

---

# THE DEATH OF PHILOSOPHY IN KIERKEGAARD AND HAWKING

**Tibor Máhrik**\*

*Central European Research Institute of Søren Kierkegaard,  
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Faculty of Arts, Hodžova 1, 949 74 Nitra,  
Slovak Republic*

(Received 8 April 2015)

---

## **Abstract**

Not only the humanities focus their direct research on a person as a substantial self in social, psychological and ethical terms, but also the hard sciences endeavour to do the same albeit indirectly. Their aim is to provide answers to the question about the origin of the universe by offering the ground, from which philosophical implications of such understanding of man are being drawn, back to the soft sciences in many ways. The author analyses Stephen Hawking's view of human freedom as presented in his book 'The Grand Design' and the role of Philosophy in the consequent endeavour of human research. This study offers an analysis of Kierkegaard's thought as presented in his monumental work 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments' and 'Philosophical Fragments' in comparison with Hawking's strictly naturalist approach. It shows that both authors hold the same position regarding the limits of Philosophy, but along with that also the massive discord in their reasoning behind it as well as the implications stemming from this position.

*Keywords:* metaphysics, ethics, philosophy, epistemology, free will

---

## **1. Introduction**

There is no unity among scholars in the understanding of what one should see behind the term 'nature'. Some naturalists define this term under the umbrella of Philosophy according to which everything that exists is a part of nature and there is no reality beyond or outside nature. Yet still within the Natural sciences the discourse about the specification of that might be labelled the nature of nature is seen as relevant as set against the evolutionary character of scientific knowledge. For example – should or should we not include in the view of the Universe the spiritual realm which includes God, angels, demons, souls, etc? Should we understand the Universe in terms of natural and supernatural dimensions or should we equate the universe with nature while the term itself remains ambivalent? Or should we not?

---

\*E-mail: tmahrik@ukf.sk

For some thinkers in the past the concept of *natura naturans* deals exclusively with the reality of physical matter. According to Spinoza all reality is subject to impersonal laws by which even human beings without exception are strictly determined. For d'Holbach humans are complicated machines and we have to leave behind any concept of human conscience, civilisation, purpose, individual or social consciousness. Hawking is in the same mould in that he anchors his view in his so-called *effective theory*: „Because it is so impractical to use the underlying physical laws to predict human behaviour, we adopt what is called an effective theory. In physics, an effective theory is a framework created to model certain observed phenomena without describing in detail all of the underlying processes... Similarly, we cannot solve the equations governing the behaviour of complex atoms and molecules, but we have developed an effective theory called chemistry that provides an adequate explanation of how atoms and molecules behave in chemical reactions without accounting for every detail of the interactions” [1]. The ambivalence of this effective theory offers enough room for creating the illusive character of human free will arising from a deterministic framework of humanity.

Some other scholars like Aristotle understand the natural world in such a manner, where pointers to purpose and absolute *teleos* play the inevitable role while embracing a value agenda that would otherwise lose the meaning of the existence of the world. Aquinas in his reflection about the nature of nature operates under three modes: nature is fundamentally good, nature could be evil with an inevitable effect on good and the third mode of *divine grace* he understood as the source of perfecting nature. In his *teleos* therefore is the *redemption* of nature as the *consummation* of nature that fundamentally differs from *annihilation* or *violation*. In his metaphysics the latter accommodates freedom of the will and intentionality in Teleology, along with matter in motion, while the former rather points to the fundamental question regarding the goodness of nature with no intrinsic basis for solid answers.

Kierkegaard's perspective of embracing the truth is essentially different from classical fundamentalists, which corresponds to Descartes' view of truth as knowledge and understanding with a high degree of definiteness, which was his reflection on Montaigne's scepticism. According to Descartes our reason tells us that as well as withholding assent from propositions that are obviously false, we should also withhold it from the ones that are not completely certain and indubitable [2]. Hence for the purpose of rejecting all our opinions – here Descartes corresponds to the view of Popper – at least some reason for doubt needs to be found in each of them. Kierkegaard, however, views humans as ultimate beings, existing in a historical context and as such are not capable of perceiving reality in absolute coordinates, even not to reason in Spinoza's *sub specie aeterni*. According to Kierkegaard, retaining knowledge with absolute certainty requires knowledge which is absolute, ultimate and final – here he goes tangibly along with Gödel's theorem questioning the TOE concept – as for Kierkegaard, since a logical system might be given, nevertheless, every system to any extent has to be rejected [3].

## 2. Climacus' certain uncertainty

According to Climacus [4] we have to distinguish the nature of 'a system' within the totality of being itself. On the one hand through Hegel a system, the absolute system, was brought to completion but without having any ethical content, and this is the core problem. According to Climacus the truth (in a philosophical sense) is related to the process of deciding, as only in subjectivity is there decision and commitment, so wanting to be objective means to be false. On the other hand the system of existence (Tilvørelsen's System) cannot be given too. Is there, then, not such a system? That is not at all case. Neither is this implied in what has been said since existence itself is a system – for God. But it cannot be a system for any existing (*existierende*) spirit. It could be said that while system and conclusivity are in mutual correspondence, it is exactly the opposite for existence – a person cannot perceive the reality of being from absolute perspective that of God, only from human (limited) perspective. No logical system henceforth can relate to understanding the concept of eternal life and death and thus to the ultimate parameters of cosmic Teleology.

Climacus' epistemology on truth agenda thus oscillates between the two poles of subjectivity and objectivity. An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual. Thus truth, "should rather be understood as an objective uncertainty appropriated passionately by the inward reflective experience of love and faith of the self" [5]. Such an objective uncertainty is not merely a borderline, that no human as a self-defining being is allowed to cross, but also creates a foundation for a principal possibility of choice within an ethical realm. Since "objectively the emphasis is on what is said; subjectively the emphasis is on *how* it is said" [4, p. 202], Climacus links his epistemology to human existence of 'how do I live', 'who I am' (ethical dimension) rather than 'what do I think' (intellectual dimension). The conflict between *absolute* and *actual* is not for Climacus the reason for scepticism, but proves to be an argument indicating a certain infirmity of fundamental epistemology.

Unlike fundamentalism, the emotions are not seen as an inconvenient filter in viewing an objective truth. They are perceived as a space, where the essence of human acknowledgement is being actualized, the knowledge which every human needs to retain to become truly human in the whole spectrum of his existence. According to Climacus there is no 'neutral position' for objectivity, from where the truth might be embraced by the means of logical reasoning. Just the opposite, an individual who situates the starting point for retaining knowledge in a 'view from nowhere', will not be capable of understanding the existence of human beings, since objective knowledge presumes a certain distance, even estrangement of subject from object of study.

We could analyze the epistemological paradox of truth in relation to Kierkegaard's understanding of existence and explain a phenomenon of estrangement, resulting from his view. Let us assume an understanding that

a human being has an individual existence, while existence is a process of becoming. Then truth, defined as unity of being and thinking, never can be complete neither can it be achieved by any human being. Implicitly the act of existence itself (as such) is the foundation separating thinking from being [6]. We have to notice here, that in Kierkegaard's interpretation *reality* is a present state of things and events while *actuality* is a result of the process of actualization (realization). Epistemology is therefore a grappling with present reality and a continuous openness to actuality in terms of future happening, however, by no means in deterministic sense [7].

For Climacus thoughts represent reality and created beings are reality too, yet unlike thoughts they are also actuality. The difference between reality and actuality is clearly presented by Climacus in *Philosophical fragments* – a reflection on possibility, necessity, formation and becoming. The epistemological limits are set forth by Climacus view, that all essential knowledge relates to existence, or only such knowledge that has an essential relationship to existence is essential knowledge. His epistemology conveys the paradoxical character of being itself, as „the paradoxical passion of reason thus comes repeatedly into collision with this Unknown, which does indeed exist, but is unknown, and to that extent does not exist. Reason cannot advance beyond this point, and yet it cannot refrain in its paradoxality from arriving at this limit and occupying itself with it.“ [8] Kierkegaard's *three stages of life* then do not retain a character of Gnostic sequence, but three equal mutually related and yet independent entities reflecting an *existential system* of every individual being. The epistemological problem whether 'the truth can be learned' is viewed by Climacus as a movement from Socratic philosophical approach (a man possesses the truth) to the Christian approach (man has lost the truth, so then he does not possess it) where a more significant role than 'retain the truth' is the necessity of 'living the truth'. What Kierkegaard feared in all of this was “that Christendom ... had falsely given the impression that one can have genuine faith simply by adhering to the norms of the allegedly Christian society, without undergoing a *true transformation*...” [9].

### 3. Hawking's uncertain certainty

Stephen Hawking, an outstanding thinker and the most prominent current scientist has revitalized naturalism when posing his own answer to the question about the origin of the Universe. The key concept he elaborates upon is an *effective theory* out of which important consequences ought to be considered. He is aware of the fact that we cannot solve the equation governing the behaviour of complex atoms and molecules, or solve the equations that determine our behaviour and therefore we use in the case of man the effective theory that people have free will. Since for Hawking “it is hard to imagine how free will can operate if our behaviour is determined by physical law, so it seems that we are no more than biological machines and free will is just an illusion” [1]. The free will of human beings is no fundamental feature of humanity anymore.

One could wonder on what grounds, then, an ethical dimension can be applied to the individual or life of any social entity could be reasoned, developed and anchored in terms of love, justice, responsibility and solidarity. Hawking presents “the fact that we human beings – who are ourselves mere collections of fundamental particles of nature” and yet are able to understand the laws governing the Universe via an “abstract consideration of logic” [1, p. 145]. This sounds like an example of circular reasoning. The problem, however, remains in terms of logic itself – if one states that free will is an illusion, how can it be concluded that any result of human reasoning is reliable and thus without risk of also being an illusion? If the whole of reasoning is based upon the illusive character of human free will, what validity then lies behind each human statement, reasoning, conclusions and even ‘abstract consideration of logic’?

Hawking pursues the challenge to understand the Universe at the deepest level in his book. He therefore underlines the importance “to know not only how the universe behaves, but why. Why is there something rather than nothing? Why do we exist? Why this particular set of laws and not some other? This is the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything.” [1, p. 14]. Here we see not only the technical aspect (how?) of the functioning of the Universe, but also the teleological one (why?) and the triad is closed with the anthropic principle agenda (design?). In fact Hawking rejects the Intelligent Design concept which is based on the belief that “the multiverse concept can explain the fine-tuning of physical law without the need for a benevolent creator who made the Universe for our benefit” [1, p. 133]. To answer these questions one must be aware that we face the metaphysical area of our epistemology that goes far beyond the mandate offered by the Natural sciences. Yet we can hypothetically solve this abstract study case in two possible ways. Either the ultimate cause behind the great singularity (Big Bang theory) is being of a personal character (Creator) or impersonal one (force, energy, principle). For Hawking the ultimate explanation of the entire Universe lies in gravity: “Because there is a law like gravity, the Universe can and will create itself from nothing... Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, and why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the Universe going.” [1, p. 144] What is the final cause behind the gravity reminds unanswerable.

Hawking thus puts the list of fundamental philosophical questions to be answered within the naturalist framework, where the natural world is complete in itself and where it is self-sufficient and self-contained. Hawking presumes that the M-theory as the unified theory of Universe can be formulated and hence the Theory of everything (TEO) is attainable; it is just a matter of time when we will discover its course. We have to point out here that by such reasoning not only has the law of gravity been shifted from the scientific field into the metaphysical category of eternal principles with no support from any rigorous experiment or academic research. The problem is this: any scientific law contains some descriptive and prescriptive essence, but it does not contain creative power. Scientific law can be described as functioning reality in the present

and can with some extension of probability prescribe how it will behave under certain conditions. But no scientific law on principle can change the course of nature, since they are just our logic and abstract formula of the object we research.

The most serious flaw in Hawking's new picture of the Universe and our place in it arises from his statement about the death of Philosophy: "Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in Science, particularly Physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge." [1, p. 10] When closer consideration is taken about his way of reasoning, one cannot overlook the circular reasoning in it. To say 'Philosophy is dead' is a metaphysical statement itself and we have to be aware of the principal differences between Science and Philosophy in terms of their subjects. Physics cannot answer questions that belong to philosophical realms, no more than Science itself can fight its own battle with Hume's problem of induction, according to which Science cannot be proven inductively by empirical evidence. To put it in another way – Science cannot be proven scientifically. This coheres with Gödel's theorems of incompleteness, according to which no system can demonstrate and prove its own consistency.

#### 4. A metaphysical search

In a wider context Metaphysics can be understood as a science (Aristotelian approach) 'beyond physical' dealing with the world further off the experience, the transcendental world. It is also understood as an effort to embrace the world of the supernatural, God, angels, demons. Metaphysics can also be seen as an effort to embrace the whole complex understanding of reality. In this case the metaphysicist is not obliged to focus exclusively on the specific aspect of reality, but he can detect a *metastory*, where besides Science also Ethics, art and religion are involved [10]. Another categorization is concentrated more on assumed epistemological status than on the object of study. This is why Kant preferred the synthesis of truth *a priori*, Spinoza the strict method of rational evidence and Hegel the method of the Dialectic. In the strict sense Metaphysics applies to a specific study of reality, with no concern for absolute knowledge, but applying a holistic approach with a commitment to responsibility from man, which is close to Kierkegaard's view on truth. It is more an understanding of life in its complexity and with man being part of the complex [11].

Kierkegaard rejects those philosophical concepts, which were strongly influenced by Hume's scepticism, claiming that not only reasoning, but also empirical observation are insufficient to establish a basis for a solid world view. The problem of the limitations found in epistemology and the paradoxical progress of scientific knowledge inspired not just French and Scottish philosophers but particularly the ideas of Kant and later of Hegel. Climacus controverts Kant with his Metaphysics and rejects speculative *methods* of metaphysical philosophers with their logical processes. He tends to direct the

rational capacity of the human spirit to the existential dimension of truth, to questioning the issues which cannot be answered formally. In a similar manner he criticizes Plato and Hegel with their system, presented as a final and complete knowledge of reality, since *system and finality* are pretty much one and the same, so much so that if the system is not finished, there is no system [4, p. 107].

Kierkegaard similarity to Kant, makes a distinction between reason and faith, which he does not understand as two different forms of knowledge. Faith belongs to the category of experience and is related to a decision of man in his heart. Faith stands above all other forms of knowledge. Subjectivity, then, is not the opposite pole of objectivity, rather it is a certain mode of every individual's existence. Kierkegaard agrees with Kant in his critique of metaphysical aspirations of pure reason logic, although he disagrees in his epistemology, ethics and also metaphysics established on practical reason. Nevertheless, they both develop metaphysics by trying to capture a deep faith in what is real, the view of the world that not only comes from actual decisions of man but also helps to form them.

Climacus, as well as Kant, sees morality as an universal imperative, yet for him the motivation for human action is much more important than the Kantian consequences of actions. God is not just a result of a projection of thought (the categorical imperative), but the reason for the *leap of faith*, which carries a man beyond the universal reality. Explaining the ethical context Climacus opens the idea of *theological suspension of the ethical*, presenting God as the final purpose of every man's own existence [12]. While Kant's metaphysics reduces religion (man's faith) to a matter of ethics in the horizontal level of human relationships, Climacus transforms religion into the category of universalities and sees ethics as a vertical relationship between the individual and God.

Hawking rejects any metaphysical realities and philosophy itself, since Physics will bring the final answers to any kind of questions including existential ones. His view of man as a quantum machine and the effective theory that dismiss the libertarian concept of free will makes Hawking the philosopher that echoes Ch. Wolff and G.E. Lessing with their mechanistic view of the world that under the rationalistic concept referred to Descartes, Lock and Leibniz, where the truth of reason and the truth of science could be acknowledged *a priori* without a reference to an empirical observation of reality. In those cases it is obvious that religion as a revealed truth is being rejected and the preferential perception of humanity in its evolutionary historical process progressing somehow to a personal and spiritual perfection and complex integrity is being presented instead.

The main problem according to Ratzsch is the limitation of Science that is its „inability to provide proof of its results“ [13]. Although scientific theories are never absolutely certain, that limitation is not a limitation on the scope of Science. The problem lies in the object – if any part of reality lies outside the boundaries imposed on Science by its methods, that portion of reality will be definitely beyond the competence of Science. If such epistemology is thence

artificially restricted to scientific knowledge, we will thus be sheltering ourselves and our beliefs from the consequent part of reality. Such strict naturalism is being linked with epistemological reductionism that does not fit to answer current questions challenged by recent neuroscience and the humanities. Any method of research which is deliberately reduced to the naturalistic cannot be competent to deal with most of the fundamental questions of Morality, Axiology, Psychology, Theology and some other areas as well. Currently there is an increasing call for the revitalisation of metaphysical inquiry.

## 5. Conclusions

There is an ongoing debate among a wide rank of scholars operating within a variety of Natural sciences and Humanities about the fundamental aspect of human morality and the future of civilisation that would sufficiently engage with current challenges that have arisen out of society. The prerequisite is obvious – any relevant system of ethics must be rooted in true philosophical framework, which will show a solid competence in dealing with those challenges regardless of their cultural and political context. Kierkegaard and Hawking have surprisingly come to the same conclusion – Philosophy is dead – but from different perspectives and with different implications for ethics and life in general.

Kierkegaard directs his epistemology towards human existence to ‘how do I live’, ‘who I am’ (ethical dimension) rather than ‘what do I think’ (intellectual dimension). His *leap of faith* is therefore the theological application of Socratic thought. Unlike Hegel, who claimed that knowledge is a continuous process, Climacus talks about a discontinuity, a huge gap, which has to be overcome by a leap. The concept of leap oscillates between the epistemological level (process of learning the unknown) and the metaphysical level (proving the improvable), and it becomes a paradox which Climacus uses in his critique of speculative philosophy. No philosophy can take a single individual across the epistemological gap. In that sense every philosophy is dead. Hawking on the other hand resonates with Hegelian dialectic that brings humankind through a continuous process into completeness (TOE) and unity with universals on the top of the evolutionary ladder (human integrity).

While for Hawking philosophy is dead by the very character of the Universe, where man is just a quantum machine with no free will living in a world where there is no room for metaphysical reality, for Kierkegaard philosophy is also dead, but because of human aspirations and the existential aim exceeds the realm offered by Philosophy. It is precisely the opposite character of the Universe that leads Kierkegaard to deal with the metaphysical realm in an existential sense. Thus for Hawking ethical categories are just an illusion and any human effort in a moral sense is futile. This reminds us of the Hegelian system, where man is the observer who contemplates the empirical reality according to the rules of absolute reason. Intellectual thinking oscillates between

finality and incompleteness with no relation to either transcendental reality or eternity.

Therefore this philosophical system, according to Kierkegaard, has no ethic. To understand *ethical* then means to understand the *paradox of faith*. Kierkegaard deals with the question of the relation between the truth and an existing individual who is the synthesis of the eternal and the finite. Human existence carries in itself a *double movement*: from ‘actual’ to ‘possible’ (an intellectual self-reflection and all possible courses of action) and the movement from ‘possible’ to ‘actual’ (an intellectual choice and action). For Hawking the truth is just a logic abstraction and the existing individual a complex machine, which renders any effort on the human side to be illusive.

The ethical dimension of existence can be accomplished according to Kierkegaard explicitly and entirely if the individual actualizes his “ethical relationship with God” [4, p. 140], since God is the one who demands everything ethical from man. Unlike Hawking, whose epistemology leaves no room for the Creator, reduces religion (man’s faith) to a matter of ethics on the horizontal level of human relationships, Kierkegaard transforms religion into the category of universalities and sees ethics as a vertical relationship between an individual and a personal God.

While Hawking limits himself to the Socratic philosophical standpoint, where man possesses the truth, Kierkegaard’s position starts from the Christian standpoint, where man has lost the truth, so he does not possess it, henceforth philosophy is a dead discipline that has no resources of any help to man. The absolute paradox thus plays a key role in comparing the two thinkers. For Kierkegaard it is the absurd point, where philosophy becomes dead and man touches metaphysical reality with practical implications for individual existence, where love, justice etc. make sense; Hawking does not see the absolute paradox at all, as his horizontality and verticality merge into one point, where philosophy also becomes dead, but man is purged through physics into a way of life bereft of meaning.

## References

- [1] S. Hawking and L. Mlodinov, *The Grand Design*, Bantam Books, New York, 2010, 32.
- [2] R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Classin Books America, New York, 2011, 11.
- [3] R. Králik, *Kierkegaardův Abrahám*, Kud Apokalipsa, Ljubljana, 2013, 10.
- [4] S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript To Philosophical Fragments*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992, 118-119.
- [5] M. Valčo and K. Valčová, Communications: Scientific Letters of Zilina University, **16(3)** (2014) 25-28.
- [6] R. Campbell, *The Concept of Truth*, Palgrave Macmillan, Eastbourne, 2011, 212-215.
- [7] R. Králik, Eur. J. Sci. Theol., **11(3)** (2015) 183-190.
- [8] S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments or Fragments of Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1962, 55.

- [9] M. Valčo, R. Králik and L. Barrett, Communications: Scientific Letters of Zilina University, **17(2)** (2015) 103-108.
- [10] W. Hasker, *Metaphysics: Constructing a World View*, Inter-Varsity Press Academic, Downers Grove, 1983, 125-183.
- [11] M. Pavlíková, Eur. J. Sci. Theol., **11(3)** (2015) 191-200.
- [12] S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2009, 221-224.
- [13] D. Ratzsch, *Science & its Limits*, Inter Varsity Press, Downers Grove, 2000, 92.