

Kierkegaard's search for an individual.

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Introduction

As a philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard seems to put something 'in between' the reationalistic construct of the philosophers of the time: a new emphasis on the condition of existence.

The Kierkegaardian "[...] *I must exist in order to be able to think and I must have a chance to think in order to exist*"¹ shifts the subject problem set by Descartes into a new position regarding a deeper individual awareness of oneself. For Kierkegaard, man is actually and in principle the unity of finiteness and infiniteness. It is in maintaining this unity that one finds his being. It concerns one's being '[...] *where thinking, feeling and especially taking actions are unified. This unity needs to be created again and again and in every moment. To exist means to create oneself in one's being continually, that means to always act with regards to oneself, world and God.*'² The dynamics of each stage are not characterised by a fluent linearly sequenced transition, but each stage rather demonstrates different perspectives on human self-realization based on one's decisions. Yet one's courage and radical passion consciously oscillate between the finite and infinite, for '*to become a man one needs to take courageous risk*'.

2 Relationship about relationship

Man is therefore created on the basis of contradictions. However the mutual connection of these contradictions cannot be said to be a real *I*. '*Only one's behaviour to this fact defines oneself as I. One's thinking cannot preserve the structure of contradictions his existence is defined by, though everyday practical actions can. We cannot act towards reality only by means of thoughts, for the concept of reality can only contain the thinking, still not the reality itself. However reflection of thought alone is always 'disinterested*'.³ Here the human *I* does not stand for the relationship itself. Rather it is about something having a relationship with itself within mere relationship. Such a relationship must either seem to be produced of itself or established by someone else. Here Kierkegaard as a thinker and believer in God comes to one important point. It is also faith itself that

applies the pressure in this respect. A human can either recognise that he is God-determined or deny his relationship to God. For Kierkegaard it is this latter case in which the human 'is going to miss' his existence. Existence starts becoming meaningless, as the finite does not resound in the infinite, but in itself and therefore in the finite.

3 Dialectics of the stages

It can be said that on the basis of the relationship to one's person and actions towards one's neighbours and God, Kierkegaard distinguished three stages of human existence: aesthetic, ethical and religious. Existence stands for the most internal and abstract personal core of an individual: 'the individual character'. Kierkegaard writes so not only in his work *Sickness unto Death*, but also in other works. With emphasize on the uniqueness of human existence he turns back to it in another form, for example throughout his works *Fear and Trembling* or *Philosophical Fragments*. Aesthetic – being the first stage - is merely sensual. A man appears to be getting lost in the world, he does not realize his being with internal interest, and yet he can live as a 'bon vivant'. He is allowed to do anything, as others are. He can furthermore be respected and honoured by others. However no one can externally recognise that such a man is missing his deeper Self. The world does not care about this position, the world does not enquire into this position. The man is losing himself and silently dying 'inside'. On this sensual existence level alone Kierkegaard declares that aesthetic and religious intersections, being linked into the experience-oriented world, make sense. In this aesthetic stage only one thing matters - to satisfy one's needs, in order for the mechanized routine to be experienced and enjoyed 'right now'. But in contact with eternity man seems to get frightened.

4 Door to death wide open

Kierkegaard is characterised by his presentation of the internal world in different forms. He makes a drama of the human experience of existence. The question of judging actions as good or bad in general terms does not make sense. The question is rather whether *I*, a concrete human, shall act one way or another in the present situation. Kierkegaard's principle of a reflective thinker is

therefore understood in the following way: *'substantive knowledge is the knowledge related to existence'*. While the Hegelian system implies that everything in an abstractedly-set synthesis and its contradictions are balanced in abstraction (thought), Kierkegaard on the other hand stands for the contradiction which intensively persists in the internal experience of a concrete actual living being. In this position the human appears to be a historical being with a basic element of the 'Self wide open', his death being the end. Kierkegaard's manifestation of this openness is clearly defined by the three above mentioned stages of existence; the aesthetic stage – sensual existence due to its passive character – no matter what happens to me – represents a very common situation, as the majority of people not pass beyond this stage.

5 Moral vs. Ethical

Some people, however, manage to determine themselves. Such people are set free from a close dependence on the world. They decline the sensual and decide for the ethical. This is manifested in the ethical existence, being the second stage of the self-knowledge and self-realisation, and which requires a clear decision. This position is expressed in his *Either-Or*. Kierkegaard points out that those compromises do not exist. The more one goes deeper into the Self, the more he is aware of his finiteness and limitations. His limited nature is always revealed if he stands before an established ethical requirement that becomes the subject of a somewhat routine dependence on a required tradition. In this not our virtue crisis, but our morality crisis is manifested. However, to be human in a given moment, to be the man who fully experiences his existence and feels responsible for the given condition of affairs, is difficult enough. Taking into account the requirement of meeting daily responsibilities, it is exceedingly so. Our morality is therefore dissolved in the position expressed by the following phrase: "but we were doing everything required." There occurs some pressure and the feeling of *be yourself* is replaced by a comfortable and natural thought process: do something that was supposed to be done, while the rest is seemingly put aside, even though the 'others' were supposed to do so.

6 End at the beginning

Within this pressure the solution emerges in transition to the third stage of existence - religious one. Everyone, a little dependent on the spiritual power, remembers the fact that the result always comes at the end. If we really want to learn something great in the context of the consciousness of death, we need to pay attention to the origin, *'if the one, who wants to act, wanted to judge oneself according to the result, and one would never reach the origin. Even if the result always fascinates the entire world because of a hero, it remains unworthy. The result is clear when everything is ready and we do not become heroes due to the end (result), but our own initiative'*.⁴ Kierkegaard's internal understanding of human existence brings him to the paradox: though the individual, an individual being, is always greater than the general, within faith, however, the individual single man is equal to the general. That is to say that it stands in an absolute relationship to the absolute. This is and will still be an inaccessible position for rational thinking. I as finiteness have to deny myself *'make my soul empty to leave place for God to come and I to be able to open to the absolute. Relationship to the absolute gives I the image of the infinite reality. It realises that it is here for God. Thanks to the fact that God is the measure it becomes a human I'*.⁵ Religious existence is an expression of the fact that if one denies himself before God, his actual *I* will be realised in faith. Kierkegaard masterly expressed this position in the model of Abraham, who does not ask but obeys God's requirement to offer his son Isaac. Abraham denies his parental love and decides to meet God's commandment in a concrete situation, with the existential feeling coming from himself seeming to shatter in. His faithful obedience bears a deep contradiction itself. It is a leap of faith. It makes it possible for man to move up higher, precisely when God measures man's internal decision.

7 Conclusion

Kierkegaard does not expect philosophy to interpret but to make change. It is not about changing people en masse, but on an individual level. *'Human immortalization leads to the fact that the question of a concrete individual existence became a marginal question. However one cannot accomplish his true existence only by thinking, for abstraction is disinterested, and the existence is*

*the highest human interest.*⁶ Every modern spiritual movement, starting with the Enlightenment, avoided the question of individual human existence. Enlightenment set up Reason on the pedestal of the absolute. Hegel made spirit absolute. Vulgar materialism reduced human to a matter print and Marxism sees the cause of all change in the process of material production. Somehow all led to a society that had defeated the human being en masse. After all, early 20th century Europe was characterised by totalitarian regimes.⁷ The individual, an independent single being, is missing his actual space for self-realization. He is getting lost in something that is not his most natural manifestation. On the other hand current postmodern challenges⁸ make individual's autonomy significant and urgently install the problem of human understanding into the context of the changing environment. Therefore within such a context Kierkegaard's vertical-horizontal view of the man remains irreplaceable.

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¹ KIERKEGAARD, Søren. *Filosofické fragmenty aneb Drobátko filosofie*, p. 27.

² FÜRSTOVÁ, Mária – TRINKS, Jürgen. *Filozofia*, p. 172.

³ FÜRSTOVÁ, Mária – TRINKS, Jürgen. *Filozofia*, p. 172.

⁴ KIERKEGAARD, Søren. *Die Werke*. I.D. (Auswahl) Berlin 1 925, p. 58. Quoted with reference to Popelová 1968, p. 207.

⁵ FÜRSTOVÁ, Mária – TRINKS, Jürgen. *Filozofia*, p. 173.

⁶ FÜRSTOVÁ, Mária – TRINKS, Jürgen. *Filozofia*, p. 174.

⁷ To explore some of the effects of totalitarianism on the life of the church and society, see: VALČO, Michal. Súčasný výzvy pri vyučovaní náboženstva a pri kresťanskom vzdelávaní na Slovensku. In: *Náboženská otázka ve výchově a vzdělávání v Československu (ČR a SR) v letech 1918-2008*. Ostrava: Ostravská univerzita, Pedagogická fakulta, 2010, p. 146.

⁸ VALČO, Michal. Kresťanské cirkvi a výzvy komunikácie v globálnom svete. In: *Globalizácia a náboženstvo*. Prešov: Prešovská univerzita v Prešove, 2011, pp. 53-54.