
ROUSSEAU AND KIERKEGAARD

AUTHENTICITY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

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Abstract

The article deals with the issue of human subjectivity and the ideal of authenticity in the concepts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Søren Kierkegaard. By reconstructing and analysing their argumentation, we try to create a space for their mutual comparison at the level of the discourse on authenticity. The paper points out their different ideological and methodological approaches, as well as common motives and themes, seeking to highlight the similarity of their normative conclusion. Both philosophers agree on the question of defence of the ideal of authenticity, while propounding the same thesis that the expression and the means of authenticity is the self-determining freedom of human.

Keywords: Rousseau, Kierkegaard, individual, authenticity, existence

1. Introduction

Although the Danish thinker S. Kierkegaard was not a great admirer of the French philosopher J. J. Rousseau, and though, in all of his work, there are only seven brief comments to Rousseau, both thinkers have a lot in common. “Both Rousseau and Kierkegaard were contrarian, subjective thinkers and lyrical authors, whose writings are strongly connected to their personal lives. Both were passionately concerned about personal, subjective truth.” [1] The works of both thinkers stand out in a sharp opposition to the predominant mode of thinking of their time. Rousseau resolutely distances himself from the optimistic spirit of the Enlightenment, while Kierkegaard particularly rejects Hegel’s rationalism and idealism.

In addition to philosophical rebellion, both philosophers connect their passionate critique of society, with their rejection of the idealistic idea of progress, aspiring to reveal the spiritual pathology of their time. But what really connects both thinkers, is their common philosophical interest, where in the centre of their attention is the human individual as a subject. In both thinkers, sincere and passionate interest in the individual, in the question of his individual self-realization, prevails over abstract reasoning. A common focus was not the only thing they had in common, however. From the normative point of view of

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human subjectivity, they were both convinced, in spite of coming from different philosophical positions and using different theoretical argumentation, that the true moral mission of the human is to be oneself.

2. Rousseau and the natural man

A critical confrontation of the social reality of his present day with a reconstruction of the natural state, allows Rousseau to reveal the full extent of what is artificial in human life. That which is actively created by man, that which is historical, becomes fully exposed to the possibilities of criticism and renewal. Rousseau finds his normative ideal of authenticity in the past, in the natural man who stands at the beginning of a hypothetical human history. Man as a subject is included in the historical context that shapes and creates his subjectivity. This context is not a simple projection of the subject or a result of the decisions of rational agents (such as in Hobbes or Locke), but to a large extent, it functions independently from the consciousness of the subject and from outside interferences during its formation.

The essence of human nature, the bearer of which is every individual, becomes for him decisive. Rousseau is convinced that there is a common unchanging human naturalness which, though in principle unchanging, manifests itself in various ways in the different social and historical conditions. The revelation of pre-social, natural nature of man shows how the historical process of socialization necessarily leads to a departure from nature, to the alienation of man from its own nature, the result of which is a modern society marked by the Hobbesian state of war of all against all.

In the genealogy of human emotions, the primacy belongs to an awareness of its existence, as Rousseau argues: “man’s first sentiment was that of his existence, his first care that for his preservation” [2]. Just this natural feeling of man’s own existence and the effort for one’s individual fulfilment in freedom and equality, is becoming a key element of Rousseau’s anthropological concept. And not only that, as David Gauthier points out: “the sentiment of existence is at the core of Rousseau’s understanding of his fellows and of himself; the individual is revealed in how he senses his existence. Indeed, we might say – although this is to interpret and not to quote Rousseau – that perfectibility manifests itself in the unfolding of the sentiment of existence.” [3] The abilities and the needs of the natural man are perfectly balanced and, as a result, he is completely self-sufficient and does not need to build lasting relationships with others. Even if he sometimes relates to other people, he does it always temporarily and substantively. Due to one’s self-preservation, therefore, one relates to others in freedom and equality. Freedom and equality are the basic attributes of human nature.

However, in the historical process of socialization, human being becomes alienated from its very nature, which leads to a loss of freedom and the emergence of social inequalities. The key to understanding this process is the notion of development of the fundamental emotion that stands for awareness of

one's own existence, thus also of the self-love, "the source of our passions, the origin and the principle of all the others, the only one born with man and which never leaves him so long as he lives" [4]. The natural self-love, says Rousseau, the authentic love for oneself (*amour de soi*) gradually changes during the development of human societies and under the influence of social relations, taking the form of vanity (*amour propre*). The difference between the natural and the artificial form of self-love is abysmal - "*Amour propre* (vanity) and *Amour de soi-même* (self-love), two very different passions in their nature and their effects, should not be confused. Self-love is a natural sentiment which inclines every animal to attend to its self-preservation and which, guided in man by reason and modified by pity, produces humanity and virtue. *Amour propre* is only a relative sentiment, factitious, and born in society, which inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else, inspires men with all the evils they do one another, and is the genuine source of honour." [2, p. 218]

In the natural state, while the man lives in relative isolation and he reflects only its own existence, the self-love is an external expression of the perception of singularity of one's own being and the expression of one's freedom, in the sense that one's own actions are determined solely from the position of one's own thinking and will. However, as the natural singularity disappears along with the establishment and development of society, disappearing with it is also the natural self-love. In society, people realize and reflect the existence of others, they compare with each other, creating thereby a general idea of respect and recognition, of social status. The subject and the focus of self-love are changing in this manner, moving away from its original designation. While the subject of the natural self-love is only the individual's own ego, his natural needs and desires, the artificial vanity is immediately focused on the others and only indirectly back onto oneself. The sociable man relates to oneself through others. While self-love is a natural sentiment, vanity is an artificial sentiment, not only in the sense that it is a product of society and the individual acquires it by socialization, but also because it is not bound to the biological constitution of man, but to his social identity. Vanity does not satisfy the biological and psychological needs of man, but his socio-cultural need for recognition. While the natural man "lives within himself; sociable man, always outside himself, is capable of living only in the opinion of others and, so to speak, derives the sentiment of his own existence solely from their judgment." [2, p. 187] In a social environment, vanity becomes a hidden motive of self-realization as well as a proof of our internal depending on others. According to Rousseau, it is necessary to make the following distinction: "there are two sorts of dependence: dependence on things, which is from nature; dependence on men, which is from society. Dependence on things, since it has no morality, is in no way detrimental to freedom and engenders no vices. Dependence on men, since it is without order, engenders all the vices, and by it, master and slave are mutually corrupted." [4, p. 85] In Rousseau's philosophy, authentic freedom represents

independence from others. Man is free if his actions are not determined by someone else, but only himself.

An artificial, false and insincere, internally empty world emerges under the influence of vanity, in which everyone follows the others, so that no one stays oneself any longer. People prefer that which they like to that which is good, courtesy before virtue and erudition before wisdom. But the levelling and the conformism do not lead to social harmony. Relationships based on vanity become an expression and a tool of ruthless competition, of struggle for prestige and benefits, because to live means to live in the eyes of others, in their thought and recognition. In the context of the refined struggle for supremacy, science, art, property and social status become the major means of the smug will to impress. The natural man is a perfect antithesis to the civilized man, according to Rousseau: “natural man is entirely for himself. He is numerical unity, the absolute whole which is relative only to itself or its kind. Civil man is only a fractional unity dependent on the denominator; his value is determined by his relation to the whole, which is the social body.” [4, p. 39-40]

In its psychological and social analysis of human nature, Rousseau reveals the historical process which leads to the development of false I of modern man, where relations among individuals result in hypocrisy, fraud, manipulation and mutual alienation on the individual level. On the level of social processes and structures, then, they lead to an effort to incorporate these relationships into institutionalized forms, thus consolidating the patterns of domination and subordination. Rousseau sees the solution to the deeply pathological situation of the modern age in the return of man to his original naturalness. This return is the focus of his project of education (*Emile or On Education*) – “living is the job I want to teach him” and “he will, in the first place, be a man” [4, p. 41, 42] – but also his project of political reform (*Of the Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right*): “Rousseau’s conception of a free community of equals describes a political society in which citizens achieve full autonomy by cooperating as equals for the common good” [5]. The common aim of Rousseau’s normative philosophy, socio-political and educational reflection, is the emancipation of man from the social pressure, from existing social institutions, which deform and violate the human nature. The normative aim of his critical theory is the liberation of man from the ubiquitous influence of vanity. Rousseau calls for the existential turn to the subject, the turnover of man to his own I, by renewing one’s authentic moral connection with oneself.

3. Kierkegaard and the existence as a synthesis

While Rousseau finds the pattern of authenticity in the original, animal nature of man, for Kierkegaard the starting point becomes the ontological and teleological interpretation of human being. According to Kierkegaard, man is more than a mere entity of being, the human individual is shaped by contradictions, he exists between the opposites and, at the same, is a synthesis of these contradictions, a synthesis of infinite and finite, of temporality and

eternity, of freedom and necessity. "A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis." [6] But the synthesis which Kierkegaard speaks about is not given to man beforehand, nor is it naturally bestowed upon him. The synthesis is imposed upon him as a life performance of the unification of the mentioned contradictions. By the substantial nature of its being, the human individual is to be a synthesis, but initially it is only a thesis.

On the level of what Kierkegaard defines as the aesthetic stage of human existence, which constitutes in terms of its origin its basic determination, man is thrown into the world of human society, initially being only its passive member. His relationship to life is characterized by a hedonistic approach, by his orientation on immediate delight, his conduct being determined primarily by the immediacy of everydayness – "the aesthetic in a person is that by which he spontaneously and immediately is what he is" [7]. Man is, at the same, the infinity and the finality, the freedom and the necessity, the eternity and the temporality, the spirit and the body, but in the dimension of the aesthetic stage, he confirms only one side of the equation – finality, necessity, temporality and physicality. The more the individual receives this immediacy of the world, and the more one succumbs to the world of human society, the more one loses oneself, the more one loses one's own sense of life. "In this state of despair the self tries to escape itself. In this case, the self appears to be selfish, and it revels in its own goals and ambitions and focuses only on the material and hedonic side of life, where there is no place for spirituality and a deeper understanding of one's existence or of one's own self" [8]. The world of society is a foreign place for the individual. One struggles to find one's individual identity, but manages only to find a social one. His existence is marked by tragedy, despair and a futile struggle – "the individual does not have that for which he strives, and history is the struggle in which he acquires it. Or the individual has it but nevertheless cannot take possession of it, because there is continually something external that prevents him." [7, p. 134] "Man lives in a tragic situation, in a tragic inevitability of evil. He lives in alienation, which according to Kierkegaard is constitutive of our human condition." [9] On the level of the aesthetic stage, man gave himself up by his voluntary adaptation that ultimately leads him to an anonymous being in the crowd. He identifies himself in comparison with others and, as a part of the crowd man always follows the others, never himself. The anonymity of the crowd deprives him not only of his own individuality, but also of the responsibility for his own life. For Kierkegaard, however, the individual is more than merely an abstract and anonymous member of society, more than an individual bearer of general historical regularities. By his nature, the individual goes beyond the generality. "It is a simple matter to level all existence to the idea of the state or the idea of a society. If this is done, it is also simple to

mediate, for one never comes to the paradox that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal.” [10]

In order for the individual to fulfil the synthesis of one’s own existence, it is necessary to overcome the aesthetic determination. In his freedom and responsibility, the individual must first obtain his own I as a synthesis of differences. The manner in which it takes place is a categorical choice, the choice of oneself, the choice of one’s own self. Precisely this continuously repeated choice represents the ethical moment through which the human individual frees himself from the immediacy of the aesthetic stage and from the indifference of aesthetic attitude. As we have seen, the individual is not merely a synthesis of opposites, he is also a relationship that is in a relationship to itself. It is by the right act of choice that the individual confirms his relationship to the relationship itself. Human existence is in the form of a relationship, which relates to itself, but this is not yet in itself the full existence. According to Kierkegaard, existence is not defined only by this level of relationship, but also includes the relationship to that which defines and grounds this whole relation – the relationship to God: “a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another” [6, p. 13-14].

Since the individual received a substantial core of one’s existence, it is necessary to confirm this relationship by means of surpassing one’s own immanence towards the transcendence through the individual’s choice of oneself, which is characterized by the move towards to absolute goal, which is God as the absolute transcendence. “The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude that relates itself to itself, whose task is to become itself, which can be done only through the relationship to God. To become oneself is to become concrete.” [6, p. 29-30] The existence as synthesis can be performed only through a relationship with God. To be concrete, to be identical with itself means to be free, because freedom is “the most abstract expression for this self” that makes him who he is” [7, p. 215]. The freedom, which the individual obtained by relating oneself to God is the freedom of spirit and at the same time is an authentic self-realization. We should also keep in mind that the “struggle for the freedom of man lies in the context of a sovereign God, while Kierkegaard’s existentialism, Heidegger’s atheism, Augustine’s mysticism and German pietism form the framework, within which he finds the space for his own dialectical scopes as well as responses to challenges of the time” [11].

For the self to exist means to choose itself, thus to acquire itself or to lose itself before God. Every acquiring of itself is the approaching to the bliss of God, while each losing of itself is the distancing in despair from God. It should be noted that Kierkegaard puts the category of faith solely in relation to the specific, individual existence of the individual, whereby the category of faith acquires an exclusive existential dimension [12]. Faith does not take place in a crowd, in a stupor of an indifferent ecclesiastical Christianity. Such context has nothing to do with the authentic faith. Church Christianity rather became a superficial and spiritless institution. [13] Only the individual may have a relationship to God. [14] The question of faith, according to Kierkegaard, is the

issue of understanding one's own destiny and identity, in which there is a personal and intimate relationship with God [15]. In faith, the human individual is on a search for truth, which is his truth; truth that gives him not only identity, but also the meaning of his existence: "authentic being is being with God through the Spirit" [16].

In contrast to the Hegelian idealism, which understood the individual as a meaningless actor in a vast mechanism of history, whose main purpose consisted of the objective realization of the absolute spirit, Soren Kierkegaard focused his philosophical and theological reflection on the existential awareness of the individual. The philosophical objectification and the deification of instrumental reason, whose aim was absolute objectivity, degraded man to a mere thing, to a crowd-man. The objectified world produces emptiness and the objectified man loses his individuality. But without the awareness of one's own individual identity the human self cannot exist. To be able to exist, the self must return to itself, it must with full responsibility choose itself. Not in the way the spirit of the Enlightenment did it when it exempted God from the equation, or when it objectified and rationalized God and made him into a recognizable object of reason, but in such fashion that God would stand as his own pattern. According to Kierkegaard, man is always tempted to adapt God and faith to his own wishes and vision of the world. "In rational constructs, the only and personal God is replaced with 'God of philosophers' who is foreign and remote to human." [17] But God is not a subjective product of human reason, nor a substance of an objective world, which is located outside of man. It is rather man's existential relationship itself that may be granted the privilege to become aware of the divine constitutive presence. The relationship of self-fulfilment and self-knowledge is a relation to God (stems from one's relation to God) and the relation to God is not a matter of reason but of faith [18]. "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" [18, p. 97].

4. Conclusions

Despite differences in the philosophical starting points and in the methodological approaches, both Rousseau and Kierkegaard presented relevant concepts that critically reflect on the issues of human subjectivity, showing a remarkable resemblance in its content and meaning. As we have shown, not only do both thinkers develop, on a formal level, the same ideal of authenticity, according to which the purpose of existence of the self is to be itself, but we find important similarities in their concepts also in terms of the content. Against the background of a number of common themes, which include mainly the critique of the crowd nature of society and the rejection of purely hedonistic approach to life, the common element of content of both concepts is their focus on freedom as an authentic value of existence. Both authors are convinced that to be authentic means to be free and that authentic freedom means independence from

others (mainly in terms of their projections of one ought to be). Man is free as long as his thinking and acting is not determined by someone else, but only by himself. This common idea of the self-determining freedom goes far beyond the negative definition of this notion.

The main and fundamental difference between these concepts lies in the way in which the human individual practically acquires this freedom and fulfils it, that is, in the manner in which the ideal of authenticity is realized in practice. For Rousseau, the freedom is hidden in immanence of naturalness itself; in listening to the voice of nature in oneself; in the authentic relation to one's own nature, which enables man to get rid of vanity and to truly live in oneself and not outside oneself; to live in an authentic reality and not in some false impressions that are produced, reproduced and mediated in social relationships controlled by vanity. According to Kierkegaard's concept, the full realization of freedom and authenticity of the individual consists in crossing one's own immanence towards the transcendence. In relation to the absolute transcendence, in a personal relationship to God, the individual self realizes itself by its own choice as freedom. In the fulfilled synthesis of soul and body, possibility and necessity, eternity and temporality, the individual acquires its spirituality and freedom. "A valuable lesson for us rests in learning to live with a creative tension between immanence and transcendence." [18, p. 98] Both thinkers in this way develop and defend an original and inspiring version of the ideal of authenticity of human existence.

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