KIERKEGAARD’S ACCOUNT OF FAITH
AS ‘THE NEW IMMEDIACY’

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The paper discusses Kierkegaard’s account of faith as ‘the new immediacy’. After considering the term ‘immediacy’ with respect both to its ambiguity and to the different ways in which it can be used, i.e. as an epistemological assumption and as an ontological assumption, I will argue that this very distinction can provide a hermeneutic key for an understanding of Kierkegaard’s account of faith.

Keywords: Immediacy – Reflection – Faith – Paradox – G. W. F. Hegel

Kierkegaard’s account of faith as ‘the new immediacy’ may be regarded as part of a general effort in the philosophy of his time: the (re-)establishment of certain immediacies as impervious to mediation. This came in reaction to Hegel’s dialectic, which had implemented the continuous mediation of all immediacies. Hegel held that inasmuch as philosophy mediates the indeterminate immediacy of pure being at and as the beginning of logic, it reveals that there can be “nothing in heaven or nature or spirit or anywhere else that does not contain just as much immediacy as mediation, so that both these determinations prove to be unseparated and inseparable and the opposition between them nothing real.”

1 If, however, there can exist neither pure, unmediated immediacy nor pure, immediacy-free mediation – inasmuch as both immediacy and mediation are merely abstract dimensions of something that is always already both immediate and mediated – then every immediacy necessarily has only the appearance of immediacy, and so must be convicted [überführt], so to speak, of mediacy. The dialectic of negativity as the procedural principle

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of determinate negation (i.e., negation conceived as real)\(^2\) and of the negation of negation does not stop, however, with this mediation of immediacy, since mediation must then itself be carried over into an immediacy.\(^3\) In this mediated or reflected immediacy – as the (ever) relative result of this cycle\(^4\) of immediacy and mediation – the supposedly unmediated immediacy is restored as a mediated immediacy, which now in turn, as the basis for the appearance of immediacy, forms the basis for further mediation.

During the Vormärz period (1815 – 1848), numerous philosophers of various persuasions united “under the banner of immediacy”\(^5\) to plead, against Hegel’s conception of the continuous mediation of immediacy, for the unmediated and allegedly unmediatable status of certain immediacies (understood as inconceivable and intangible). Schelling, for instance, wrote of an “innate and inborn” or “immediate content”\(^6\) prior to all real cognition, posited by the very essence of reason – a content which, as Schelling expressly states, is “not an object, that is, already a being, but is rather only the infinite potency of being.”\(^7\) Another example is Feuerbach, who spoke of “sensuous – i.e., real things” to which philosophy and science need to turn “towards” rather than “away from.”\(^8\) A third case, arguably, is Kierkegaard’s account of faith as ‘the new immediacy.’ The present essay will examine the extent to which this is so.

In Section I, I will consider the term ‘immediacy’ with respect both to its ambiguity and to the different ways in which it can be used. In interpreting Kierkegaard, it will prove crucial to distinguish between his use of ‘immediacy’ as an epistemological as-


\(^7\) Schelling, “Einleitung in die Philosophie der Offenbarung,” 74 (Lecture 5) [The Grounding of Positive Philosophy, 141].

\(^8\) Ludwig Feuerbach, *Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft* (Zurich and Winterthur: Verlag des literarischen Comptoirs, 1843), 69 (§ 44) [quoted from the partial translation by Zawar Hanfi in *German Socialist Philosophy*, ed. Wolfgang Schirmacher (New York: Continuum, 1997), 60-78, here 67 (§ 43)]; compare also 64 (§ 39): “something is true only when it is no longer mediated; that is, when it is immediate.” *German Socialist Philosophy*, 64 (§ 38).
consumption, following everyday usage, on the one hand, and his use of the term as an ontological assumption, following the technical usage that came into vogue at the start of the nineteenth century. In Sections II and III, I will argue that it is precisely the different possible ways of employing the term ‘immediacy’ that can provide a hermeneutic key for an understanding of Kierkegaard’s account of faith.

I. In everyday language, ‘immediate’⁹ (Greek ἀμεδασία; Latin immediatus; German unmittelbar; Danish umiddelbar) denotes a direct relationship, one that emerges without further ado and without the mediation of a third party. Immediacy in this sense refers to a spatiotemporal presence that is unaltered and unadulterated by anything else. On the other hand, ‘immediate’ can also mean ‘inaccessible,’ as when something is inaccessible to us precisely because we have no medium through which to access it. Something that is immediate in this sense remains self-sufficient and self-identical, like an opaque surface that we can touch but cannot penetrate.

Both of these senses of ‘immediacy,’ along with the assumptions about relations that they bear, have left their marks on the usage of the term in epistemology. On the one hand, we can speak of an immediate relationship to an object of knowledge – as when it makes sense to us by itself, i.e., is evident to us. On the other hand, the object of knowledge can itself stand for something immediate, can be immediacy in and for itself¹⁰ – namely, when it represents something that is understandable only to itself, something that is neither susceptible to proof nor in need of it, something for which no further reasons can be given, as is the case with an axiomatic principle.

The latter understanding of immediacy, rooted in the thought of Aristotle,¹¹ became vitally important in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the term ‘immediacy’ was employed in the search for a systematic foundation for philosophical knowledge. Here ‘immediate,’ understood as an explicitly philosophical concept, gained the meaning of an absolute principle irretrievable by reflection, and immediately anterior, qua principle, to philosophy. This usage presupposes a dichotomy between immediacy and reflection, which emerged most prominently in Jacobi’s critique of Kant’s transcendental philosophy. According to Jacobi, truth is grounded in two realms inaccessible to science, namely, “faith” and “revelation” (here understood not in a dogmatic-Christian sense).¹²

When regarded as a self-identical relation, as immediacy in and for itself, the im-

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⁹ See Arndt, Unmittelbarkeit, 6-18.
¹⁰ See Arndt, Unmittelbarkeit, 8.
¹¹ See, e.g., Aristotle, Analytica posteriora, Book II, Chapter 2, 71b 21-23; 72a 7-8.14-17; Chapter 3, 72b 18-25 as well as Book II, Chapter 9, 93b 21-23.
mediate simultaneously presents us with something un-mediated and un-mediatable. The immediate cannot be dissolved in mediation – that is, it cannot be conceptualized by us – without thereby losing its status as immediate. Yet this in no way implies that the immediate must elude every form of communication or relation. For all its impenetrability, even the opaque surface mentioned above can still be touched, that is, described in outline, giving us a de facto relationship to the immediate.\[13\]

In the context of Kierkegaard’s use of ‘immediate,’ it is also worth noting that, from the start of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century onward, the term was also employed – alongside its epistemological usage – as a “reified category” in ontology “that asserts something about the internal constitution of beings or of Being itself.”\[14\] Usage of this kind is evident, for example, when Hegel writes: “Immediacy means being in general; being, or this abstract relation to self, is immediate to the extent that we remove relationship.”\[15\] Thus in interpreting Kierkegaard’s understanding of ‘immediacy,’ and the extent to which he understood faith as ‘immediacy,’ we will need to reflect not only on the term’s own ambiguity, but also on the different possible ways of employing the term.

When we consider the various passages in which Kierkegaard employs the term ‘immediacy’ when discussing Christianity and Christian faith,\[16\] we may observe the following pattern. ‘Immediacy’ is used in its epistemological sense primarily when Kierkegaard characterizes faith as “the new immediacy”\[17\] or “an immediacy that follows reflection.”\[18\] Kierkegaard aimed to differentiate this understanding of faith as clearly as possible from an understanding of faith as “the immediate,” or, as he writes elsewhere, as “the (first) immediacy.”\[19\] By contrast, ‘immediacy’ is used in an ontological sense – or, more

\[13\] A useful visualization of this ambiguity can be found in “The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical-Erotic” in the first part of Kierkegaard’s \textit{Either/Or} (1843), where ‘A’ describes the relation of music (immediacy) to language (reflection) as the relation between two adjoining realms that abut without penetrating one another. See SKS 2, 64 / \textit{EO1}, 56f. and SKS 2, 71-73 / \textit{EO1}, 64-67.


\[17\] See, e.g., SKS 7, 318 / \textit{CUP1}, 347 (note); \textit{Pap.} X 6 B 78 / \textit{JP} 1, 9; see also SKS 18, 204, JJ:201 / \textit{KJN} 2, 188; SKS 18, 205, JJ:203 / \textit{KJN} 2, 189; SKS 18, 217, JJ:237 / \textit{KJN} 2, 199; SKS 19, 185, Not5:23 / \textit{KJN} 3, 181.


precisely, an ontological-existential sense – when Kierkegaard speaks of “losing” or “dying to” immediacy, or conversely of a “recovering” or “returning” to, or of, immediacy. In these contexts, ‘immediacy’ is used less in an epistemological sense than in an existential sense, a sense concerned with existence itself, inasmuch as the term is used to say something about the mode of existing. This will be demonstrated in the section that follows.

II. For Kierkegaard, Christian faith is an immediacy that necessarily presupposes reflection: “Once reflection is totally exhausted, faith begins.” Epistemologically considered, reflection precedes faith, but faith does not emerge from reflection – not through mediation, at least, and not without a leap. In a polemic against the use of the “probability proof” to establish the truth of Christianity, which he characterized as an illusory attempt to use the method of approximation to “quantify oneself into” the quality of faith, Johannes Climacus argues in Philosophical Fragments (1844) that from the “probability proof” there “is no direct transition to faith, since...faith is by no means partial to probability – to say that about faith would be slander. If that fact [i.e., that God became man] came into the world as the absolute paradox, all that comes later would be of no help, because this remains for all eternity the consequences of a paradox and thus just as definitively improbable as the paradox.”

According to Kierkegaard, this object of faith, the “absolute paradox” of God’s becoming man, is “humanly speaking,...the most absurd of all absurdities.” When faced with it, the understanding inevitably fails. As Kierkegaard had made clear during his dis-
pute with the Icelandic theologian Magnús Eiríksson, whose 1850 book Is Faith a Paradox and “By Virtue of the Absurd” had harshly criticized the Kierkegaardian account of faith in Fear and Trembling (1843) and the Climacus writings (1844/46), the absurd functions as a boundary-concept for reason, a concept that demarcates negatively, as “a sphere by itself,” the domain of faith from the realm of human intellection. It thereby wards off confusion of the two spheres: “The absurd is the negative criterion of that which is higher than human understanding and knowledge.” When it comes to presentations of faith, therefore, one should ensure “that this immediacy of which he [viz., the one presenting faith appropriately] speaks is the new immediacy, and precisely this is assured by the negative sign.”

According to Kierkegaard, Eiríksson not only failed to appreciate that the absurd, qua boundary-concept, was inextricably interlinked with faith, but also failed to take into account the particular perspective set forth by each of the two pseudonyms, which Kierkegaard used to illuminate faith from an unbeliever’s standpoint – namely, negatively: by virtue of the absurd. “To a third person the believer relates himself by virtue of the absurd; so must a third person judge, for the third person does not have the passion of faith.” The believer himself, however, has a different view of things, as the absurd is in no way absurd to him. Only in the “autopsy of faith” – as Kierkegaard elsewhere calls the believer’s peculiar mode of perception, which itself bears a qualitative difference to natural perception and marks a break with the imagination – does a transformation of the absurd take place: “When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd – faith transforms it, but in every weak moment it is again more or less absurd to him. The passion of faith is the only thing that masters the absurd – if not, then faith is not faith in the strictest sense, but a kind of knowledge.”

Between faith’s immediacy and the realm of intellectual activity lies a fault line. “Regarded historically and existentially, this fault line is called ‘absurd.’” There can

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26 Magnús Eiríksson [Theophilus Nicolaus], Er Troen et Paradox og “i Kraft af det Absurde”? (Copenhagen: Chr. Steen & Son, 1850). On this dispute between Kierkegaard and Eiríksson, see Gerhard Schreiber, “Magnús Eiríksson: An Opponent of Martensen and an Unwelcome Ally of Kierkegaard,” Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries, Tome II. Theology (Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, vol. 7), ed. Jon Stewart (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 49-94, especially 75-86.


28 Pap. X 6 B 80, p. 87 / JP, 1, 11; see also SKS 23, 24, NB15:25 / JP 1, 7.

29 Pap. X 6 B 78, p. 84 / JP 1, 9.


32 Pap. X 6 B 79, p. 85 / JP 1, 10; see also SKS 23, 176f., NB17:19 / JP 1, 8.


35 Hermann Deuser, “’In kraft des Absurden’. Die Verborgenheit des Glaubens bei Søren Kierke-
thus be no seamless ‘dialectical transition’ to the sphere of faith, for as Climacus emphasizes in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), the sphere of faith can only be reached in “the qualitative transition of the leap from unbeliever to believer.” Nevertheless, the efforts of the understanding should not simply be ignored: “The task is not to comprehend Christianity, but to comprehend that one cannot comprehend it. This is faith’s holy cause, and therefore reflection is sanctified by being used in this manner.”

If Kierkegaard characterizes faith as ‘the new immediacy’ or ‘an immediacy that follows reflection,’ then an immediacy is ascribed to faith “that can only be attained by wrenching oneself free of mediation” – by the *leap* into faith. Through its essential relationship to the absolute paradox of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, faith is referred to a particular historical fact as its ground; and this radically dissociates faith not only from any historical categorization, but also from “the very notion of mediation.”

The absurd marks the *fault line* between the immediacy of faith and the realm of intellectual activity, a realm from which no ‘dialectical transition’ to faith is possible, but only a leap in the sense of a ‘qualitative’ or ‘pathetic transition.’

The ‘new immediacy’ peculiar to faith can be understood as immediacy *in and for itself*: immediacy that does not vanish in mediation, and which we cannot penetrate conceptually without it *eo ipso* losing the status of this immediacy, the *differentia specifica* by which true Christian faith is distinguished from all other forms of

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*Filozofia* 68, 1

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36 *SKS* 7, 21 / *CUP1*, 12; see note 23.

37 *SKS* 21, 68, NB6:93 / *KJN* 5, 70 (translation slightly altered); see also *Pap.* X 6 B 80, p. 87 / *JP* 1, 11.


39 *SKS* 18, 125, HH:2 / *KJN* 2, 117. On the contrast between ‘mediation,’ as “the watchword of modern philosophy” (ibid.) and ‘[absolute] paradox,’ see, e.g., *SKS* 19, 211, Not7:22 / *KJN* 3, 207; *SKS* 19, 390, Not13:23 / *KJN* 3, 388; *SKS* 19, 418, Not13:53 / *KJN* 3, 416; *SKS* 7, 103 / *CUP1*, 105f.; *SKS* 7, 345 / *CUP1*, 379; *SKS* 20, 46f., NB:47 / *KJN* 4, 45f. (see *SKS* 15, 162); *SKS* 22, 219, NB12:129; *SKS* 15, 275 / *BA*, 120.
immediacy. “Kierkegaard holds that every (sc. religious) faith is a form of immediacy, but not every – but only the post- or transreflexive – form of immediacy is faith.”40 In other words, faith’s immediacy as ‘a sphere by itself’ refers not only to the immediacy of something unmediated that did not itself emerge from some previous mediation, but rather to the immediacy of something unmediatable that itself precludes mediation. This is evident in the claim made in Fear and Trembling (1843) to the effect that the paradox of faith cannot be communicated to another (and in that sense mediated41) – a claim made by the pseudonym Johannes de silentio (!), when describing Abraham’s situation after receiving the divine command to sacrifice Isaac: his paradoxical situation “cannot be mediated; in other words, he cannot speak.”42 As immediacy in and for itself, however, the immediacy of faith does not preclude every form of communication or relation to it. Though faith cannot be penetrated conceptually, it can nonetheless be described and presented. Yet here it is vital to attend to the specific perspective of the one presenting faith. As Kierkegaard made clear in his response to Eiríksson, any presentation of faith from the standpoint of an unbeliever is not positive or determinative, but is negative or regulative: it proceeds by virtue of the ‘absurd.’

III. ‘Immediacy’ is used in the ontological-existential sense, on the other hand, primarily when Kierkegaard speaks of a ‘losing’ or ‘dying to’ immediacy, or conversely of a “recovering” or “returning” to, or of, immediacy with reference to Christianity and Christian faith.43 This usage plays a prominent role in the account of the diverse modes of existing that emerges from Kierkegaard’s well-known differentiation of various “stages” or “spheres”44 of existence as possible ways in which a person can relate to himself qua existing human being. In this systematic account of existential possibilities, which is characterized by the three central concepts ‘aesthetic,’ ‘ethical,’ and ‘religious,’ immediacy is clearly associated with the aesthetic: “the esthetic in a person is that by which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is.”45 This attribution of immediacy to the aesthetic realm should not be understood as exclusive, however. As “the reality of one’s own worldly experience,” immediacy belongs “to the constitutive characteristics of every self-relation, thus not simply an aesthetic self-

41 The German verb *vermitteln* and noun *Vermittlung* derive from the root noun *Mittel*, which originally referred to a ‘part found in between.’ Accordingly, *vermitteln* can mean ‘to mediate’: to be in between two relata, to be the relation through which they are bound to one another. At the same time, however, *vermitteln* and *Vermittlung* can also be used to describe a communicative act. In the latter sense, *vermitteln* means ‘to communicate’: to make something understandable to another, to transmit a message. This ambiguity of *vermitteln* and *Vermittlung* cannot be adequately reproduced in English.
42 SKS 4, 153 / FT, 60; compare SKS 4, 172-207 / FT, 82-120.
43 See note 20.
44 See, e.g., SKS 6, 439 / SLW, 476 and SKS 7, 455 / CUP1, 501f.
45 SKS 3, 173 / EO2, 178.
relation. As the manner in which an existing human being initially finds himself, “[t]he immediate is his foothold [Fodfræste],” which he never can “completely abandon.”

Immediacy thus remains a foundational reference-point in the ethical and religious stages, which distinguish themselves from the aesthetic by their distinct relations to immediacy. Whereas in the ethical stage the goal is to sublate – via its mediation with the ethical-universal in an aesthetic-ethical “balance” – what a human being qua immediacy always already is, the dialectic of internalization characteristic of the religious stage (Religiousness A) relates far more negatively to immediacy, as the essential expression of existential pathos is “suffering as dying to immediacy.”

The ideal task assigned to the (religious) individual in his existence – namely, “simultaneously to relate oneself absolutely to the absolute τελος and relatively to the relative [τελη],” presupposes that the individual renounce all of the relative goals in which immediacy is invariably entangled. As the reversal of this relation, dying to immediacy thus means nothing other than “existentially expressing that the individual is capable of doing nothing himself but is nothing before God.”

Yet every effort to realize this goal fails on account of the contradiction between the ideal task and the real conditions of existence. For even when the individual “has surmounted immediacy, with his victory he is nevertheless again in existence and thereby again hindered from absolutely expressing the absolute relation to the absolute τελος.”

The resolution of this paradox is possible only in Christianity (Religiousness B), and thus in an essential relation to the radical break with the immanence of Religiousness A posed by the ‘absolute paradox’ of God becoming man. Like Religiousness A, Christianity also bears a negative relation to immediacy, inasmuch as to the path to Christianity as a process of becoming spirit there corresponds a process of withdrawing oneself out of immediacy, expressed existentially in the human being’s “self-annihilation” before God. In contrast to Religiousness A, Christianity demands a recovery of immediacy, which presupposes – or, put more precisely, accompanies – such a ‘self-annihilation’ of the human being before God. This recovering of immediacy in actuality corresponds to the human being’s rebirth in faith: “No doubt immediacy can be attained again – but the nonsense of ‘The System’ is the contention that it is attained again without a break. Immediacy is attained again only – ethically; immediacy itself becomes the task – you shall attain it...If for a moment I omit all the more specifically dogmatic aspects of the cooperation of

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48 SKS 7, 153 / EO2, 154.
49 SKS 7, 478 / CUP1, 526.
50 SKS 7, 392 / CUP1, 431 (translation slightly altered).
51 SKS 7, 418 / CUP1, 461.
52 SKS 7, 393 / CUP1, 432.
54 See SKS 20, 358, NB4:154 / KN 4, 358.
the spirit, etc., I can define rebirth in this way: it is immediacy won ethically. Ethics or, better, the ethical, is the turning point and from here the movement is into the dogmatic.\footnote{SKS 22, 40, NB11:62 / JP 1, 972 (translation slightly altered).}

As was the case with the transition to ‘the new immediacy’ of faith in the epistemological sense, the recovery of immediacy in the ontological-existential sense demanded by Christianity does not proceed ‘without a break.’ As an ethical task, the recovery of immediacy makes only a \textit{relative} fresh start possible, not a total one. For regarded \textit{sub specie christianitatis}, immediacy is, like innocence, “lost from the beginning”\footnote{Ibid.} – through the Fall. The ethical is merely ‘the turning point’ toward the dogmatic: the doctrine of sin and the atonement effected by Christ.

Frater Taciturnus’s remarks on the forgiveness of sins in \textit{Stages on Life’s Way} (1845)\footnote{See SKS 6, 437-446 / SLW, 474-485.} make clear that the recovery of immediacy in the Christian sense represents a paradox that can only be believed. Through the repentance that always precedes the forgiveness of sins, the human being discovers that sin is nothing discrete or one-off, but is “radical,” which implies “that immediacy is regarded as something that is not valid.”\footnote{SKS 6, 443 / SLW, 482.} The difficulty in the forgiveness of sins, accordingly, is “to become so \textit{transparent} to oneself that one knows that one does not exist at any point by virtue of immediacy, yes, so that one has become another person.”\footnote{SKS 6, 444 / SLW, 483 (emphasis mine); compare also SKS 11, 130 / SUD, 14 et passim.} The one difficulty – that immediacy must be canceled – is linked to another, namely, “that immediacy is even canceled as sin”; and this raises the most difficult questions of all, which are encapsulated in the \textit{single} problem of “how an immediacy can return.”\footnote{Ibid. (translation slightly altered); see also SKS 27, 481-483, Papir 402 / JP 2, 1214.} In any case, as Frater Taciturnus remarks in closing, the problem of the forgiveness of sins overwhelms both his understanding and his capabilities: “once I had understood it myself I would surely find the place and time and the space for exposition.”\footnote{SKS 6, 446 / SLW, 485.}

“To believe the forgiveness of sins is a paradox, the absurd.”\footnote{SKS 27, 481, Papir 402 / JP 2, 1214; see also SKS 7, 204-207 / CUP1, 224-227; SKS 20, 187, NB2:115 / KJN 4, 185.} For this reason, the radical \textit{revaluation} of existence made possible by Christianity’s paradoxical external reference “to a given historical fact in time”\footnote{SKS 4, 294 / PF, 96.} must seem entirely inconceivable to an observer with a standpoint \textit{outside} faith. This applies also to Frater Taciturnus, whose unbeliever’s perspective permeates his representation of “the unity of the comic and the tragic,”\footnote{SKS 6, 444 / SLW, 483.} much as a similar perspective pervades the claims of the humorist Johannes Climacus, who in the \textit{Concluding Unscientific Postscript} takes up the problem formulated by Frater
Taciturnus, but progresses no further than he.\textsuperscript{65}

The rebirth of the human being in faith should be regarded not as a return to an initial supralapsarian immediacy, but as an infralapsarian retrieval of a non-alienated origin, and thus as a \textit{total}\textsuperscript{66} fresh start: “he is like a new man.”\textsuperscript{67} Kierkegaard’s talk of ‘losing’ and ‘recovering’ immediacy can thus be understood as a relation-ontological (rather than substance-ontological) interpretation of Luke 17:33: “Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.” For what is it that the human being \textit{re}covers in faith? Not anyone else, but he himself: he who has become \textit{transparent} to himself as grounded in God. This is he himself in his non-alienated origin – but yet anew: from God’s hands.

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\textsuperscript{65} See \textit{SKS} 7, 317f. / \textit{CUP} 1, 347.
\textsuperscript{66} See \textit{SKS} 21, 189, NB8:107 / \textit{KJN} 5, 197; \textit{SKS} 18, 302, JJ:486 / \textit{KJN} 2, 278.
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{SKS} 27, 482, Papir 402 / \textit{JP} 2, 1214; see also \textit{SKS} 27, 487f., Papir 409:1 / \textit{JP} 1, 66; \textit{SKS} 21, 285, NB10:56 / \textit{KJN} 5, 296.