

Kierkegaard's reading of reality

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Abstract

This study presents an interpretive understanding of Kierkegaard's perception of reality with respect to the authentic life of the individual living in the context of his own quest for self-realization in relation to eternity. In an effort to make an authentic statement about life, Kierkegaard oscillates in his reflections between a subjective and objective world, real and ideal, current and potential, possible and necessary, in order to grasp the nature of the existence of the individual in time and space. We present here such an interpretive view in which, rather than the alethic or epistemic modality traditionally applied to the hermeneutics of Kierkegaard's writings, an approach is offered according to which reality as an enigmatic entity emerges in time and space and man grasps it in his consciousness, so as to reflect it in terms, imaginary concepts and then communicated it to his surroundings. The horizontal aspect of all human contexts of philosophy, language, ethics and culture Kierkegaard intersects with its only vertical aspect and that is the absolute paradox – God in time.

Key words: Kierkegaard, alethic logic, epistemic logic, reality, authentic life, ethics, Christianity

Introduction

In today's fragmented world, the issue of reality and truth comes to the fore, especially in connection with the fact that truth has become a commodity and reality has become a questionable entity. The media world distorts the view of events that belong to the common experience in society. The political world often presents its own priorities and solutions, regardless of those who created it. The global world of the economy brings utilitarian values to a world that is culturally and religiously diversified. It is therefore natural that existential issues set in different contexts bring about outputs that do not necessarily cohere across the social spectrum. That is also why the voices of those who call for a deeper reasoning for our actions and decisions are growing stronger. We are witnessing the renaissance of metaphysics and metaethics. The reinterpretation of "old data" and the relevant interpretation of "new data" are proving to be a key factor in finding solutions that connect more people than they divide and help to discover hitherto hidden connections and relationships between phenomena in life.

Søren Kierkegaard lived and worked in the so-called Denmark's golden age, in which prosperity, an economic boom and global trade were high. As a philosopher, he notices the opposite side of this reality and critically reflects on the person who is the creator of this society and at the same time its consumer. The pseudonymous works of Kierkegaard's first literary period frame three stages of existence (aesthetic, ethical and religious) that provide an excellent interpretive key for understanding the dynamics of the inner world of man in relation to changes in the environment around him (Lojan, 2020). At the same time, it opens up an inspiring space of existential awareness of its responsibility to the transcendent. It is in these horizons that Kierkegaard's contribution to reading reality is timeless and relevant to today.

The paradox of subjectivity

In his reflections and in the direction of his thought constructs, Kierkegaard surprises us with the complexity and breadth of his scope. Not only does he deal very

sensitively with the notion of truth, subjectively, objectively, absolutely and relatively, but above all he remains very honestly anchored in the basic starting point of his approaches. That point is existence as such, which is always bound to the agent. We consider the opinion of Watts to be justified: Kierkegaard's division between objective and subjective truth holds not between different kinds of truth but between different ways in which truth manifests itself as a standard of success in different contexts of inquiry. (Watts, 2017: 199) Kierkegaard rejects dualities in the style of Hegel's dialectic but worked with them because he was aware of the complexity of reality and the limitations of the human tools of understanding it. Kierkegaard was extremely aware of the phenomenon of human language, its possibilities and limits, as well as the cognitive potential of human existence. According to Mahrik, it is important to perceive the will component in the interpretation of Kierkegaard's works, because it is the will that is intrinsic to existential movement in a subjective sense: "The limits of reason, as well as of scepticism, are in Climacus' view overwhelmed by the will - not by the knowledge, as the absolute paradox cannot be explained *per definitionem*." (Mahrik, 2017: 126) Therefore, when it comes to the question of truth, reality in the ontological sense, he becomes very reticent in his claims and propositions. Rather, he chooses a method of broader discourse, in which he invites "specialists" to individual vectors of reasoning. These specialists are developing their paradigm of looking at existence under a *pseudonymic* name. Thanks to those pseudonyms, Kierkegaard can masterfully sketch various shades and silhouettes, which in human cognition and language expression bring out the object of research and interest of the author.

In his critique of Hegel, Kierkegaard very strongly separates human knowledge from the reality of life, which remains mysterious. Life cannot be described with absolute precision. Human knowledge will always only approximate to what it is possible to know about reality. In the world of thinking, Johannes Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* therefore inserts the well-known statement "truth is subjectivity". It is important to note that this is considered in a Socratic context. At the same time, however, paradoxically, the exact opposite statement is made – "subjectivity is untruth", which the author places in another context – Christian. So, this is a seeming paradox. We agree with Walsh that "this does not mean the negation of subjectivity in favour of objectivity as in speculative thought." (Walsh, 2009: 43) Truth is really subjective, because only what a person is able to realize can be formulated and materialized into forms of communication. The problem arises when the individual is in the truth - he has a real view of the entity - even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true. (Jacoby, 2002: 27; Martin et al., 2020) It is interesting that the current discourse on the basic of ethics shows that even the best ethical concepts are just "a kind of indicator of the limitations of man's knowledge, confirmation of an existential necessity to know and discover moral frameworks, and to seek such ethical solutions to particular situations that transcend man." (Mahrik, 2018b: 12) On the other hand, Kierkegaard knows that human sinfulness precludes the absolute mandate of man in terms of his knowledge and his own statements, so his subjectivism is erroneous, imperfect, and therefore false in the absolute sense of the word. Truth as a concept does not exist outside of human knowledge and consciousness (Akimjakova, 2011), but it does not imply an interpretation that Kierkegaard should be perceived as a subjectivist who advocates philosophical solipsism.

Paradox of objectivity

Kierkegaard is aware of the reality of the world one is thinking about, the reality of reasoning itself and the difference between them, which is all the more complicated because the two perspectives meet in a single subject of an observer, which is the existence of the "single individual (*den Enkelte*)."

 (Pavlikova, 2021: 224)

“Whether truth is defined more empirically as the agreement of thinking with being or more idealistically as the agreement of being with thinking, the point in each case is to pay scrupulous attention to what is understood by being and also to pay attention to whether the knowing human spirit might not be lured out into the indefinite and fantastically become something such as no existing human being has ever been or can be... if being [*Væren*] is understood as empirical being, then truth itself is transformed into a desideratum and everything is placed in the process of becoming [*Vorden*], because the empirical object is not finished, and the existing knowing spirit is itself in the process of becoming.” (Kierkegaard, 1992: 189) Following this example of Climacus' thinking, he skilfully illuminates the dialectical nooks and crannies of the issue of modality in philosophy. In his reflections, Climacus opens not only the alethic world of possibility and necessity, but also the epistemic modality of variability with which observed reality is distorted and changed in the inner world of sinful man. The deontic modality is represented in Climacus not only by the world of desires and ideas about how things in life should be. According to Mahrik, it is justified to perceive the position of Christ, who as the absolute paradox creates a central point at which the various modalities of Kierkegaard's thinking meet: “Christ as the truth becomes a universal principle touching all the people in the sense that the truth is potentially accessible - accordingly from the outlook of an individual; and also in the current sense - because Christ as the truth has realized himself in real life and world.” (Mahrik, 2018a: 43) Paradigmatic existential change in Kierkegaard occurs at a time when the basic philosophical question "what" is replaced by the ethical question "how". (Valco, Valcova, 2014)

In his work *De omnibus dubitandum est*, he grasps the issue of the objective and the subjective with yet another duality – the terms "reality" and "ideality". This is the linguistic side of philosophizing – speech is “ideality” and what is talked about is “reality” (Kierkegaard, 1985: 148). Even in this case, he sensitively perceives various contexts that cannot be ignored if we want to understand reality in an absolute sense. If one refers to one's thoughts as "ideality," then the subject of research, description, or reasoning refers to "reality." Similarly, in ethical matters, he considers "possibilities" to be "ideality," but he then considers the existing form of realization of these possibilities to be "reality." Holmer points out this duality: “Whenever one reflects upon that which one thinks, one delineates what is otherwise the logical factor, and whenever one studies (and isolates) that about which one thinks and behaves, one finds the existential component.” (Holmer, 2012: 172)

According to Kierkegaard, this duality inevitably forms the world of human reasoning and the core of "how" our language works. In his study, Lee draws attention to the modal way of thinking and expression, because Kierkegaard in his works “sees the possibility of constructing a picture of perfection by imagination that is far from actuality”. (Lee, 2004: 209) Precisely because the ideal and the real world are separate entities, uncertainty, correlation, approximation and the questioning of knowledge are an integral part of man's intellectual effort to understand the world around him and his own mission in it.

Nevertheless, in Kierkegaard's reflections, an interesting line of the objective world runs, which penetrates the world of dualities on the part of a single individual: “In connection with all communication, if it is supposed to be true, it must first be asked whether what is said is true, and next it must be asked who the speaker is, what his life expresses.” (Kierkegaard, 1990: 179) After all, the life practice and quality of the organization of human society becomes a platform into which all dualities emerge. This is one of the reasons why Kierkegaard is so anxious about the quality of life of the church, the level of thinking and ethics of action at the university, the responsibility of the rich and influential in relation to society as a whole. The reason for his criticism of everything is a personal struggle for truth in the absolute sense, not

personal antagonism. (Pavlikova, 2019: 8-9; Pavlikova, Zalec, 2019). Also Roman Králík highlights related to Kierkegaard: “Nandrásky anticipated that which we struggle with today: a deepening spiritual crisis and a lack of competent solutions on the side of the Church that has lost its salinity.” (Kralik, 2017: 33). The search for the contours of eternity and absolute justice in the context of Denmark’s golden age.

The paradox of knowledge

In the Kierkegaardian world of philosophy, the metaphysical and epistemological dimensions of reasoning intersect. On the epistemological side, Kierkegaard works with a coherent and correspondent view of the question of truth. He sees both approaches – idealistic and empirical – as valid tools for understanding life and the world around us. Climacus' idealistic (coherent) view understands truth as the agreement of being with thinking, while the empirical (correspondence) view defines truth as the agreement of thinking with being. If one is dominated by idealistic metaphysics and rationalist optimism, according to which absolute reality, if it exists, must conform to reason, then in the other approach reality is independent and objective, while human propositions should correspond to how things really are and work. Kierkegaard accepts and rejects both optics at the same time. The reason for rejection is the processual aspect of life. Life is on the move in time and space and therefore no human propositions can have absolute validity. Such truths will be real, existing, but they will be an abstraction, a thought construct that does not correspond to existing temporal reality. For Kierkegaard the temporal and the eternal may be seen as “summative categories” (Colledge, 2004: 27) where under temporality one might put the elements of necessity, body and soul, finitude, the real self, possibility, ideality, while the eternal may encompass freedom, the absolute *telos* and all the forms of infinitude and possibility.

Nevertheless, in Kierkegaard's reflections, an interesting line of the objective world runs, which penetrates the world of dualities on the part of man. Human life, its quality and the "fruit" of human endeavour in time and space becomes a measure of truth. However, not in the subjectivist sense of absolute solipsism, but in the *sub specie aeternitatis* fashion: “For truth, from the Christian point of view, does not lie in the subject (as Socrates understood it), but in a revelation which must be proclaimed.” (Pap. IX A 221). According to Kierkegaard, Christianity is God’s invention (Pap. X 4 A 212) or in other words Christianity is God’s thought (Pap. XI A 605). Therefore, Kierkegaard vehemently rejects any "system of existence" and opposes the conceptualization of human knowledge, which over time could aspire to absolute truth. Reality can be a system only and exclusively for God, who understands everything and knows everything, because he created everything.

It should be noted that the question of "how" also opens up a teleological dimension in which the absolute paradox of "God in time", Jesus Christ, represents an existential universal not only in terms of anticipation but also existential movement in the trajectory of time. Kierkegaard places the vertical in the horizontal of human concepts not only in the aesthetic, ethical but also religious spheres: “there is only one who is *the Way and the Life*.” (Kierkegaard, 2009: 217). Neither the epistemological nor the metaphysical dimension is a sufficient basis for Kierkegaard to be able to satisfactorily resolve the dilemmas and paradoxes which he has accumulated in his way of thinking about life and the world. Therefore, it opens up a soteriological dimension and targeted its theological suspension of ethical right there. In that way Kierkegaard can relate to the absolute with a deep satisfaction. According to Shakespeare “It is this particularity above all which accentuates the paradox and the responding passion of faith.” (Shakespeare, 2013: 25) The existential dimension of happiness is important for the life of faith, and the paradox of human knowledge is also evident in this area, where, according to Abraham Khan, "*Salighed* has to be made a part of one's existence, to penetrate one's personality; for this to happen, a

person must have an infinite and passionate interest in it" and on the other hand" every personality has as its task ensuring proper relationship to *Salighed* as the absolute telos " (Khan, 1985: 78; Khan, 1982), i.e. its subjective relationship to absolute happiness, which is the absolute good, the absolute telos of its existence in time and space.

In his study, Mahrik identifies an interesting teleological pattern of reasoning typical of Kierkegaard in connection with salvation. "If we use the term teleological pattern of thoughts, it doesn't mean that telos has a single and finite meaning... His three stages of life, like the different types of religiousness and ethics, form a kind of dynamic complex in which the existence of an individual plays a primary role, overcoming doctrines, teachers, Church, society, history or knowledge in its updating of possible potentials and is directed where there is "rest" and "life" - the two words encompassing in salvation." (Mahrik, 2020: 51) The world of practical faith becomes a platform where Kierkegaard's three spheres of individual existence become a dynamic complex that is teleologically directed in time and space. The future is an open entity. Therefore, the freedom and responsibility of man has its justification: "Ethical behaviour is reduced to fulfilling my more or less capricious and voluptuous desires or aspirations; freedom, meanwhile, based on free will is reduced aesthetically to what I want." (Martin et al., 2021: 52).

Pattison emphasizes an interesting element of Kierkegaard's approach to existence - the spiritual side of human life. It interferes not only with intellectual activities but also with moral ones and forms an important moment of the will apparatus, thanks to which one can materialize one's knowledge. "Thus language is not only about the world, but also about its speaker, the one who is spirit. Spirit itself is the breath - *ruach, pneuma, spiritus, And* - that animates the reflective plane and renders it meaningful." (Pattison, 2005: 80) Kierkegaard perceived "spirituality" not only psychologically but also metaphysically. That is why the spirituality, as an entity embraced in language, has an ambivalent character: current and transcendent. (Ambrozy, 2012).

In Hebrew thought, and Kierkegaard resonated with it, the unity of word and deed is natural. In the creation story, the Creator's action is framed by "said" and "happened" - while "ruach" (spirit) was the engine that turned chaos into a living structural order. (Krupa, 2010). Thought, word, deed, and visible reality form the basic quartet as the normative framework of God's action in human history, which includes not only the history of Israel but also the story of the incarnate God (the Son) and the subsequent birth of the church. Hence Kierkegaard's subjectivism has no connotation of individualism, because the individual and the collective form the two foci of the ellipse of his thinking about the life of faith and the radical following of Jesus Christ. For "when he walked on earth... he also had something else to carry out: he himself had to express the truth with his own life... and as truly human he consequently had this something else as his task - to accomplish this himself." (Kierkegaard, 1991: 181-182). Climacus asserts: "Just as previously the Bible was supposed to decide objectively what is the essentially Christian and what is not, now the Church was supposed to be the secure objective stronghold. More specifically, it is the Living Word in the Church, the Creed, and the Word with the sacraments." (Kierkegaard, 1992: 37) Despite his weakness and violation of sin, man may have knowledge that helps him to attain qualities of life that become objective and ethically normative - but only on the implicit assumption that the axis of his being is the transcendental Living Word, who is the incarnate Son of God. Alastair Hannay also draws attention to the practical and existential significance of the doctrine of incarnation in the sense that "the life of Jesus does manifest the infinite, that life can be taken to contain a record of finite actions which are also "absolute" actions, i.e. actions descriptions of which are therefore also descriptions of the good" in relative as well as in absolute

terms. (Hannay, 1993: 49) Paradoxically, the criticized church, the imperfect expression of knowledge in the creed, the earthly elements of the sacraments become for Kierkegaard a normative entity, without which man cannot complete his life story meaningfully.

Conclusion

In today's world, there are high scholarly discussions on the topic of realism and anti-realism, absolute and relative norms in ethics, possibilities and limits in the personal development of the individual, etc. The truth has become a commodity in the hands of political elites, media moguls and financial groups. (Janigova – Pekarcik, 2021). There is a strong voice among experts – and we agree with them, that the biggest problem nowadays is the loss of absolutes as the result of redefining transcendence from the realm of metaphysics to the realm of constructivism and then having stuck in the trap of self-reference.

Kierkegaard enters this discourse with a clear view:

- a) Truth cannot be grasped in one's consciousness in the degree of fullness and finiteness, and yet one can live it, approach it and allow it be transformed by it.
- b) Man lives in the temporary world, but his words, thoughts and actions have consequences that transcend his knowledge and ideas about life.
- c) The church has an irreplaceable place in the development of human society, as long as it represents the Living Word in a specific context.
- d) Life in truth is the life of the individual in whose epicentre the truth of God's word is revealed, as the higher power of the transformation of man and the core of the message which he is to convey further.

Kierkegaard speaks of the Christian faith not as a matter of concept, where the emphasis is on "what" but rather as a way of life - "Christ does not claim merely to teach the truth but to be the truth, and being the truth is identified with a particular human life and "a way" (Evans, 2009: 62) - in which man, as a being created in God's image, can triumphantly cope with all the challenges of joy and pain. Even if he fails to do so, God's grace is the absolute salvation of man. Thanks to it, to be said by the way of Climacus' paradox, a single individual can learn the truth even if the truth cannot be learned.

Kierkegaard's reading of reality therefore becomes an inspiration that has a strong legacy not only for his time and our present, but also for those who come after us. However, the truth remains a constant challenge even for the ongoing discourse among philosophers, especially from the point of view of modal logic. Kierkegaard's existential key to truth, especially his emphasis on "what" and "how", offers a remarkable and thought-provoking space in which the many views and searches of 20th and 21st century philosophers can meet creatively and interact in a balanced way.

This study is exclusively focused on the analysis of Kierkegaard's thought apparatus without comparative elements. We place our belief in the significance of its legacy for subsequent generations of philosophers in the a priori category. The references not only to a number of post-modernist existentialists but also to post-modernist currents of opinion to Kierkegaard's work are a natural consequence of this. However, following such contexts would be beyond the scope of the annotation to our study.

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