpinned by an ’altogether instinctively’ working daimonion? Kierkegaard accepts the challenge, anticipating in his definition to what will be recurrent in his later work: subjectivity.

“Socrates’ position, then, is that of subjectivity (Subjectivitetens), of inwardness (Inderlighedens), which reflects upon itself and in its relation to itself detaches and volatilizes the established (Bestaaende) in the flood of thought (Tankebølge) that surges over it and carries it away while it itself recedes again into thought (Tanken).” (CI 163)

“Socrates’ position presumably was that of subjectivity, yet such that the subjectivity did not disclose itself in its full opulence, such that the idea became the boundary (Grændsen) from which Socrates turned back into himself in ironic satisfaction (ironisk Tilfredshed).” (CI 165)

Socrates’ subjectivity is so self-immersed that it cannot relate to anything outside itself. Taking reality only as an object of thought (idea) while being unable to think that thought through immobilises both thinking and acting. Besides, this subjectivity consists of the self-satisfaction and peace of mind irony offers. This is consistent with what we saw above about Socrates relishing ‘the joy of irony’, even more since he felt divinely authorised. (CI 175)

So far, we can infer that Kierkegaard mainly interprets the daimonion as an internal aspect of Socrates’ personality that kept him from truly relating, i.e., to others, to reality, to actuality, to politics, etc. However, without pretending to make any definite claims as to a possible (albeit partly) external origin of the daimonion, Kierkegaard modestly suggests that ‘it still has something external’ (endnu noget Udvortes).20 (CI 165) He continues saying that ‘subjectivity is halted in its outpouring’ (note the passive voice, standses), ‘it closes itself off (afslutter sig) in a particular personality’. (CI 166, my italics)

In this context, it also becomes meaningful that, according to Kierkegaard, the (external) ‘divine calling’ Socrates experienced doubled his ironic enjoyment (’relished it doubly’, CI 175); in virtue of its being external, the divine dimension supplemented the pleasure. But Kierkegaard does not go beyond these vague allusions, and chiefly insists on what Socrates does to himself: ‘The daimonian was sufficient (Nok) for Socrates, and with it he could manage (han kunde hjelpe sig dermed: “he could help himself with it”); but this is a qualification of personality, but of course only the egotistical satisfaction (egoistiske Tilfredshed) of one particular personality.’ (CI 166)
The Concept of Irony’s first discussion of the daimonion ends by introducing the famous Kierkegaardian category of the leap (Springet); Socrates, Kierkegaard claims, approximates leaping without ultimately giving in to it:

“Here again Socrates proves to be one who is ready to leap into something (staaer paa Springet til Noget) but never in the relevant moment does leap into this next thing (men dog i ethvert Øiebliek ikke springer ind i dette Andet) but leaps aside and back into himself (springer til Siden og tilbage i sig selv).” (CI 166)

If the question is asked how exactly the daimonion is involved in preventing Socrates from leaping out of himself, the answer should once more be that it provides Socrates with the adequate mind-set that enables him to deal with the perplexities of life. The daimonion gives Socrates not only satisfaction, but also inner security (Sikkerhed), and peace of mind.

“If we now add to this the polemic consciousness into which Socrates absorbed his whole relation to his contemporaries, the infinite albeit negative freedom in which he lightly and freely breathed (aandede let og frit), under the vast horizon intimated by the idea as boundary, the security (Sikkerhed) provided for him by the daimonian against being perplexed by all the happenings in life (i Vildrede med Livets), then Socrates’ position once again manifests itself as irony.” (CI 166)

In light of the ambiguity concerning the daimonion’s origin (internal or external), it might be instructive to know if Socrates could have acted differently than he did. This would not only contribute to a better understanding of the daimonion, but also of the ‘moral’ deficiencies of transcendental consciousness (which I believe is essentially what the daimonion comes down to). However, rather than use a superficial concept of ‘freedom’ or ‘free will’, a satisfactory answer to this question should at least do justice to the phenomenological profundity of Kierkegaard’s account of freedom. This account, at least as it is decisively developed in The Concept of Anxiety, Ch. II, does not so much solve the problem of freedom as it offers phenomenological access to it: experiencing anxiety first reveals freedom.21 Freedom itself, then, cannot be defined; it can only be lived. To live freedom equals leaping. To not leap equals being unfree while being free,22 since freedom for Kierkegaard, means an impossible possibility.

In other words, the question whether Socrates was free (an external origin of the daimonion might imply unfreedom) should be transformed into the question as to how Socrates’ structure of subjectivity was aroused. Can forms of suppression be discerned, and if so, what could be the nature of the suppressed? Are there traces of anxiety, and if so, how are they dealt with? My interpretative hypothesis is that Kierkegaard’s repeated reference to the daimonion’s ‘external’ origin testifies to a doubling of resistance and self-delusion, and also to the doubled enjoyment of successful resistance. The complacency, comfort, or appeasement Socrates allegedly experiences in efficacious self-enclosure, or the experienced protection against insecurity or perplexity, may refer to felicitous psychic self-regulation. Could it be that Socrates’ purported ‘demonic’ self-complacency was the result of an efficacious attempt to expel anxiety and, concomitantly, freedom and actuality, in favour of pure, paralysed possibility? This conclusion can hardly be taken on the sole basis of The Concept of Irony alone, we would have to resort to The Concept of Anxiety for
a conceptual corroboration. Before turning to the latter, let us verify some final references in The Concept of Irony.

“It is certainly true that in this continually implied negativity, which is perpetually postulated (satte) and at the same time revoked (tilbagekaldte), there is a rich and profound positivity the moment it has a chance to come to itself, but Socrates continually kept it merely in this possibility (holdt den bestandig blot i denne Mulighed) that never became actuality (Virkelighed).” (CI 170)

“What kept (afholdt) Socrates from a speculative absorption (speculativ Fordybelse) in the remotely intimated positivity behind this ignorance was, of course, the divine call (det guddommelige Kald) that he had to convince every individual of the same thing. He had come not to save the world but to judge it.” (CI 173)

The inversion of the Biblical verse (John III, 17) in the last sentence once more underlines, in my view, that the daimonion’s external origin should first and foremost be seen as an exacerbation of self-enclosure. If an ‘external’, ‘divine’ stimulus should be acknowledged at all, then rather, I would argue, in the experience of inner restlessness and (negative) freedom. Should I be right in this reading, the Socratic daimonion would be nothing else but invigorated subjectivity mobilised against inner freedom. Since the latter – as Kierkegaard will teach us in his later work – equally transcends inwardness, the daimonion’s origin is rightfully called external, but for a different reason than Socrates assumed: the daimonion’s agency is proportional to the inner stirrings of freedom. Counteracting the leap, it reveals the possibility of the leap better than anything else. Admittedly, The Concept of Irony does not offer us the conceptual tools to substantiate this interpretative, yet thoroughly Kierkegaardian hypothesis.

Let me conclude my reading of Kierkegaard’s daimonion-interpretation in The Concept of Irony. Socrates’ coming ‘to judge (dømme) the world’, his relentless, ‘ironic’ postponement of knowledge claims, his self-enclosure, his eternal suspension of any form of relationship or engagement, and his setting a trend for his intellectual posterity (starting with Plato and other Athenians youths, but also Diogenes, the ‘furious Socrates’, CI 182): I believe these descriptions refer to what is often called ‘transcendental consciousness’, as it reached its pinnacle in German Idealism (which dominated in Kierkegaard’s time). I am not sure if Kierkegaard, when developing his thoughts in his thesis, is already aware of the extent of his views, let alone that he could foresee the enthusiast, explicit support his critique of transcendental consciousness would find by later ‘existentialists’ (Sartre, Marcel, Heidegger, etc.).

The Concept of Anxiety

I will now turn to Kierkegaard’s famous yet enigmatic category of the ‘demonic’ in The Concept of Anxiety. In this book (true, written by Vigilius Haufniensis), the demonic is defined as ‘anxiety about the good’. In a stimulating article, Manuela Hackel shows that this category, for all its unsystematicity, occurs in different Kierkegaardian texts, though most extensively in The Concept of Anxiety. Also, the exemplarily demonic character of, e.g., Faust is not limited to the latter book but also outlined elsewhere throughout Kierkegaard’s work. Hackel explains the demonic as a ‘failure of the ethical’.
Already the descriptions of the demonic (det Dæmoniske) in The Concept of Anxiety strongly remind us of the Socrates descriptions in The Concept of Irony. The demonic is unfreedom that wants to close itself off; it becomes ‘enclosing reserve (des Indesluttede)’ and the unfreely disclosed'. (CA 123, Kierkegaard’s italics) The demonic does not close itself up with something, but it closes itself up within itself.’ (CA 124) Those who read Kierkegaard in Danish may be surprised to see the word det Dæmoniske, which they remember to be Kierkegaard’s Danish translation of the Greek word δαιμονιον, reappear. The corresponding descriptions strengthen the impression that the same mental disposition or mindset is at stake here, albeit that in The Concept of Anxiety, the framework has become more explicitly ‘ethical’. This is because here the demonic is put in an outspoken relation to freedom and goodness: ‘When freedom comes into contact with inclosing reserve, it becomes anxious.’ (CA 124) The good ‘signifies disclosure’ (Aabenbarelse, ‘revelation’). (CA 127) If the latter is true, then enclosing reserve must either be evil or at least be in a negative relation to goodness. It has become a moral category.28

Several phenomenological features of the demonic are pointed out. The demonic is characterised by muteness (det Stumme, CA 124), suddenness (det Pludselige, CA 129), contentlessness (det Indholdsløse, CA 133) and boringness (det Keedsommelige, CA 133). It may well be that Kierkegaard, when trying to elaborate on the demonic, was inspired by the ‘evidence’ of some public performances that he attended in Copenhagen. Reference is made for example to August Bournonville’s staging of Mephistopheles in his Faust ballet (leaping suddenly through the window, Mephistopheles remains stationary in the position of the leap, CA 131) and to C. Winlovs’s representation of Klister in J.L. Heiberg’s vaudeville De Uadskillelige (‘The Inseparables’, as yet not translated as far as I know).29 What these characteristics have in common is that they interrupt continuities; or, seen from another perspective, the kind of continuities at stake are empty negativities.30 Doubtlessly alluding to Hegel, Kierkegaard states that ‘If I were now to call attention to the terminologies of the most recent philosophy, I might say that the demonic is the negative and the nothing (det Dæmoniske er det Negative og er Intet).’ (CA 134) But, as opposed to Hegel, for whom the negative is a category of thinking (Verstand), for Kierkegaard it is a category of experience. The negative exemplifies a phenomenological dimension of recurrent hollowness: ‘like the elf maid who is hollow when seen from the back’, or those vaudeville actors who appear iteratively on stage in multiple roles, thereby displaying the absence of a ‘substratum’ of the characters and suggesting negativity as a recurrent structure. (CA 134)

At this crucial point in Kierkegaard’s discussion of the demonic in The Concept of Anxiety, Socrates resurfaces. Whereas so far we may have got the impression that the Socratic position is problematic for Kierkegaard (since it represents demonic self-enclosure, pure negativity, failing actualisation, etc.), it turns out now that at least its irony makes it superior to Hegel’s:

‘Thus irony has been explained as the negative. Hegel was the first to discover this explanation, but strangely enough, he did not know much about irony. […] it was Socrates who first introduced irony into the world and gave a name to the child, […] his irony was precisely enclosing reserve (hans Ironie netop var den Indesluttethed), which he began by closing himself off from men, by closing himself in with himself in order to be expanded in the divine’. (CA 134)
This passage is very important for my entire argument for the following reasons: 1) it reintroduces Socrates into the discussion of the demonic, 2) it connects Socrates and Hegel as thinkers of the negative, thereby indirectly associating Socrates to (what I have called) ‘transcendental consciousness’, 3) it puts Socrates in the superior position inasmuch as Socrates had a grasp of irony (as infinite negativity, and so, of the possibility of freedom). Could it be that Socrates, in virtue of (or despite) his daimonion or demonic mindset, had a still greater awareness of freedom than Hegel? Could it be that Socrates’ irony testifies to this greater awareness? If true, one could continue asking, would not this greater awareness of freedom then entail greater anxiety in Socrates?

Though Kierkegaard does not say this literally, Socrates’ anxiety could be inferred at the basis of the gendered discussion of anxiety in Chapter II §2 (‘subjective anxiety’) of The Concept of Anxiety. Here, it is stated that ‘[w]oman is more anxious than man. (Qvinden er mere angest end Manden).’ (CA 66, Kierkegaard’s italics). She is more anxious, Kierkegaard explains, as she has a greater share in the erotic, thereby consequently preventing the (synthesising) spirit from entering the scene. (CA 71) How about Socrates? Oddly enough, also in this specific context (i.e., the discussion of subjective anxiety in man and woman) Socrates appears. ‘Socrates’, Kierkegaard claims, ‘has reduced the erotic to indifference’. (CA 70) For evidence, Kierkegaard refers in a footnote to Socrates’ indifference to the beautiful courtesan Aspasia who wanted to impress him. (CA 70n) However, Socrates’ indifference to the erotic is not incompatible with his own (erotic) attractivity. If we return to The Concept of Irony and its discussion of the second accusation against Socrates (his spoiling the youth), we read that according to Kierkegaard ‘he certainly was an amorist of the highest order (Erotiker var han vistnok i høieste Grad), […] had all the seductive gifts of the mind […] [O]ne perhaps would dare to call him a seducer, since he infatuated the youths, awakened longings in them but did not satisfy them’. (CI 188) In other words, Socrates’ attraction and erotic appeal on his students, his being an Erotiker might, based on Kierkegaard’s wording, suggest increased anxiety in Socrates. However, the argument is thin here.31

Socrates may well be endowed with a greater ‘moral’ sensitivity than Hegel (i.e., with a greater sense of freedom), he remains demonic to the extent that he lacks inwardness. This could surprise, since we have already seen how Kierkegaard links Socrates to inwardness in The Concept of Irony (‘Socrates’ position, then, is that of subjectivity (Subjektivitetens), of inwardness (Inderlighedens), which reflects upon itself and in its relation to itself detaches and volatilizes the established in the flood of thought that surges over it and carries it away while it itself recedes again into thought.’ CI 163). In The Concept of Anxiety we find a more rigid definition of inwardness:

“Inwardness, certitude, is earnestness (Inderligheden, Visheden er Avlor). […] pure subjectivity (rene Subjektivitet). […] Whenever inwardness is lacking, the spirit is finitized. Inwardness is therefore eternity (Evigheden) or the constituent of the eternal in man (det Eviges Bestemmelse i et Menneske).

“To study the demonic properly, one needs to observe how the eternal is conceived in the individuality”. It comes down to a “lack of inwardness” (Manglen af Inderlighed). (CA 151)

Though Kierkegaard does not explicitly say that Socrates lacks this (deeper) inwardness, it can be safely assumed that Socrates does indeed lack it. For, this inwardness presupposes
eternity and earnestness. ‘[I]rony is jealous of earnestness’ (CA 150), we read on the previous page, and I take this to be an indirect reference to Socrates. ‘[A]nxiety about the eternal turns the moment into an abstraction’. (CA 152) Even without Kierkegaard’s explicit statement, in light of the preceding, it could be argued that Socrates’ daimonion exemplifies this anxiety. Inwardness, then, is not identical to a focus on eternity or earnestness; instead, it consists of the possibility that this focus is developed. But it could equally consist of the actual refusal of this focus and of the continued volatilisation of ‘the established’. The Concept of Irony emphasises the latter, whereas The Concept of Anxiety introduces the former possibility. It would be erroneous, I think, to confuse inwardness with an asset that warrants the subject’s right orientation. It consists of a type of consciousness which comes down to an increased awareness of urgency. By attributing Socrates inwardness with one hand while seemingly taking it from him with the other, Kierkegaard transforms the Socratic position into a real and concrete, dynamic position, rather than into a paradigmatic, static option.

While it is not my aim in this article to describe Kierkegaard’s positive appreciation of Socrates – which is too well-known to be mentioned – it follows from his Socrates interpretation that Kierkegaard can find in Socrates a philosopher with whom he can identify. Neither because Socrates is endowed with inner convictions that Kierkegaard shares (Socrates has no convictions),32 nor because Socrates has an adequate orientation (his reticence is irreducible). Kierkegaard’s sympathy for and identification with Socrates should be linked to the concrete experiential position of liminality into which Socrates had managed to manoeuvre himself. This liminal position is a decisive, existential position, albeit that in Socrates, it was continuously paralysed by something ‘demonic’.33

Socrates’ position is superior to Hegel’s, in so far as the latter, while certainly not lacking intelligence, lacks a sense of the negative as a category of experience. Socrates’ daimonion dismantles consciousness farther than Hegel had managed to do; whereas in Hegel, at least reason (Vernunft) survives negativity (by courageously facing it without looking away),34 in Socrates (according to Kierkegaard) the demonic pressure is so strong that nothing survives it – unless the complacency and self-efficacy of sustaining this pressure. That anxiety is around the corner cannot be logically concluded but seems very likely, in light of Kierkegaard’s general discussion of the demonic ‘enclosed reserve’ as anxiety about the good: ‘in every phenomenon of the absence of inwardness there is an activity, even though this begins in a passivity’. (CA 144)

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have tried to show the crucial position that the Socratic daimonion takes in Kierkegaard’s assessment of Socrates. It is a name for that in Socrates’ mindset which prevents one from leaping, i.e., adequately relating to eternity. Instead, it represents an inexorable, ironical reluctance to establish any lasting connection to actuality, thereby maintaining an infinitely negative position as from which actuality is supervised, if not undermined. I argued that the daimonion exemplifies transcendental consciousness. Irrespective of whether or not this term is positively appropriated, it could be applied to Modern philosophy in so far as it attempts to rid itself of concrete, meaningful self-experience. In my view, the sceptical approach which, for many
centuries already, is largely characteristic of modern scholars and scientists, both in the humanities and in the natural sciences, is greatly indebted to what Taylor had called ‘disengaged selfhood’ and to what Kierkegaard’s philosophical disciples (Marcel, Sartre, Heidegger) disqualified as ‘transcendental consciousness’.

I have tried to argue that the daimonion’s external origin, mentioned by Kierkegaard several times, should not be taken as a divine voice (albeit a wordless voice). I think that the externality of the daimonion is to be attributed to the enhanced self-complacency with which Socrates managed to deal with infinite negativity in the first place. If any ‘real’ externality is to be ascribed to it, then this should rather be located in Socrates’ intensified suspicion of inner freedom; the daimonion, then, as a successful yet incessantly required repression of anxiety, could be seen as an inverted divine revelation. To corroborate this interpretation, the notion of the daimonion as discussed in The Concept of Irony should be related to the notion of the demonic in The Concept of Anxiety. Due to inconsistent translations, the conspicuous identity of the Danish word used by Kierkegaard in both cases (det Daemoniske) is frequently ignored.

Consequently, the founding significance of Kierkegaard’s analyses of the daimonion in his doctoral thesis for his later thinking is overlooked. Analysing the role and function of the daimonion-demonic enables Kierkegaard to dismiss the de-historicising, de-actualising, abstract nature of a mindset that, meanwhile, has gained prominence in Modern science and philosophy. In coherence with Kierkegaard’s philosophical adepts, I termed this mindset ‘transcendental consciousness’ – a Kantian notion with wider applicability.

Interestingly, the cumbersome nature of Socrates’ daimonion has not prevented Kierkegaard from continuously resorting to Socrates, throughout his writing career. This indicates that mere rejection of the daimonion-demonic, in favour of a more adequate, ‘existentialist’ position, would be extremely simplistic and not in line with Kierkegaard’s thinking. The daimonion amounts to a suppressive pressure that is experienced; however, it equally reveals an inner counter-pressure. The more the daimonion’s negative pressure is felt, the more a rising inner awareness of freedom is likely, and the more the latency of anxiety can be surmised. Therefore, despite his ‘demonic impediments’, the Socratic position is to be preferred over Hegel’s, whose over-rationalisation has not even familiarised itself, neither negatively nor positively, with anxiety, let alone freedom. Therefore, if the Hegelian Spirit will not be the first thinker Kierkegaard envisions when criticising the Socratic daimonion, this is not necessarily a compliment.

Notes

1. I fully agree on this point with Watts, “Subjective Thinking,” 23–44.
2. Prel, Die Mystik der alten Griechen.
5. Cf Stewart, Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered, Ch. 3; and Thulstrup, Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel, Ch. V.3.
9. The same applies to irony, “a vanishing element in the system”; the content of a life in irony “must be regarded as nothing”. Yet, its form can be described. (CI 166).
14. Cf Brooks, Musil’s Socratic Discourse in Der Mann Ohne Eigenschaften.
15. Part I discusses the possibility of irony, i.e., concrete examples of Socratic irony found in the Socratic dialogues (Apology, Protagoras, Phaedo, Symposium, Republic), whereas part III discusses its necessity, i.e., as a critical instrument to fight sophism. If the Hegelian division of the subject looks artificial, this may be due to Kierkegaard’s own irony.
16. “particularly in the Greek state and to a certain extent in every state there is indeed an ignorance that must be regarded as a crime (Forbrydelse)” (CI 169n.), and “it is obvious (da vil det være inøiefaldende) that Socrates was in conflict with the view of the state” (CI 178). Leo Strauss also believes that the first accusation was serious, cf Strauss, “On the Euthyphron,” 191. Instead, many historians believe that it was the second accusation (“Socrates spoils the youth”) that was the real one. Cf Waterfield, Why Socrates Died, Ch. 11–12.
17. Among the too many examples, cf Kierkegaard’s critical, yet self-ironical remark about Socrates: “even in our countries someone living on private means is always a dubious person”. (CI 179).
18. For a discussion on Kierkegaard and Ast, see Muench, “Socratic Irony,” 33ff.
19. I am afraid that this Kierkegaardian way of arguing also affects much Kierkegaard scholarship. Also see CI 161.
20. He follows Hegel in this respect, cf. CI 165.
21. That freedom itself, according to The Concept of Anxiety, cannot be adequately defined follows from the fact that only (what is called) the “spirit” can understand, the spirit itself being an always actualising synthesis of body and soul. In other words, only lived life can teach us what freedom truly is. Anxiety hints at it. Cf CA 60ff.
22. Cf “the infinite albeit negative freedom in which [Socrates] lightly and freely breathed”. (CI 166).
23. “he himself was suspended high above all this in ironic contentment”, CI 182, obviously also refers to Aristophanes’ portraying of Socrates in the Clouds (suspended in a basket).
24. It could even be argued that, at least to some extent, he is positively drawing on Hegel’s Socrates reception – apart from Hegel’s positive assessment of the State, or the universal: this is where Kierkegaard distances himself from Hegel. Cf CI 184f.
27. The word occurs 61 times in the section on the demonic.
28. “What determines whether the phenomenon is demonic is the individual’s attitude toward disclosure, whether he will interpenetrate that fact with freedom and accept it in freedom. Whenever he will not do this, the phenomenon is demonic.” (CA 128f).
29. See CA 133 and 250.
30. “The continuity that corresponds to the sudden is what might be called extinction. Boredom, extinction, is precisely a continuity in nothingness.” (CA 133).
31. Another suggestion about Socrates’ anxiety I found in Boulter, 1991 (“it seems to me highly significant that a concept as central to Kierkegaard’s thought as anxiety should be seen as being closely linked to the philosophical position he attributes to the actual Socrates. The link being that the negativity of the actual Socrates can arouse anxiety in individuals who are faced with the infinity of possibilities”), 53f. Cf Leo Strauss, “He [Socrates] was the erotician par excellence.” Strauss, “On the Euthyphron,” 134.


33. Cf Muench, “Kierkegaard’s Socratic Point of View.”

34. Cf “Aber daß das von seinem Umfange getrennte Akzidentelle als solches, das gebundene und nur in seinem Zusammenhange mit anderm Wirkliche ein eigenes Dasein und abgesonderte Freiheit gewinnt, ist die ungeheure Macht des Negativen; es ist die Energie des Denkens, des reinen Ichs. Der Tod, wenn wir jene Unwirklichkeit so nennen wollen, ist das Furchtbarste, und das Tote festzuhalten das, was die größte Kraft erfordert. […] Aber nicht das Leben, das sich vor dem Tode scheut und von der Verwüstung rein bewahrt, sondern das ihn trächtet und in ihm sich erhält, ist das Leben des Geistes. Er gewinnt seine Wahrheit nur, indem er in der absoluten Zerrissenheit sich selbst findet. Diese Macht ist er nicht als das Positive, welches von dem Negativen wegsieht, wie wenn wir von etwas sagen, dies ist nichts oder falsch, und nun, damit fertig, davon weg zu irgend etwas anderem übergehen; sondern er ist diese Macht nur, indem er dem Negativen ins Angesicht schaut, bei ihm verweilt.” (Hegel, 1986, 36) I would argue that Hegel’s *Vernunft* falls prey to what Kierkegaard calls ‘habit’ (“habit arises as soon as the eternal arises from repetition”, CA 149). Hegel’s courage to face the negative lacks earnestness, as it has become a habit.

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**Notes on contributor**


**Bibliography**


