KIERKEGAARD'S 'SICKNESS UNTO DEATH' AS A RESOURCE IN OUR SEARCH FOR PERSONAL AUTHENTICITY

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Abstract

Having transcended the mythical conception of time, the European philosophical thinking set on the trajectory of establishing subjecthood. The 'agape personalism' of Ocepek and Milbank (among others) ensued, building primarily on the emphasis on the individual and his relatedness to himself and to Other. The legacy of S. Kierkegaard and his strand of theological existentialism has been and may continue to be a valuable resource for developing the agape personalism in our striving to bring about an existential revolution on the inner-personal as well as inter-personal levels. This becomes most obvious upon reading his masterpiece in theological anthropology, *The Sickness unto Death.* Kierkegaard here grounds authentic subjectivity in a double relatedness of a human individual's self – as self relates to itself and as this relatedness relates to Other in faith.

Keywords: authentic individual, sickness, death, theological anthropology, sin

1. Introduction - Ocepek's search for authentic subjecthood

The humanist emancipation of the single individual in the modern times seems to inadvertently also entail a sense of a crushing burden – the unbearable burden of freedom. Summarizing and commenting on Emmanuel Lévinas's article 'Some Thoughts on the Philosophy of Hitlerism' [1], the renown Slovenian philosopher, Miklavž Ocepek, points out that "what was constitutive for the European civilization was man's transcendence of the mythical world. This enabled man to establish himself as a subject, while in the midst of mythical life where *autonomy is unknown, subjecthood is an impossibility*. Man does not understand himself out of himself in this scenario, but out of his past and fate. The philosophy of Hitlerism reverts back to this condition. Therein lies man's unfreedom; because he cannot disentangle himself from the past, he is essentially circumscribed by history." [2]

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Furthermore, following up on his own, gloomy appraisal of humanity's post-Holocaust and post-Stalinist existential situation [2, p. 9-22], Ocepek desires to probe into and to establish "a new philosophical and essentially different perspective that nevertheless remains open to Metaphysics beyond the ontology and the rationality of the traditional Metaphysics" [3]. This, he believes, will only be possible if in our "attitude towards the *not-given* which remains invisible" we acknowledge the demand for "a leap from the level of being to the level of responsibility" [3], thus placing the epistemological priority on Ethics [2, p. 64; 4].

Picking up on this strand of thought, Milbank argues for what we might label an 'agape personalism,' when he says: "Love is always *personal* and *singular*, so that the highest thing which all can offer is now nothing general to which they should aspire; it is instead simply their given *real selves*, their own uniqueness, which is inseparable from their unique set of relations to others. In clear continuity with this personalism, later western humanism and Romanticism considered that the really democratic element is 'genius,' the 'originality' of each and every one which tends to be suppressed by over-scrupulosity concerning rules, or over-veneration of the specificity of the past productions of acknowledged ability." [5]

Kierkegaard, among others, reminds us precisely of the importance of an intentional cultivation of the individual human self, reflecting and relating to itself and the (human) other, while consciously receiving its being, dignity, and direction/destiny from the (divine) Other. A valuable lesson for us rests in learning to live with a creative tension between immanence and transcendence, caring unreservedly about the temporal and hoping ferociously for the eternal; or, as George McLean argues, shifting our reflection "from being a work of deduction … working in abstraction from the process of human life, to deep engagement under the pressure of life's challenges at the center of human concerns" [6]. Ethics in the form of an 'agape personalism' may thus assume an epistemological priority, without disqualifying further explorations into ontology and fresh renderings of Metaphysics (perhaps of Ocepek's kind). (Commenting on Lévinas' *Totality and Infinity - Totalité et Infini; Essai sur L'exteriorité* [4], Ocepek states: "In his critique of totality, Lévinas advances his evaluation of the history of Philosophy. He interprets it as an attempt at a universal synthesis and reduction of every experience and reasoning into a totality, where consciousness encompasses the whole world and does not allow for anything outside itself — thought thus becomes absolute." [2, p. 60]. This might be where Ocepek, if not Lévinas himself, sees room for a 'new metaphysics.')

2. Kierkegaard and the Kantian 'moral autonomy'

Kierkegaard's view of Ethics has long been seen in congruence with that of Kant. David Humbert points out that both "Kant and Kierkegaard, according to MacIntyre, accept the modern paradigm of moral activity for which freedom

of the will is the ultimate basis. Ronald M. Green, in *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt*, accepts and deepens this alignment between the two thinkers. Green argues that Kierkegaard deliberately obscured his debt to Kant by a systematic 'misattribution' of his ideas to other thinkers, and to classical philosophy in particular (p. 310)." [7]

David Humbert in his recent study on this topic, however, maintains that both "MacIntyre and Green are mistaken in identifying Kierkegaard with the Kantian tradition of moral autonomy and that they overlook his debt to the classical conception of virtue. In casting Kierkegaard in the role of the quintessential exponent of a modern conception of freedom, they have perhaps overlooked one of the greatest *critics of moral autonomy* who has ever lived." [7] One of the most obvious works of Kierkegaard that we may explore in support of this point is his profound masterpiece of theological anthropology – *The Sickness unto Death* [8].

In this work Kierkegaard sets out, in a rather complex and profound way, to present his mature notion of the *self,* which he regards both as the bearer as well as the goal of understanding. His dynamic, relational account of the self provides a groundbreaking anthropological perspective in that, instead of defining the self statically (i.e. substantively), Kierkegaard goes on defining the self relationally by means of an existential ontology of freedom and potentiality. The humans self is thus being conceived of as an 'emerging' reality which is being constituted in the vary act of relating to itself. To become a fully constituted self, however, Kierkegaard maintains that the 'self-aware' self must relate its own relatedness to the divine origin of its being. For Kierkegaard, this divine source of each self's existence is a personal God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of Jesus (Logos incarnated).

3. Kierkegaard's 'authentic individual' - a case study on 'Sickness unto Death'

Evoking 'idealized Christianity,' with which Kierkegaard does not dare to identify himself, Kierkegaard finally writes one of his most profound Christian religious reflections titled *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* (by Anti-Climacus). It was meant to be a supplement to or better yet a companion to his previous piece, *Concept of Anxiety.* In his 'Historical Introduction' to Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*, Howard Hong reminds the reader that the 'Anti' prefix "does not mean 'against.' An old form of 'ante' (before), as in 'anticipate,' the prefix denotes a relation of rank, as in 'before me' in the First Commandment." [9] Hong goes on quoting a text from a Kierkegaard's journal entry, where the author himself explains: "Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus have several things in common; but the difference is that whereas Johannes Climacus places himself so low that he even says that he himself is not a Christian, one seems to be able to detect in Anti-Climacus that he considers himself to be a Christian on

an extraordinarily high level … I would place myself higher than Johannes Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus." [9, 10]

Religion and Psychology are intertwined in the *Sickness unto Death,* as Kierkegaard reflects on the spiritual aspects of despair. "As anxiety is related to the ethical, despair is related to the religious, that is, to the eternal. Despair is anxiety in the face of the eternal." [S. Storm, *The Sickness unto Death*, in *Kierkegaard Commentary*, http://sorenkierkegaard.org/kierkegaard-commentary. html] Much like Saint Augustine in his autobiographical masterpiece – *Confessions,* centuries before him [11], Kierkegaard goes deep into the human psyche, uncovering distinct, yet somewhat overlapping layers of perception and self-perception, including that of despair. (By publishing his book *Confessions,* Augustine became known as the first known autobiographer with the ability of psychological introspection. What we see in Augustine, in his personal struggle with philosophical ideas and religious cults that allowed him to become one of the most influential Christian philosopher of all times, is a an interesting combination of a 'MacIntyrean' focus on the socially embodied reality of historical traditions and a 'Kierkegaardian' emphasis on the individual inner processing of the transcendental, the 'inwardness' of the human self, and the individual's responsibility before God.)

Kierkegaard distinguishes to basic types, depending on whether the human self is oblivious to the reality of being in despair or whether the self-consciously recognizes that one is despairing (the second type). The qualitative distinction thus is the degree of self-awareness of the individual: "The ever increasing intensity of despair depends upon the degree of consciousness or is proportionate to its increase: the greater the degree of consciousness, the more intensive the despair" [8, p. 42]. On the lowest level is "the despair that is ignorant of being despair or the despairing ignorance of having a self and an eternal self" [8, p. 42]. The second type finds itself on a higher level, attaining a greater degree of self-awareness: "The despair that is conscious of being despair and therefore is conscious of having a self in which there is something eternal" [8, p. 47]. This second type further subdivides into a despair that either "(a) does not will to be itself or (b) in despair wills to be itself" [8, p. 47].

Kierkegaard's point, however, is not to glamour the reader with his sophisticated distinctions but rather, as he points out in his Preface, to provide a cure for the sick: "Everything essentially Christian must have in its presentation a resemblance to the way a physician speaks at the sickbed; even if only medical experts understand it, it must never be forgotten that the situation is the bedside of a sick person" [8, p. 5]. Theological reflection then must not be self-serving. For, as Kierkegaard asserts, "From the Christian point of view, everything, indeed everything, ought to serve for upbuilding. The kind of scholarliness and scienticity that ultimately does not build up is precisely thereby unchristian." [8, p. 5] The supposed objectivity of 'scienticity' in Theology is not only cold and impersonal, but also detached from reality, far removed from the ideal of 'Christian heroism' of the human self standing alone before God. In Kierkegaard's words, to be a Christian hero is rather "to venture wholly to

become oneself, an individual human being, this specific individual human being, alone before God, alone in this prodigious strenuousness and this prodigious responsibility" [8, p. 5]. This is a difficult, terrifying task, however. It is much easier, and therefore much more common, to hide behind 'objective systems,' scientific expositions, to let oneself be occupied by "the idea of man in the abstract or to play the wonder game with world history" [8, p. 5]. Resulting from this is a life of outward mediocrity and inner alienation. Such alienation stifles the human spirit and removes beyond reach any possibility for authentic existence. This leads to one's awareness of his despair, the ultimate despair being an urgent realization that one's life may amount to nothing but a spiritual void with a stamp of eternity on it. In Kierkegaard's words, "to despair over something is still not despair proper. [...] To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself – this is the formula for all despair." [8, p. 19-20]

For a human being, who is a 'synthesis' of spiritual and physical realities, there is no purely immanent solution to his predicament. Despair is the incurable 'sickness unto death' precisely because it represents a fateful tension (or misrelation) between these two entities. And though the despair may appear to be derived from the external realities of this world, the root of the problem goes deep inside the human self, to its inability to relate properly to itself and to the Other, which established the very relation of the self to itself. "*Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another. [...] The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another.*" [8, p. 13-14]

This is a beautiful example of Kierkegaard's 'elastic,' dynamic thinking, expressing the relational character of human identity. The human self is a true self precisely because it realizes itself and is able to enter into an inner dialogue with itself. This would not be possible, according to Kierkegaard, if human being were a static essence, established without any constitutive relation to the Other. "*A self directly before Christ is a self intensified by the inordinate concession from God, intensified by the inordinate accent that falls upon it because God allowed himself to be born, become man, suffer, and die also for the sake of this self. As stated previously, the greater the conception of God, the more self; so it holds true here: the greater the conception of Christ, the more self.*" [8, p. 113-114]

Paradoxically, the constitutiveness of the self's relation to the Other does not abolish its freedom. Kierkegaard does not attempt to resolve but rather highlights the tension between freedom (possibility) and necessity. The inability of the self to relate properly to itself and to the Other is not predetermined or necessary, or imposed on humans, however. Human beings are responsible for how they actualize the potential given to them in their innate ability to relate to oneself and the other. "Despair is the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself. But the synthesis is not the misrelation; it is merely the possibility, or in the synthesis lies the possibility of the misrelation." [8, p. 15] People generally plunge into hopeless attempts to cope with this situation: the

solutions range from denial, rejection (where the typical thing to do is for the self to reject its self-identity, wishing to be someone else) to a defiant aspiration to be completely self-sufficient [12-14].

Switching to a more explicit, Christian theological language, Kierkegaard goes on to label despair as 'sin'. "*Sin is: before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself. Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the intensification of despair. The emphasis is on before God, or with a conception of God; it is the conception of God that makes sin dialectically, ethically, and religiously what lawyers call 'aggravated' despair.*" [8, p. 77]

It is important to notice that Kierkegaard is ruthless to the reader, giving him/her no possibility to dodge, no way to escape. Confronted with its Creator, the self is "no longer the merely human self but is what I … would call the theological self, the self directly before God" [8, p. 79]. Having God as the criterion of its own authenticity (the authenticity of its self-relation), the self finds itself infinitely lacking. Being in despair in relation to God thus actually means being in a state of sinfulness. In such case then, it is not individual acts of sins that make a human sinful but the state of despair/sin results inevitably in sinful acts. Kierkegaard is adamant to emphasize that there is no human solution to this 'sin'. Not even death can liberate the human self, for as Kierkegaard reminds his readers, "eternity has claim upon him" [8, p. 21]. The solution must come from outside of the self, from the 'Other' [15]. In Christian terms, it is only through the revelation of God (the Other that relates to the relating self) in Christ that humans receive the truth about faith being the divine cure to despair [16, 17]. "*The opposite to being in despair is to have faith. Therefore, the formula set forth above, which describes a state in which there is no despair at all, is entirely correct, and this formula is also the formula for faith: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it…*" [8, p. 49]

Thus, the human self can finally rest only in the One who made it. What we hear in these words is echo of Saint Augustine's famous words about the ever restless heart [18] – "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee" [11, p. 3]. It is sin that prevents human being from being existentially anchored, i.e. from 'resting securely' in the divine Other. There are grave consequences of this state of alienation [19, 20]. As Kierkegaard points out, "The antithesis sin/faith is the Christian one that Christianly reshapes all ethical concepts and gives them one additional range" [8, p. 83]. An individual's values must be born out of an 'existential awareness' which manages to keep in balance one's relationships with others through external interactions and one's personal independence (i.e. one's own independent integrity). This is no easy task, though. A balanced, pro-social synthesis of individual freedom and existential integrity only becomes an option after one manages to see through all the deception – self-induced as well as external [21]. This is virtually beyond the reach for the self-centred, 'despairing' individual. Such a change would require a radically new definition of one's self, which is

agonizingly painful. The paradox is that the more a person becomes aware of his existential situation, the more profound is his despair and the more sophisticated his excuses and 'solutions' become. A true existential awareness of the 'authentic self' can only come into existence when one's being is, so to speak, 'de-centred' and 're-centred', that is, when a new centre for an individual's identity (and freedom!) is established. Such a new centre recalibrates one's values, self-perception, decision making, etc. Thus, we may legitimately argue that the teleological suspension of the ethical "is not the nihilistic end of ethics but rather its beginning" [22].

4. Conclusions

For Kierkegaard, especially according to his mature writings after 1848, it is the God of Christianity who alone is able and willing to open up the human self from the inside and to re-centre his whole existence. However, Kierkegaard in his 'Christian/theological writings' fiercely distinguishes between the God of the Old and New Testament on one hand and the doctrines about this God as they are presented and communicated to people by the Danish Church establishment. There is no redeeming system of religious thought; there is no consecrated structure that would automatically lead people to this new, redeemed existence [23]. The truth is revealed in and through subjectivity, for, as Kierkegaard says provokingly, "truth is subjectivity" [24]. Such subjective epistemology, however, is not to be perceived as a neo-gnostic attempt to extract truth from one's own fountain of being, or an esoteric world of spiritual eons, but rather Christologically within the most intimate relatedness possible: "No, his [i.e. Christ's] presence here on earth *never becomes a thing of the past*, thus does not become more and more distant – that is, if faith is at all to be found upon the Earth" [25].

This leads us to yet another interesting paradox. The Kierkegaardian subjective self-examination is not completely stripped of rationality in the sense of an intentional, intellectual self-reflection. Yet, even though intellect is included in the process, it in itself is not the guiding light, nor the driving motivational force, but a mere tool within a movement that is rooted much deeper in one's being (in terms of one's existential self-awareness). Having fulfilled the unconditional self-examination that leads the self to despair, reason has reached its limit and can go no further. Interestingly, human intellectual capacity and even the purest, most sincere reasoning he/she can come up with will only lead him/her to 'despair unto death'. Notice, reason is not even able to truly 'kill' the despairing, i.e. sinful individual, it only manages to lead him to a hopeless, desperate situation of almost dying, robbing one of even the last hope one might have – to escape this precarious condition by having his being annihilated. Such escape, such a 'minimalist' version of deliverance is beyond human reach. For Kierkegaard, only God can put an end to this desperate existence of an endless decay and hopelessness and bring a new, de-centred life out of death.

Such existential revolution is necessary for the coming into existence of an authentic self [26]; such existential revolution is inevitable for a true Christian faith to be experienced; and precisely such existential revolution was utterly missing from the religious vision of Danish church dignitaries. And, for a long time, such existential revolution seemed to have been an unattainable goal for Kierkegaard himself. Then came the fateful year of 1848, fateful for Denmark and for Kierkegaard, and things would never be the same.

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