

## Some Kierkegaardian Elements for a Philosophy of the Existential Subject

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### RESUMEN

¿Quién soy y quién quiero ser? ¿Qué elementos pueden ayudarnos a abordar estas cuestiones que forman parte central del interés filosófico y existencial de Sören Kierkegaard? Plantear estas preguntas y esbozar algunas respuestas de la mano del pensador, sin ahorrarnos algunos comentarios y críticas, es el cometido de este trabajo.

### TEMAS

angustia · decisión · existencia · filosofía del sujeto · Kierkegaard · sí mismo

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## Introduction

According to Kierkegaard we cannot expect to find in his authorship a system a coherent expression of different themes using the different pseudonyms he used (1). The aim of this article is to collect some relevant ideas from his works in order to consider the existential subject. We will try to formulate Kierkegaard's position (or rather through his pseudonyms) on the following questions: Who Am I? and, whom do I want to become? Moreover, we will attempt to consider a Kierkegaardian manner to determine criteria and select the appropriate instruments in answering these questions.

Clarification: We will only use Kierkegaard's name as the same subject even if we know he does not identify himself necessarily with the points of view manifested by his pseudonyms.

### 1. Who am I?

Kierkegaard employs disparate expressions relating to the question of the subject in his writings: human being, oneself, the self, selfhood, the individual... We have not found a sophisticated justification or

development where he justifies these concepts or a minimum philosophical thought for clarifying his conception of subject. We might conclude that this is coherent with his lack of interest of assuming the label of a philosopher as well as his disinterest in establishing a coherent system. Nevertheless, with regards to his philosophical reflections on the concrete existent (the subject or the self in the way as we live: feeling, thinking, reasoning, ignoring, becoming aware, wanting to be ourselves...) we find that Kierkegaard displays an effort to be more organised, at least in Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death*, where he presents a systematic phenomenology of despair that it is a philosophy of the subject. A philosophy of the subject "I am", and especially of the subject "I want to become". Therefore, despair is not the fundamental issue by itself, so much as we are placed in an existential feeling linked to the self in its different aspects (ignorance about who I am; fight for becoming myself; resistance to becoming myself; lack or excess of possibilities to be myself...).

Before we continue, it is necessary to define what a subject is, and to offer certain characteristic traits.

An individual is something or someone singular (from Latin: "individuus", indivisible and minimum unity). We would then expect each one person to be a coherent individual, which holds true when we consider humans as distinct biological unities. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard believes animals and plants do not exist as individuals, but only human beings, who are the only concrete and existent beings. At the interior of each individual we find a social and a personal self. A self contains social goals, but with a personal life linked to its own internal teleology (Kierkegaard 1843: 553) (2). There exist two principal tasks for the human being: to separate what is in himself the merely social and external goals from his most important projects and values: who he wants to become. However, neither is it clear that we will find a unique model of existence inside ourselves, because our social self is intrinsically mixed with the inner self, and because of the plural nature of our most innermost self-renders the enterprise impossible. We do not consider it possible to separate both in a clearly defined way manner. In this sense, we have to conceive our unified individual existence as dual and plural, where each self is not only motivated by freedom but also by contradictory motives and passions that are irreconcilable, and which we are often unaware of (3). Thus, Kierkegaard seems to admit in the very nature of existence of an unconscious dimension that it is able to make choices and inhabited by "dark powers" (Kierkegaard 1843: 483).

For "the self", existence is problematic and its resolution remains enigmatic, if not impossible in at least three fundamental ways.

1) Life is a masquerade full of illusions. We are obligated to live with other people, according to social rules and values that we were born into

and did not choose, and without fully understanding either the roles we have been assigned to play or those of others. (Kierkegaard 1843: 479).

2) My own self is enigmatic for the other and for myself. Everyone is living continuously in the dilemma either/or and we each build our own personal lives in this way too (Kierkegaard 1843: 479, 480).

3) "One should be an enigma not just to others but to oneself too. I study myself" (Kierkegaard 1843: 47). We are continually confined to social interactions where we have assigned the self as a task: to fully realize the "self" through the process of living and to influence the devolvement of our "self". In order for this to be possible we have to discover as much as we can about the enigma of existence and of our own existence so that we might be loyal to ourselves and achieve the difficult balance between necessity and possibility as we undertake the continuous and enigmatic dialectic between temporality and eternity, facts and imagination, body and soul, present and future... in spite of the typical self remains an imperfect self (Kierkegaard 1843: 553, 550).

A fundamental part of this enigmatic subject is the indeterminacy and the freedom of the self. That is what makes possible to choose and for Kierkegaard this choice endows human nature with dignity (even if we can call this dignity a despairing dignity related to the either/or dilemma) (4), that is, each human can acquire a history (5).

Alastair Hannay in *The Sickness unto Death*, characterizes the self is not "as some kind of substance or thing, some entity, which the human being ineluctably *is*, or assembles itself into being, but a 'relation' which 'relates to itself'. This self-relating relation, or self-relating synthesis, is what Kierkegaard calls *spirit*" (Hannay 2004: 20-21). We could identify this relation with the capacity of thought; the "I" is obliged towards self-reflection, and we are forced to observe ourselves. Here, the "I" is in relation with "me". As Hannay puts it, "the self is its consciousness of itself" (Hannay 2004: 24). Even "one can be less or more of a self, depending on the degree of one's self-consciousness" and it would be before God when we could achieve the highest degree of consciousness: "So long as it is assumed that identity is conferred in the eyes of another, God is the only resort for an individual for whom no intercomparative identity counts" (Hannay 2004: 7-10).

We can guess here one of the paradox or tensions in the self, according to Kierkegaard: a self in a continuous and dialectical process that combine in a descriptive and in a normative sense the most possible level of awareness but also take into consideration the enigmatic, the own task to discover the own task and her achievement. In this sense, it becomes imperative in any discussion to link "self" and "consciousness" to the praxis and the moral dimension (Hannay 2004: 24). Perhaps it is this self-consciousness that we have to consider as the "primordial self"

that "can never be fundamentally harmed by contingent failures" (Söderquist 2016: 3), and therefore it is the refuge, the hinge, and one of the motors to drive from the question about who I am to the question about who I want to become, not in a only direction, given that we are in a dialectic movement and in a continuous discernment for building our own history in dialogue with the imagined and unexpected possibilities that become real.

## **2. Who do I want to become?**

We would like to emphasize three elements in Kierkegaard's time that he believed led to the growing alienation of the individual: a) Socialism and Hegelian and Marxist philosophies, which underlined the social side of human being, b) rapidly evolving mass media such as radio and newspaper that began to have greater and greater influence on public opinion c) the mistaken focus of the Danish and Lutheran Church on the public, as opposed to the ideal Christian mediation with God which would center around an individual's relationship with his Creator.

We can begin to reflect on this problem by considering the negatives: Who I do not want to become, or what must I avoid in order to be myself. And while this may appear to be an abstract question, it's possible to offer a concrete answer: I do not want my destiny, my vocation, chosen by someone but chosen by me. Kierkegaard fears we can lose our personality because of social influence, and for him this is the worst possible scenario: "Or can you imagine anything more frightful than that it might end with your nature dissolving into a multitude, with your really becoming many, losing the innermost, the most holy thing in a man, the unifying power of personality?" (Kierkegaard 1843: 479).

We might believe that we could answer the question of who I want to be by getting married or getting a job. However, even if we can think about the process to choose in each of these fields including our own choices in our individual identity, this is not enough for Kierkegaard, who addresses the self with far greater complexity, and delves into the inextinguishable despair inherent in existence. For Kierkegaard, it would be impossible to hide this despair with activities or with people:

"Another person might say: 'Get married; then you'll have something else to think about.' (...) If you cannot maintain yourself, you will hardly find another capable of doing that. Or one might say, 'Apply for some office, throw yourself into business life, that's a distraction, and you will forget your melancholy; work, that's the best thing.' You might manage to reach the point where it seems as though forgotten, but forgotten it is not; now and then it will still erupt, more dreadfully than ever; it might then be able, as hitherto it has not, to take you by surprise. Besides, whatever

you think of life and its affairs, you will think too chivalrously of yourself to choose a position for that reason, for it is, after all, a kind of falsehood, just as marrying on that account. What then are you to do? I have only one answer: 'Despair!'" (Kierkegaard 1843: 510-511).

One of the most ingenious elements in Kierkegaardian philosophy is the ability to use our emotions as a barometer to gauge the quality of our existence, i.e. if we are aware of who we are and who we want to become, if we are trying to be ourselves or, on the contrary, if we are running away of ourselves. Someone who has never read Kierkegaard might unjustly deny his conceptualization of despair, assuming it to be only important for him, or in and of itself. However, the Kierkegaardian theoretical conceptualization of despair is extremely rich; despair can be a good guide for living more genuinely, and serve to better listen to one's self, to one's internal compass (6). Moreover, in spite of we cannot choose a lot of things, we might find a certain relief in ourselves if we take control of our own manner of doing things. But this is not enough. The ethical and absolute imperative for Kierkegaard is the internal task where the universal and the particular are together: do my duty and "even though it is impossible for another man to say what my duty is, it will always be possible for him say what his duty is" (Kierkegaard 1843: 554).

Are we alone with respect our own task? Apparently yes, and in the profoundest sense, yes, but not absolutely. To reach the ethical point "it is possible for one man to help another" (Kierkegaard 1843: 490) and someone who lives ethically and "stands a step higher" could explain to another and to enlighten him (Kierkegaard 1843: 492), in a way that can remind us of the initiation to the ancient wisdoms. But the wise can only help us to grow closer to ourselves. And we are alone again before the most important occupations: "to win yourself"; "to take possession of yourself" (Kierkegaard 1843: 482); "to cultivate yourself" (Kierkegaard 1843: 480, 486, 550); "to become self-aware and to assume responsibility"; "to be my own work"; "to live ethically" (Kierkegaard 1843: 542, 545). We remember what ethics means for Kierkegaard: "that it is that whereby a man comes to be what he becomes. So, it wants not to make the individual into another but into himself; it wants no to do away with the aesthetic but to transfigure it. To live ethically is necessary for a person to become aware of himself" (Kierkegaard 1843: 544-545) (7). If "inward work is the true life of freedom" (Kierkegaard 1843: 489), do we have any criteria or instruments to carry out this labour?

### **3. Instruments and criteria**

Again, we come up against the contradictory, multifaceted and multiform Kierkegaard. As readers, we try to we forge a framework to understand

and to interpret what we read, even unconsciously. What about the book of life? Reality is constantly changing. As are we. The real subject Kierkegaard was constantly changing and not only from one to another period but in a same time. He was able to express different points of view and so to conceive them and perhaps to have them as own thoughts. His "self" was constantly evolving and that "self" was nor more than a discontinuity of characters, and finally a discontinuity of selves unified only under the aspiration of becoming authentically himself. According to Kierkegaard "a self that lacks narrative continuity is not a self at all" (Söderquist 2013: 359). We can add this is lastly the decisive continuity expressed in the historical past that we have to assume as a part of the reality in the inexorable passing of time (8).

In this way, we can take all the paradoxes and the contradictions in Kierkegaard's work and to take advantage of all the elements in each moment and different circumstances. For example, we can read in this way *The Sickness unto Death*, identifying in each moment the despair caused by the lack of finitude or infinitude; the lack of necessity or possibility. Or we might ascribe the cause to the despair caused by unconsciousness, or alternately by our own consciousness— to a desire *to be oneself*, or to *not be oneself*.

Perhaps in certain situations we need to think and imagine new possibilities for the self, and even to conceive of the opposite: to become present to ourselves in the present moment. We might experience a need to imitate the lilies of the field and the birds of the air – as in the Gospel –, in the art of silence only trusting in the silence of the night, because he is the only silent (Kierkegaard 1843: 51), or we can need to write and to publish a lot of books like Kierkegaard about our inner life. We can combine despair with joy, sorrow with laughter (Kierkegaard 1843: 57), and candidness with irony.

Kierkegaard's philosophy is more complex than a simple existentialism, and it is also more complex than a type of mysticism focused on the present moment. We can be aware of our passions, emotions and ways of controlling them (it is not possible to create them) and to seize the moment, just as an experienced sailor might do (Kierkegaard 1843: 239). We can find inspiration in the lilies of the field, in the moment to be present to ourselves, rejoicing this day, rejoicing in our existence, if we are brought low by an absurd despair. Paradoxically, we can also become aware as a free subjects who live "in the present, making decisions about what I ought to become" (Söderquist 2010: 1) (in the future) and perhaps the anxiety can be useful to become aware of, and seriously consider the responsibility of the choice: "I can imagine no unhappier and more agonizing life than that of someone who has got his duty outside him and yet is constantly wanting to realize it" (Kierkegaard 1843: 546). In a moment, we can employ the imagination and give our faith over to future possibilities (Kierkegaard 1849a: 69), whereas in

another moment the best choice might be to look backwards and to become 'reconciled' with the past in a religious attitude (Söderquist 2013: 360). But again, it is possible to remember a past which has had no reality for us can be make us the "genuinely unhappy individuals" (Kierkegaard 1843: 215) All the casuistry is possible and all the casuistry is possible for the same person (9) ...

Kierkegaard's philosophy offers us guidance and tools for developing our emotional intelligence and awakening our consciousness.

#### -Intellectual Development:

While Kierkegaard did not explicitly state this quality in his work, he implies that it is both useful and necessary in growing more conscious, as well as becoming more critical and rational, and his intellectual framework assumes a certain mental fitness, not to say— intellectual development.

#### -Self Reflection:

"Ask yourself with the solemn uncertainty with which you would address a person you knew was capable of deciding your life's happiness with a single word, ask yourself even more seriously, for in truth it is a question of salvation. Stay not the flight of your soul, do not sadden what is your better part, do not enervate your soul with half wishes and half thoughts. Ask yourself, and keep on asking until you find the answer, for one can recognize a thing many times and acknowledge it, one can want a thing many times and attempt it, yet only the deep inner movement, only the indescribable motions of the heart, only these convince you that what you have recognized 'belongs unto you', that no power can take it from you; for only the truth that edifies is truth for you". (Kierkegaard 1843: 608, 609)

#### -Awareness & Acceptance of a Transient Reality:

"Having perfected the art of forgetting and the art of remembering, one is then in a position to play battledore and shuttlecock with the whole of existence. A person's resilience can really be measured by the power to forget. A person unable to forget will never amount to much" (Kierkegaard 1843: 234-235).

#### -Decisions & The Assumption of Responsibility:

This is only possible if we are self-aware; an ethical life only can be put into practice if someone is connected with reality (Kierkegaard 1843: 542): "it is important to choose rightly even when the choice in itself is harmless; to test oneself so as never to have to begin a retreat to the point one started out from, and thank God for having nothing worse to

reproach oneself for than wasting time" (Kierkegaard 1843: 477).

"The moment of choice is for me very serious, less on account of the rigorous pondering of the alternatives, and of the multitude of thoughts that attach to each separate link, than because there is a danger afoot that at the next moment it may not be in my power to make the same choice" (Kierkegaard 1843: 483).

"The main thing, the only saving thing, is that always, in relation to his own life, a man is not his uncle but his father" (Kierkegaard 1843: 556).

"At the instant of choice, then, he is in the most complete isolation for the withdraws from the surroundings, and yet is at the same instant in absolute continuity for he chooses himself as product; and this choice is freedom's choice, so that in choosing himself as product he can just as well be said to produce himself. At the instant of choice, the, he is at the conclusion, for his personhood forms a closure; and yet in the same instant he is precisely at the beginning for he chooses himself in respect of his freedom. As product, he is pressed into the forms of reality, in the choice he makes himself elastic, he transforms the whole of his outwardness to inwardness. He has his place in the world, with freedom he himself chooses his place, i.e., he chooses this place. He is a definite individual, in the choice he makes himself into a definite individual, that is to say, into the same, for he chooses himself". (Kierkegaard 1843: 542-543).

-Decisions & Criteria:

One of the most impressive elements of freedom in Kierkegaard's writings is the importance of choices in relation to our own personality (Kierkegaard 1843: 482). He considers the importance of the imagination in different situations to make a decision (for example, someone who doubts if he wants to become a priest, a lawyer etc.) (Kierkegaard 1843: 484) and in general "the act of choosing is a literal and strict expression of the ethical. Wherever it is a matter of an either/or in a stricter sense, one can always be sure that the ethical is involved" (Kierkegaard 1843: 485).

But even we could choose how we see the world and the way in what we live and, consequently, the criteria to evaluate our decisions and their results. So, Kierkegaard adds nuance and complexity to the dilemma: "My either/or does not denote in the first instance the choice between good and evil, it denotes the choice whereby one chooses good and evil or excludes them. The question here is, under what categories one wants to contemplate the entire world and would oneself live" (Kierkegaard 1843: 486).

We would like to emphasize this last quotation, and in particular: a) the



criteria of energy, earnest and feeling to choose, and b) a spiritual interpretation of choices. Kierkegaard explains: "If you will understand me aright, I could quite well say that in choice it is less a matter of choosing correctly than of the energy, earnest and feeling with which one chooses. The personality thereby proclaims itself in its inner infinitude, and the personality is thereby consolidated in turn. So even if a person chose what was wrong, he would still, because of the energy with which he chose it, discover that what he had chosen was wrong. For inasmuch as the choice is undertaken with all the personality's inwardness, his nature is purified and he himself is brought into immediate relation to the eternal power whose omnipresence interpenetrates the whole of existence. This transfiguration, this higher initiation, is never discovered by someone who chooses merely aesthetically" (Kierkegaard 1843: 486).

#### 4. Some final considerations

I believe Kierkegaard attributes too much importance to the inner self in his teleology so that he forgets we can find our vocation not only through introspection, but also in social interaction and development of knowledge of the natural and social sciences, the arts, spiritualities, philosophies and other fields of learning, given that each particular selfhood is also constructed through similar human conditions. We are able to draw on other sources in developing our consciousness. Also, I would also discount the importance of the "teleology" if we admit the intersubjective nature of the subject and his continuous evolution, just as epigenetics studies how the environment activates (or does not) different genes, which produces distinct biological results. In this case, we would not speak about the discovery of our *purpose* in terms of teleology or with reference to Platonic ideals, but rather we would always underline the connection with our own reality and circumstances.

Kierkegaard takes a risk when he conceives the subjective truth as the absolute. As with Nietzsche, we can speak in terms of an aristocratic moralism. The pretension of a superman who is able to create values by himself independent of society and all others. However, we can conceive the other not only as a threat to the "inner authenticity", but in the sense of opportunities; the other can be a model for our own life, and serve to inspire us. To be aware is also to be aware about the impurity of the subjectivity, which is always inevitably influenced and composed by social and cultural elements. To be aware means to be alert against rivalry and knee-jerk reactions in our choices. Perhaps the relationship of Kierkegaard with his friend the bishop Mynster affected Kierkegaard inasmuch as the bishop was a model-obstacle. Kierkegaard wanted to fulfill his father's wish that he become a pastor, which may have been his own deep-seated desire as well (or not). We can imagine beyond his critics

he found inspiration in other pastors like his friend, who refused to give to him a parish where he could become pastor. Would Kierkegaard have criticised the Danish Church in the same way if the bishop had given him a parish?

Our conclusions are necessarily limited, and were we to resume them by quoting Aranguren who called Kierkegaard "the personification of contradiction", and yet limited though they might be, I believe they go to the heart of the problems present in Kierkegaard's philosophy.

We conclude with the main objection that we would like to consider. We cannot only interpret the either/or dilemma in terms of despair and anxiety. According to Kierkegaard we may try to reconcile our self with our past, and it does not matter if it was either/or; we can live in and enjoy the present like the lilies of the field and the birds of the air in all circumstances either/or without. The challenge is to rejoice in all moments without becoming alienated.

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## Notas

1. "Kierkegaard's Pseudonyms and the Polyphony of Voices. (...) The pseudonymous structure makes it difficult to simply attribute the positions presented in these works to Kierkegaard. (...) The genre is obviously closer to fiction than metaphysics" (Söderquist 2013: 348). In the same sense, M. García-Baró claims: "he was Legion rather than an only man", also referring Kierkegaard wrote using different authors in only some months (García-Baró 2010: 11).

2. It is very difficult to isolate the social and inner self, even if we do not discredit this way of thinking about the sense. Furthermore, the greatest intimacy is often mediated by social, cultural and intersubjective dimensions, including the God image. And yet, there is no an isolated essence of us, and neither is there a God completely separated of cultural and inherited images.

3. "Thus, even the humblest individual has a dual existence. Also, he has a history, and this is not just a product of his own free actions" (Kierkegaard 1843: 489). "Generally, I have so many and usually mutually contradictory reasons that, for that reason, it is impossible for me to give reasons" (Kierkegaard 1843: 47). "If anyone should keep a diary it's me, to aid my memory a little. After a while it often happens that I completely forget what reasons motivated me to do this or that, not just in bagatelles, but also in the most decisive steps. Should the reason then occur to me, sometimes it seems so strange that I myself refuse to believe it was the reason. This doubt would be removed if I have something written to refer to. In any case a reason is a curious thing; if I concentrate all my passion on it, it grows into a huge necessity that can move heaven and earth; if I lack passion, I look down on it with scorn" (Kierkegaard 1843: 50).

4. We find at the end of this passage an echo of Pico della Mirandola when he formulated the human dignity in his classic *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, and we can extrapolate that it may well have had an influence in Kierkegaard given the thematic similarities, and remarkably convergent conclusions: "So it is freedom I am fighting

for (...) the future, for either/or. That is the treasure I plan to bequeath to those whom I love in the world; yes, if my little son were at this moment of an age that he could understand me and my last hour had come, I would say to him, 'I leave you no fortune, no title and honours, but I know where a treasure lies buried which can make you richer than the whole world; and this treasure belongs to you, and you are not even to thank the whole world; and this treasure belongs to you, and you are not even to thank me for it, so no injury is done to your soul through owing a man everything; this treasure is deposited in your own inner being: it is an either/or which makes a man greater than the angels' (...) I want to say that choosing gives to a man's nature a solemnity, a quiet dignity, that is never entirely lost" (Kierkegaard 1843: 490).

5. "For the eternal dignity of man lies in the fact that he can acquire a history, and the divine element in him lies in the fact that he himself can impart to this history a continuity if he will" (Kierkegaard 1843: 542).

6. "Whatever can be the meaning of this life? If we divide mankind into two large classes, we can say that one works for a living, the other has no need to. But working for one's living can't be the meaning of life; to suppose that constantly procuring the conditions of life should be the answer to the question of the meaning of what they make possible is a contradiction. Usually the lives of the other class have no meaning either, beyond that of consuming the said conditions. To say that the meaning of life is to die seems again to be a contradiction. The real pleasure consists not in what one takes pleasure in but in the mind. If I had in my service a humble spirit who, when I asked for a glass of water, brought me all the world's most expensive wines nicely blended in a goblet, I would dismiss him until he learned that the pleasure consists not in what I enjoy but in having my way" (Kierkegaard 1843: 49).

7. Kierkegaard continues: "so totally that no accidental feature escapes him. The ethical does not want to erase this concretion but sees in it its task, sees from what it must build and what is to be built. People generally consider the ethical altogether abstractly and therefore they have a secret horror of it. The ethical is then looked upon as something alien to personal being, and one shrinks from abandoning oneself to it, for one cannot quite sure what it may lead to in the course of time" (Kierkegaard 1843: 545).

8. Against the Romantic authors that pretended to ignore the past creating a new self in a fictional world (cfr. Söderquist 2013: 358-360).

9. "So the unhappy one is absent. But one is absent either when living in the past or when living in the future. The form of expression is important, for it is evident, as philology also teaches us, that there is a tense that expresses presence in the past, and a tense that expresses presence in the future, as well as a future perfect tense with the same characteristic. These are the hoping and the remembering individuals. Inasmuch as they are only hoping or only remembering, these are indeed in a sense unhappy individuals, if otherwise it is only the person who is present to himself that is happy" (Kierkegaard 1992: 214).

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