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# THE CATEGORY OF THE SINGLE INDIVIDUAL IN KIERKEGAARD

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## Abstract

This paper sets out to clarify the determining role of the singular category in the thought and work of the melancholy Danish writer, Søren A. Kierkegaard; especially as can be deduced from his diaries. To do this, the author conducts an analysis of its meaning, dimensions, function and communication. The final conclusion is that this category must be understood as part of a complex of biographical relationships and within a cultural-historical context that is characteristic of the period in which it was Kierkegaard's lot to live.

*Keywords:* individual, single individual, person, category, Christianity

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## 1. Introduction

If one had to choose a single concept and category to define and characterize both the thought [1] and the work [2] of Kierkegaard (and even his life), it would be that of *singularity*, or *single individual* (*Enkelthedens Kategori*) [3]. This is not just my claim, it is what he said himself [4].

The *category of the individual*, like any other, has in Kierkegaard a dual objective-subjective dimension, a double meaning: *ontological* and *gnoseological-linguistic*: a) the way of being real; b) the way of expressing the knowledge of the real. However, I do not mean by this to say that in Kierkegaard there is an ontology as such, nor a theology, a philosophy as such or an anthropology. We must reject as incorrect those interpretations of Kierkegaard's thought that convert him into a theological or philosophical ontologist, or else into a theological or philosophical idealist [5]; he was more of a writer, a poet of Christianity who set out to clarify what being a Christian really means.

As far as the *way of being real* is concerned, this category is for Kierkegaard, in general, part of existence; but, more concretely, part of human existence, of the person, the individual human Christian. In this regard, one can establish a proportionality between the concept of *reality* and of *individuality* or *individual*: the greater the reality, the greater the individuality. In this way, it is possible to establish a hierarchy that would extend from the *inert reality*, the

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lowest rung, up to *personal reality* which is that of the human being. Therefore, one can affirm that all personal reality is individual, but not vice-versa. That is to say, the concept of *individual* encompasses all that of the *person*, manifesting itself therein in its utmost perfection. In this sense, one can say that the person possesses an absolute value [6].

Meanwhile, in the same way, the category of the individual is a *way of expressing knowledge of the real*. In this sense, Kierkegaard makes controversial use of it, against the System, the universal, and the philosophy of Hegel. “Kierkegaard’s positive philosophy did not emerge by spontaneous generation out of nothing; rather, it formed gradually in polemic dialogue with German idealism, which was the predominant philosophy of the period. His position and problematic were strongly influenced by the system of thought against which he reacted critically. He formulated his thought in incessant confrontation with the dominant philosophy in his time, speculative idealism, especially as formulated by Hegel and on the Hegelian right, both German and Danish.” [7] But this was also against established Christianity, in order to sidestep and express the relationship of each person - unique - with God. It has to be said that both aspects of the category of singular (ontological and gnoseological-linguistic) are inseparable.

## 2. The category of singularity as a determining one

For Kierkegaard, the theme of the individual is very meaningful and the most decisive as thinker [3, p. 158]. But as Jólivet says: “in Kierkegaard we find the peculiarity that his thought has been formed less by assimilating alien elements than by a continuous, deep introspection of his own personality, by an increasingly broader and more demanding awareness of the conditions, not just of existence in general, but of his own existing (...), to the point that it will finally make the ‘existing as an Individual’ and the reflex awareness of that existing the absolute condition and even the whole of philosophy” [8].

Hence, to address this question is no small matter, as his contemporaries thought, thereby demonstrating their lack of understanding, but rather a demand made by the social, philosophical and spiritual situation itself that Kierkegaard faced in his time [9] and that made of the *multitude* the predominant category in all spheres. However, with regard to eternal truth, with regard to the ethical-religious, the crowd is the lie because every act or behaviour, every responsible action, is done by the single individual.

The *single individual* alone is the category, the correct point of view from which to consider the great spiritual questions. The Dane held this category in such high esteem and so closely tied was it to his life, that he took it as **his** category: “My category is the single individual. With this category in a dialectical unity my task has been to be a vivifying stimulus in an established order and to defend an established against the numerical, parties, etc. by means of ideals.” [4, X 4 A 377 / JP, p. 6422] He even proposed it as the epitaph for his grave: “this category is so linked to my name that I would like ‘that single

individual' to be placed on my grave" [4, VIII 1 A 108/ *JP*, p. 4141]. And in a text of *The single Individual. Two Notes concerning my Work as Author* [3, vol. 18, p. 162-163], states: "And yet, yes, If I were to request an inscription on my grave, I request none other than *that single individual*. Even if it is not understood now, it surely will be" (In Danish: "Og dog, ja om jeg skulde forlange en Indskrift paa min Grav, jeg forlanger ingen anden end 'hiin Enkelte'; er den end nu ikke forstaaet, sandeligen den vil blive det"). On the other hand, he was also aware that its possible historical importance would be linked to that category [4, VIII 1 A 482 / *JP*, p. 2402].

But Kierkegaard was not interested, with his thinking about the individual, to win over supporters in life; precisely because that would mean a multitude, and what he was searching for was the individual. His predication on the individual does not mean bringing people together (as it generally tends to) but instead to scatter them, to make them singular. Furthermore, the doctrine does not make for individualities, but rather *exemplars*. Consequently, Kierkegaard does not in truth have any doctrine [4, XI 2 A 19 / *JP*, p. 6535]. Kierkegaard did not want any school to form in his footsteps; rather, he intended that his - possible - followers would become real individuals, that is, singular persons. The impression then, that he wanted to give, that he wanted to make manifest, was precisely individuality through his solitary and suffering *single individuality*. The followers, if any, would appear after his death: "The category of 'individuality' [Enkelthedens] is all too crucial to risk being bungled. When I am dead, then the adherents may come, but the impression I have made is unchanged. The category of individuality is the category of eternity, and therefore within temporality it is altogether the most strenuous and the most sacrificing (...). If someone else had gotten the idea of individuality, he would immediately have supplied it with so many adherents that the whole thing would have fizzled out since the manifestation would have become the mob of followers and the idea of individuality would have been disregarded." [4, VIII 1 A 124].

There can be no doubt of the immense importance that this category held for Kierkegaard. However, in his day it was not seen as so important, and even today (generally at the level of popularization) less suspicious researchers and writers of various kinds tend to refer, especially, to other aspects of his thought, such as above all his *doctrine of the three stages*, or to concepts such as *angst*; in general, to Kierkegaard the aesthete. To give an example, we can refer to the case of the American writer Don DeLillo, with regard to Kierkegaard the aesthete [10, 11]; although the influence of Kierkegaard the religious thinker and critic is also true [12]. A contemporary hermeneutics that strikes me as accurate is that of José Luis Cañas in his work *Søren Kierkegaard. Entre la inmediatez y la relación* (*Søren Kierkegaard. Between Immediacy and Relationship*) [13], based on the dialectical application of the concepts of 'immediacy' and 'relationship' in the work of the Danish philosopher. Nevertheless, my personal interpretation of that dialectic would be rather an immediate and reflective relationship, as the relationship is always going to be present, either in a

spontaneous and unconscious way or in a reflective and conscious way. I believe that everything ultimately hangs on the meaning of existence (aesthetic or ethical-religious). In any case, we must stress *single individuality* above all of the other concepts. But what does it mean?

It was undoubtedly the influence of reading Trendelenburg, and indirectly Aristotle, as Kierkegaard has a sound knowledge of Plato's philosophy. He did not begin to read Aristotle until 1844, probably thanks to his admiration for Trendelenburg's work, which determined his point of view on categories and their overriding importance. In this respect, he points out that the study of Trendelenburg on categories led Kierkegaard to search for a new category that would express the characteristic nature of Christian existence. This category was the individual; in this way, he could go beyond Trendelenburg without falling back on the Hegelian concept of the concrete universal [9, p. 125]. Kierkegaard's view is that only a return to the individuality of each person by means of faith makes it possible to escape the speculative circle in which the *System* had locked man [14]. To denote this, he uses a new category, the single individual (*den Enkelte* in Danish).

However, it is evident from a text in the *Diary* [4, V A 98 / *JP*, p. 3514] that his preoccupation with the doctrine of categories dates back a long way; therefore, it pre-dates his knowledge of the German thinker. In fact, and more specifically, Kierkegaard did not read Trendelenburg before 1843, after publishing his work *Repetition*. In fact, his opinion of Trendelenburg until then had not been at all positive, and in his first trip to Berlin in 1841 he was the only one he was not interested in listening to. He regretted this later, even acknowledging that: "There is no modern philosopher from whom I have profited so much as from Trendelenburg" [4, VIII 1 A 18 / *JP*, p. 5317]. Such a change of posture can be explained by the rejection of Hegelianism, which the German thinker had followed in his early years. Kierkegaard found in him a point of support and a reference, a relief or source of comfort, faced with the dominant Hegelian intellectual atmosphere.

### **3. Dimensions, meaning and dialectics of the category of the single individual**

To be an individual, in the sense of a *single being, a person or unique*, is not an innate matter; in reality one is not born as such, although as we are human beings in a certain sense we already are. In other words, — and if I am not misinterpreting Kierkegaard — one must *become singular*, which is what, moreover, we really and essentially are. We can say that we are all already individuals, but not in the same way, not with the same intensity and awareness. Because I can be an *insignificant* individual who lives peacefully lost among the multitude or the crowd; or conversely an *eminent* individual, who stands out from the rest; or even better, be an individual in a strict sense, be a *religious* individual; that is, to be a singular individual who helps others by freeing them from the tyranny of the mass, of the crowd [4, X 2 A 394 / *JP*, p. 4164].

Something to which Kierkegaard devoted his existence dialectically [4, X 4 A 377 / *JP*, p. 6422].

That is to say, the afore-mentioned category is used by Kierkegaard to, on the one hand, rouse his fellow-citizens as true individuals and, on the other hand, advocate and ideally preserve the existence of the individual in opposition to the mass. Both senses are presented as linked in a dialectal way. What this means is that they co-implicate or refer to each other, as the two extremes of the same reality: Kierkegaard's existential task as a single individual that is projected in his thought and throughout his work. In other words: the category of the singular has a dual dialectical meaning, which is to make us aware of our individual existence and, at the same time, to offer us an ideal existence as individuals.

Nevertheless, such a category cannot be taught as any other subject could be: "If, instead of personally protesting to the public and positing the single individual, I had lectured, talked, written something about 'the single individual' to the public, it would have gone over with the people. Here one sees the difference between ethical reduplication and lecturing. Ethical reduplication transforms into action; therefore, it requires a sacrifice. A person who lectures apparently says the very same thing--and makes a hit." [4, X 2 A 201 / *JP*, p. 1428] It is not something that one can learn in a theoretical manner, but rather a practice that calls for a skill, ability, disposition and virtue. Hence, one can also say that it is an *art* and an *ethical task*. In this way, the communication or transfer of the category of the singular can only be made existentially and by way of example, with the moral action and conduct of those single individuals who are most capable or best suited, albeit at the cost of their own lives (as was the case of Socrates and Jesus Christ himself).

In this sense, the *category of the single individual* is considered to be decisive for eliminating those forms of objectivity as the general public or the multitude, who aim precisely to burn individuals at the stake: "But how is it possible to get rid of all these mirages of objectivity, such as the public etc., without emphasizing the category of individuality. Under the guise of objectivity people have wanted to sacrifice individualities completely. This is the whole question." (In Danish: "Men hvorledes skulde det være muligt at faae alle disse Objektivitetens Blendværker bort som Publikum o: s: v:, uden ved at faae Enkelthedens Kategorie frem? Man har under Skin af objektivitet villet aldeles offre Individualiteterne.") [4, VIII 1 A 8 / *JP*, p. 4347-4348]

And it is here that we encounter a dialectical ambiguity of the individual or, as Kierkegaard puts it: "But this doubleness is precisely the dialectic of *the single individual*. *The single individual* can mean the most unique of all, and *the single individual* can mean everyone" (In Danish: "Men dette Dobbelte er netop 'den Enkeltes' Dialektik. "Den Enkelte" kan betyde den Eneste af Alle, og "den Enkelte" kan betyde Enhver.") [3, vol. 18, p. 160 / *KW* 22, p. 115] With this ambiguity, Kierkegaard already wants to draw attention from the very same pseudonymous works. Thus, the *category of the single individual* is present in all of his literary output: in his writings on aesthetics and on religion, but dealt with differently.

Therefore, the *category of the single individual* contains two meanings for the Danish thinker: a) material or *de factum*; b) eminent or ideal. In the first case, it means human being, everyman or any man; in the second, it means morally and ideally the highest [4, VIII 1 A 15], that is to say, what we should all be as individuals. And no-one is excluded from being a single individual in this second sense; that is, in an eminent way; in fact, we are always called to be one. This bi-polarity in his concept of the individual is also clearly projected in the tension in his work between the concepts of ‘Undtagelse’ (Exception) and ‘det Almene’ or ‘det Universelle’ (the Universal) especially in his pseudonymous work, *Either/Or, Fear and Trembling, Repetition, and Stages on Life’s Way* [15]; the same occurs with the terms ‘concret’ (concrete) and ‘abstrakt’ (abstract). (*Either/Or, Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) [16]. All the same, the single individual par excellence would be the Son of God made man, whom every human being should freely imitate in order to get close to that extreme, perfect and divine single individual that is Jesus Christ [17]. (In his study on Bonhoeffer’s reading of Kierkegaard, Valčo observes that Kierkegaard’s category of the “single individual” was taken up and further developed by Bonhoeffer, in line with Bonhoeffer’s “more complex Trinitarian and ecclesiological thinking” [17, p. 47].)

#### 4. The ‘Pass of Thermopylae’

In two texts of his *Diary* [4, VIII 1 A 482 / *JP*, p. 2401, VIII 1 A 286 / *JP*, p. 2400], Kierkegaard metaphorically compares *Pass of Thermopylae* with the *Pass of the Single Individual*. And the first of these is of great importance, because in it we find (taking into account the lack of systematicity in Kierkegaard) the most essential of the category of the single individual in a joined-up way.

The point being that only person can pass through it at a time. It cannot be negotiated *en masse*, only as single, sole individuals. No-one can go through that eye of a needle in any other way. Kierkegaard’s task consisted precisely in showing and helping people to pass through it, unlike Leonidas, who gave his life to prevent the Persian invaders from doing so. However, in a certain way Kierkegaard gave his life to this struggle; and his death, like that of the Greek hero, in a certain way also represented a victory. There is no other possibility of becoming a true Christian other than going through that narrow pass that leads us to eternity and the presence of God. In summary, to be a single individual is the *sine qua non* of Christianity [4, XI 2 A 14 / *JP*, p. 4120]. Hence Kierkegaard goes to great lengths to make us realize the importance of the single individual category.

But not only each of us must go through this category from the religious point of view, but also *time, history* and *humanity* have to do so: “‘The single individual’ is the category through which, in a religious sense, the age, history, the generation must go” (“‘Den Enkelte’ er den Kategorie, gennem hvilken, i religiøs Henseende, Tiden, Historien, Slægten skal”) [4, VIII 1 A 482 / *JP*, p.

2401]. What does this mean? Well, that one can only construe them religiously in the said category. Thus, it turns out that Time is a time of *probation*; a time during which God puts us to the test as single individuals [4, IX A 450 / *JP*, p. 2406]. This implies that it is not pure temporality, but rather that our time has an eternal meaning. Each *instant* of this time is also singular, because it is unique, of each one, but also exceptional: temporal but eternal, immanent but transcendent, finite but infinite (what we could call the *paradox of time*). For its part, history must also be understood from the religious perspective in relation to the singular and to God; what would give its real meaning would be Providence and Redemption. Finally, from the point of view of the category of the singular, humanity must be comprised of individuals that add up to a real *community*, and not a depersonalised and depersonalising multitude.

## **5. From the ‘individual’ to the ‘single individual’**

To conclude, I would like to pause to consider the problem of whether it is possible to establish a *progression* or *development* that goes from the ‘individual’ to the ‘single individual’, that is, to ‘den Enkelte’. This would be precisely the position defended by G.G. Malantschuk in: *Fra Individ til den Enkelte* [18] (also that of F. Torralba Rosellò [19]), who in turn rejects Marie M. Thulstrup in an article entitled: “The Single Individual” [20]. The aim of Malantschuk’s book is to explain the problematic surrounding Kierkegaard’s concept of existence. Her main thesis is that it comprises three elements (the subject, freedom and the ethical) and that the individual must go along a path that leads him or her to achieve the state of ‘den Enkelte’.

For her part, Marie M. Thulstrup takes the view that Malantschuk’s interpretation is not consistent with Kierkegaard himself, as there is no evidence in his writings that the individual has to undergo a long process in order to become *the single individual* (the former being inferior to the latter). Julia Watkin [21] would also appear to contradict M.M. Thulstrup when she says that “Kierkegaard explores through his authorship two main kinds of personal development: one in which the individual undergoes a spiritual development within the life-style, and another in which the individual’s intellectual understanding of the life-style undergoes development”. To illustrate his point of view, M.M. Thulstrup refers to diverse pseudonymous works by Kierkegaard. What is more, according to her, it is hard to distinguish between the concept of ‘the individual’ and that of ‘the single Individual’ (den Enkelte); to support her point of view she uses diverse texts of the *Dagbøger* (*Diaries* or *Journals*) in which Kierkegaard does not use the said terms rigorously. Her conclusion is that: “Malantschuk’s assertion about a growth from the individual to the single individual does not hold. As has been shown, Kierkegaard frequently used the words the individual and the single individual arbitrarily and synonymously.” [20, p. 22]

In my opinion, Marie M. Thulstrup's criticism of G. Malantschuk is not entirely correct. First of all, it seems to me to be dangerous and not very consistent to refer to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works in order to lay the foundations for one's own point of view; and much less the statement that Malantschuk's interpretation: "is not in keeping with Kierkegaard, himself" [20, p. 21]. Secondly, I do not believe that Marie M. Thulstrup's claim is true that Kierkegaard *frequently* used the terms 'the individual' and 'the single individual' as synonyms; above all based on three texts in the *Diaries*. In any case, it is one thing to say that Kierkegaard is sometimes arbitrary in his use of terminology; it is another thing to say that he does so when it comes to the concept.

Ultimately, regarding the question as to whether such an evolution, progress or development exists, I think that, although it may not be found explicitly in the texts of Kierkegaard's *Diaries*, it is however something that must be accepted implicitly. And if we consider his pseudonymous work, according to Fazio, it is possible to speak of a 'diventare il singolo' (becoming a single individual) through the diverse existential situations or statuses [22]. Velocci takes this same view, relating it to the stages along the path of life: "In questo cammino ascensionale l'uomo deve attraversare varie tappe, quelle che Kierkegaard chiama 'stadi sul cammino della vita'" (Man have to go through several stages to which Kierkegaard gives the name of 'stages in the way of life') [23]. Now, according to Velocci, the human being can only become a single individual in the religious sphere. All of which would lead us to the conclusion that, in the end, "la individualidad no es una categoría estrictamente filosófica, sino esencialmente religiosa": (individuality is not a strictly philosophical category, but an essentially religious one) [24], since it is before God and by Him that in truth we constitute ourselves as authentic and true individuals. As Valčo points out, "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" [25], making thus humans into authentic individuals. (For a more recent, in-depth treatment of human authenticity in contemporary religious landscape in the Western world, see [26].)

## 6. Conclusions

First of all, the category of the singular must be understood in relation to: 1) God and Jesus Christ; 2) therefore, Christianity; 3) the critique of Hegelian philosophy or of the System; and 4) the critique of gender, race, the crowd, the public, sociability, the press, Christianity, and politics, that is to say, in relation to all that depersonalizes me. According to Fazio, the Kierkegaardian singular individual appears as an "*essere individuale*" (individual being), "*dialettico*" (dialectic), "*in divenire*" (becoming) and "*fondato e finalizzato teologicamente*" (established and a way theological finished) [22, p. 54].

Secondly, the concept of *den Enkelte* or the Kierkegaardian's *single individual* possesses, at heart, a Christian religious meaning, which can be identified, by the other, with that of the *person*. Nevertheless, this leaves open the question as to whether it is possible to be a single individual or person only in such a Christian sense (and within this, if as a Catholic and/or Protestant) or if there may be other extra-Christian ways of becoming it. Or perhaps Kierkegaard simply proposed a new Christian religious consciousness; something like a Christianity without Christianity, as María J. Binetti suggests [27].

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