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## SINGULARITY AND THE EXISTENTIAL TURN

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### Abstract

The aim of this essay is to explore the problematic relation between the individual and the dispersed modern world. In order to realize this aim, the authors chose Kierkegaard's insightful thoughts from 'The Concept of Anxiety', 'The Present Age' and 'The Sickness Unto Death' as a point of departure with which to determine the possibility of making the existential turn in modern times. It is our firm belief that the comparison of Kierkegaard's reflections on 19<sup>th</sup> century Denmark with a contemporary worldview will prove helpful in determining the integrity of such an endeavour.

*Keywords:* authenticity, communication, levelling, modernity, relation

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### 1. Introduction

The term singularity can be divided into two words that can be interpreted in two distinct ways: individuality and authenticity. The first term is used to signify something numerically singular, for instance: a moment in time, whilst the latter is used in describing an experience, for instance: a moment within a certain time interval, thus ascribing it a unique value. The same applies to the description of an object. On one hand we merely single it out amongst other objects whereas on the other hand one's intentions are to attribute a specific quality or uniqueness. This distinction is perhaps best captured when one tries to single out an individual amongst many. At first, one speaks numerically of an individual whereas on the other hand, one points towards a specific uniqueness of that individual. Singularity therefore signifies both individuality and authenticity [1]. However, whether or not such a solution is valid remains to be determined by way of exploring the void one can find in the relation between being a singular individual and being or better yet becoming what Kierkegaard considered a unique or authentic self. What is more, the process of becoming rests upon Kierkegaard's definition of the individual as in motion or *kata dynamin* which signifies a transformative aspect of Kierkegaard's own thought. Driven by the presented terminological dilemma, the term singularity could serve as an occasion to operate within an open topology, where one could remain close to the relation, the 'in between', all the while still maintaining the question of how to posit the singular individual within the community.

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## 2. Becoming through communication

Derived from the Latin noun *communio* [2] communication firstly denotes a community, a universal whole. Secondly, *communicare*, which is the Latin base for the verb communication or *meddelesen* in Kierkegaard's case, denotes sharing or impartation. Given that both originate from *communis* or that which is common, one could argue that communication as a social phenomenon could be understood as an act as well as a common, universal whole in which this act takes place, seeing that it primarily serves as a universal abode where individuals interact and share their worldviews. To communicate thereby represents a heterogeneous-static whole inasmuch it represents a dispersed totality, the unification of which then falls onto the individuals themselves and their capability to interact with each other. Hence the conjunction in the title, for it indicates the closely knit relation between the singular and the universal or better yet the relation between the task of becoming a self and the existential turn towards the other which is needed in order to fulfil such a task. Arne Grøn concisely formulates this need of relation in his work titled *The Concept of Anxiety in Søren Kierkegaard*: "The universal partly means what commits one ethically, partly the social context that the individual is formed by. 'To become ourselves' even means expressing the universal in the individual life." [3]

One could also argue for a communicative formulation within Kierkegaard's definition of the self. Here the definition from *The Sickness Unto Death* comes to mind. The constitution of the self as a double relation, i.e. "the relation's relating itself to itself" [4], duly incorporates a relation to others, meaning that the process of becoming a self is closely interwoven with relating to the other. As Valčo duly notes in his contribution *Kierkegaard's 'Sickness Unto Death' as a Resource in our Search for Personal Authenticity*: "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." [5]

On that note we would also like to bring attention to Taylor's comment on Kierkegaard's constitution of the self as a double relation: "Relations are ontologically definitive – to be is to be related. In terms of human being, selfhood is essentially social, spirit fundamentally intersubjective. Concrete individuality can arise only in community, with other free subjects. Apart from such interrelation, the self remains totally abstract, utterly indefinite and completely incomprehensible." [6]

Although the concreteness of one's selfhood Kierkegaard speaks of holds fast the ontological inseparability of the relation to others, the aforementioned distinction within singularity begs the question of whether or not it is wise to consider this bond between the singular and the universal as something ontologically presupposed. As Theunissen points out in his treatise on

Kierkegaard's *Negativistic method* [7], the latter can be questioned by pointing toward Kierkegaard's revocation of the initial definition of the self as a double relation which reveals the negativistic method of Kierkegaard's dialectic thought: "Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self." [4]

It would therefore be naïve to think of communication by attending to its purely affirmative aspect. This is where we encounter an important question: how are we to conduct ourselves in the occurrence of miscommunication – or, according to Kierkegaard, a misunderstanding? It is nonetheless a phenomenon which we encounter in the world as frequently as communication itself. Moreover, it brings about the uncertainty of established norms, to that what we as individuals have in common; and due to its ambiguous nature, it is also extremely hard to determine the time and place of its occurrence. One of many depictions of this uncertainty can be found in Kierkegaard's posthumous work titled *The Point of View of my Work as an Author*, specifically in the essay on *The Single Individual*. Kierkegaard explicitly addresses this oddity by attending to the folly of communication by raising the question of preliminary understanding, a preamble that should stand "at the base of all actual disagreements". He then continues by stating "the baselessness of misunderstanding is that the preliminary understanding is lacking. Without it both agreement and disagreement are a misunderstanding." [8]

At first glance, these words resonate as simple truths, uncharacteristic for Kierkegaard's complex thought. This certainly does not mean that Kierkegaard was not an advocate of simple truths. On the contrary, one could argue that the simplicity of existence was indeed his primary obsession. However, it is the simplicity of these few sentences that conceal a deeper meaning, namely the possibility of miscommunication adopting the role of communication. One could also add that miscommunication is not necessarily confined exclusively to the question of language. It could also point to an ethical displacement of communication which in turn contributes to a displacement of the individual as well. Similarly to Kafka's Gregor Samsa, whose last name indicates a state of solitude ('sam' meaning alone or even lonesome), the metamorphosis of the individual corresponds to communication with others, as does the narrative of Samsa's metamorphosis, for it runs parallel to Samsa's relation to his family that sits distantly in the other room. It is because of that same distance that the individual alteration also applies to one's miscommunication with others, even if that is not one's intention. This goes to show that the double relation of the self is also a mis-relation "which relates itself to itself" and that it is "established by another" [4]. With the given question in full view, Kierkegaard's notorious depiction of the crowd as untruth can also be found in the essay on *The Single Individual*, which contains two ways of interpreting it. It could be read as a diagnosis of the universal on one hand or it could serve as a new starting point. We should now reach further into the ambiguity of the relation between the single individual and the community.

### 3. Spiritlessness - a displaced universality

The phenomenon of indifference one encounters in Kierkegaard's works, particularly *The Sickness unto Death* and *The Concept of Anxiety*, presents a crossroad. It is due to the multi-layered nature of his existential dialectic that gives him the ability to operate with different figures and motifs, all of which can be approached as single examples within a particular discourse, whereas on the other hand, they can be understood as a part of a motion that propels the question of how to become Christian. That is also the reason why the definition of the self applies to the term spirit as well. If one fully considers the introductory question of the Self from *The Sickness unto Death*: "What is spirit? The spirit is the self?" [4], then one may well argue that the 'not yet' aspect of becoming a self applies to the realm of the spirit as well. Both can be regarded as a task of the observer or rather, as Grøn notes, a Socratic "diagnostician" [9], whose mission is to observe the ever changing human condition in relation to Christianity. In reference to *The Sickness Unto Death*, the Christian condition thereby embodies two distinct motions which stand in an inverse relation to each other: the first being a motion of progression, as in progression of faith, whereby the other is a motion of resistance, understood is the condition of resignation. Baring both motions in mind, the reason why spiritlessness – or selflessness if you will – serves as an interesting common ground is because within it, both are still non-differentiated. Another depiction of spiritlessness can be found in regards to the relation between the Greek pagan spirit and the pagan spirit in Christendom. *Johannes Anti-Climacus* writes: "Yet there is and remains a difference, and it is a qualitative difference, between paganism in the stricter sense and paganism in Christendom, the distinction that Vigilius Haufniensis pointed out with respect to anxiety, namely, that paganism does indeed lack spirit but that it still is qualified in the direction of spirit, whereas paganism in Christendom lacks spirit in a departure from spirit or in a falling away and therefore is spiritlessness in the strictest sense" [4, p. 47].

Spiritlessness serves as a non-differentiated aspect could serve as a vantage point, a way of observing the path of the progression of faith, for it plays a crucial role in Kierkegaard's delineation of Christian categories which belong to the realm of spirit as well as various existential concepts such as despair or anxiety which relate to the question of the self.

What is more, it is the social aspect of the non-differentiated nature of spiritlessness that can be found in an intriguing medium of social triviality based on a nonchalant human characteristic known as indifference. Amongst other works, one can primarily read about it in Kierkegaard's essay *The Present Age*, although we find vague formulations of it in *The Sickness unto Death*, where Kierkegaard introduces it as a motionless state of despair characteristic of the philistine. Indifference is primarily a form of self-conduction which betrays any activity and interest and so imprisons possibility in the cage of probability, in what *Anti-Climacus* calls "a certain trivial compendium of experiences as to how things go, what is possible, what usually happens" [4, p. 41]. What this means

for one's individual state is that it tries to uphold a benevolent relation to its own ambiguous condition that is bound to a life of immediacy with the other. One may find another important aspect of such a mass estrangement in *The Concept of Anxiety*, in the form of fear from anxiety which translates into fear from possibility. That which both formulations have in common is a distance from possibility that remains encapsulated within a spiritless sense of security. The individual becomes ensnared in a repetition of truisms and ideals. It is a loss of distinction best captured in one of the following passages from *The Concept of Anxiety*: "Man qualified as spiritless has become a talking machine, and there is nothing to prevent him from repeating by rote a philosophical rigmarole, a confession of faith, or a political recitative" [10].

These three qualifications of spiritlessness correspond to three central motifs of Kierkegaard's critique of his time. The first applies to philosophical – that is to say Hegelian – reflection, the second to hypocrisy of the clergy, whereas the third could be applied to various aspects of the public domain: ethical norms, affairs of the state, worldviews etc., all of which are closely intertwined within Kierkegaard's insight on indifference. Moreover, all three aspects have three common characteristics which stand in a mutually inclusive relation: gnawing reflection, loss of inwardness (or loss of passion) and the mass effect of levelling. The further aim of this investigation will try and outline what was presented so far by attending to this peculiar reciprocity.

#### **4. The ambiguity of separation**

According to Kierkegaard's introductory thoughts on *The Present Age*, the invoked absence of full blooded passion causes any deliberation to become a 'silent sorites' and every topic a superficial discourse passed along between sure-footed individuals. (Kierkegaard is alluding to the 'sorites paradox' of Zenon, where particular grains of sand create a common sound. He's using it in a negative sense to emphasize absence of passionate vocation in deliberation.) The quality of observing dispersion and cohesion of opposites is lost, it makes every positive statement an act of "colourless cohesion", thus contributing to the establishment of levelling, a grand mis-relation. It is now possible to come up with a suitable substitute for any relation between opposites. As a consequence "a quality is no longer related to its contrary" [11]. Earnest communication is consequently substituted for idle talk which maintains a general loss of content. Absence of content then paves the way to yet another result caused by the lack of relation, self-establishing envy. This lack invokes one to communicate with a sense of moral resentment. And lastly, as a grand consequence, it leads to a crumbling of the ethical as well. What remains can only thrive in the mode of relativism. Individuals thus reflect as a universal whole, yet without understanding what it means to be whole. Consequently, their individual endeavours crumble under collective gnawing reflection. However, it remains uncertain what exactly Kierkegaard had in mind while writing the critique of his age. It could have been Hegel's ethical notion of *Sittlichkeit* or Hegel's political

theory. It could have been a mixture of both, combined with a first-hand critique of up and coming liberal policies. What is certain however is Kierkegaard's renunciation of externalities that separate the single individual from his or her concreteness.

If we consider the presented mutuality of different distractions, then it would be more appropriate to speak about a group of misguided individuals rather than a society. Understood in this sense, the Public is an idealistic representation made out of "individuals at the moment when they are nothing" [11, p. 36]. One could argue that a social equality thus produced is an equality of external association. In its final stage, the given public reflexivity represents a mass self-deception, composed of unrecognizables who in avoidance of becoming who they are simply wish to become someone else. The hidden logic behind this somewhat eccentric depiction of hollow individuals rests on Kierkegaard's existential imperative that one cannot negate the immediacy the individual is manifestly a part of, meaning that a reflection used to do so is only a quantitative one. One could argue that a social equality thus produced is an equality of external association and not a genuine one. It is exactly for this reason that reflection "is a condition which should not be avoided" [12].

However, given that an individual is bound to experience, as proposed in the introduction, a displacement in communication with the other, the distance from one's being does not necessarily lead only to destitute singularity, nor is it determined to remain dependent on an externality such as the Public. It is a question of how we understand one's concreteness, for it can also serve as a turning point, a return of one's self, inasmuch the man of immediacy becomes aware of his displacement. And if it weren't for his entanglement in public affairs and a "minuscule reflection" of himself, he wouldn't continue to tarry around in everyday affairs, while still remaining, as *Anti-Climacus* neatly puts it, "a self he was not, and a self he did not become" [4, p. 52]. Taken from the author's words from *The Present Age* which he appoints to the faithful youth, the given displacement can "become the starting point for the highest life – for them it will indeed be an education to live in the age of leveling" [11, p. 29]. The separation from the crowd thereby enables two directions, the one which leads to re-absorption in the crowd, whereas the other leads to self-embracement.

By definition, taken from *The Sickness Unto Death*, the separation of the individual represents "the moment the self becomes aware of itself as essentially different from the environment and external events and from their influence upon it" [4, p. 54]. It is a key concept of Kierkegaard's exposition, the implication of which points toward the single individual and his, as Nordentoft describes, "removal from an original, symbiotic, life context" [13]. The individual becomes negatively distinct from the more sensual man of immediacy who remains in the bondage of secularity. He is literally 'relocated' as the Danish word *udsondringen* suggests. During this process, the individual becomes aware of himself as a synthesis: between freedom and necessity. This condition could also apply to Kierkegaard's account for the qualification of anxiety. As developed in his work *The Concept of Anxiety*, anxiety is depicted

by Adam's fall from the absolute which further indicates a relocation of the individual state. Both aspects point toward a qualitative designation which Kierkegaard describes as a "dizziness of freedom" [10, p. 61]. This sudden condition undoubtedly creates a bit of confusion, why up to the point of separation, the individual remained undetermined and more importantly: undifferentiated. One can ascribe this sudden realization of actuality to a previous false sense that rested upon probability instead of possibility, whereas actuality, as mentioned, should rest upon possibility (freedom) and necessity.

According to the narration from *The Sickness Unto Death*, as the individual progresses in reflecting on his condition, he begins to realize that he had inherited a peculiar otherness. At a certain point he becomes aware of his own counter-distinction, that he is both a mundane self and its inherent counterpart, the infinite self. The separation of the individual from society thereby causes one's own counter-distinction and yet it seems that the effects of the condition are already inherent in the cause of the condition itself – apropos the diagnosis of a sickness that already precedes its symptoms. In terms of communication, separation points toward an initial displacement of the individual, for it seems now that the individual was in miscommunication from the very beginning, placed in a pre – given absurd situation, out of tune or out of place. The distinction of ourselves caused by this displacement serves as proof of a pre given existential distance which confronts us with a task of growing together not only with ourselves but with the other as well. In the words of Arne Grøn, it seems that even the relation "that becomes a misrelation, the factors are negatively what they are" [2, p. 10], meaning that our task of becoming spirit arises as the third factor which now presents itself a task of "cohering" [2, p. 10].

## **5. The task of the existential turn**

What remains in question is whether Kierkegaard's existential topology of self-relation, understood as relating to the other, can be transmitted beyond the historical confinement of 19<sup>th</sup> century Denmark. Given the fact that it is rather questionable whether or not confining Kierkegaard's thought to a particular epoch fully appreciates the extensiveness of his authorship, the assessment of this paper is that this step is quite plausible. Theunissen's introductory remark on the historical placement of Kierkegaard's notorious work *The Sickness Unto Death* could serve as a corresponding point of departure in answering this question: "For a redefinition of the historical place of his treatise on despair, the comments about the history of his origin and effect perform a preliminary work at best. They would have to be expanded and deepened in various directions." [14]

One could also make a similar claim in regard to the majority of Kierkegaard's works. They all play a role within historical continuity and yet their edifice is bestowed on the evasive discontinuity of the singular which fails to fully comply to any particular philosophical direction that belongs to a certain historical strand. In the view of Jean-Paul Sartre on the discontinuous state of the

individual, he is, as Sartre claims, above all a trans-historical “universal individual” [15]. The need to expand and deepen our own inquiry on the existential turn is thereby not completely dependent on a certain time and place that needs to be reclaimed in order to argue for its possibility in the present but rather on our own ability to communicate our present sense of detachment unto the other. By relying on Kierkegaard’s scattered reflections, one may learn to determine what it actually means to be with the other. Growing together with the other ceases to remain a historically entangled philosophical question of otherness [*aliud*] and turns into an immediate awareness of the other [*alius*]. Conversely, turning toward the addressee by addressing the other with meaning transfigures the addresser himself. The given transfiguration remains important for the personal and social universality of every individual. At the very same moment it transforms also singularity of the individual into the course of being essentially authentic.

The same applies to transmitting Kierkegaard’s acute critique of his age to our own worldview of modernity, the boundaries of which trouble us today. Notwithstanding that indirect communication Kierkegaard makes us of serves as existence communication *in actu*. That makes Kierkegaard’s concept of indirect communication itself essentially paradoxical. Due to the overpowering nature of modern consumerism, one does not have to search far and wide in order to find the necessary occasion for making the existential turn. It gives way to an arguably far more dispersed and polymorphous sense of spiritlessness than the one Kierkegaard speaks of in the *Present Age*. Such an outline of modern precariousness can be found in Ocepek’s book titled *Totalitarianism and Time* in which the author claims that the consumerist situation is “a situation that might be characterized in terms of ideology and choice” [16]. We find yet another aspect of individual misguidedness in the thought of Khan, who by expounding Kierkegaard’s depiction of nihilism in the first part of *Either/or* i.e. *Crop Rotation*, argues that the basic human need for pleasure may cause a sense of forgetfulness of who we are and thus maintains the notion that “actuality for this minimal self means desiring enjoyment every moment [...] Speed is important in aiding forgetfulness” [17]. Without a profounder sense of ethical fortitude, progression becomes regression into what Starčević would call a “paradoxical state of felicity, whose vision of an end to history itself comes in a form of a derailed hypoconsumerism” [18]. If one were to labor a point about the destructive side of what Patočka in his day would deem a modern day demonic orgiastic fusion between vanity, egoistical desire and a profound lack of self-awareness on one side and a person “on the front” [19] on the other, then it ought to be the simple truth that one cannot thrive through endless consuming and self-indulgence. On the contrary, it is only through turning against such living conditions that one’s selfhood can be saved from being reduced to a dimming glare in the distance.

What is more, there is also a negative side to the living space of consumerism which in turn grabs the self-indulgent individual unannounced, through a loss of equilibrium. Kralik & Torok note the following: “Kierkegaard



presents himself as a prophet of 19<sup>th</sup> century – he claims that the fundamental characteristic of the man of our time is that he is worried, filled not only with fear about his future, but also worried about unfulfilled ambitions and his political and economic situation in the world. Man is worried about having neither teacher nor authority that he would respect, and he constantly is facing stressful situations and duties that he must fulfil. Hope that he had put in another man has failed, and the result of it is a loss of calm.” [20]

The individual who is not able to bare the public sphere any longer finds himself in demanding the turn of knowledge and behaviour in the direction of an existential turn. It is precisely the “phenomenon of anxiety in-between” [21] which produces a way of thinking that operates without an ontic-ontological gap. But the problem of modernism is that it precisely had lost a sense of anxiety. As Pavlikova notes: “Awareness of the fact that a man has the opportunity and free will to choose, even here the most terrifying possibility, rises to an unforeseen sense of fear” [22].

The existential turn thus demarcates a critical relation to an existing social reality, both self-indulgent and depraved. As a grand consequence of a mutually inclusive relation between worry and hedonism, the saturated state produced in this way drags the individual into the clutches of a trivial compendium of choices he is seemingly entitled to make [23]. It goes without saying that the created entanglement of production and indulgence separates one individual from another [24]. However, due to the insufferable nature of a consumer’s paradise, one could argue that the same distance simultaneously turns into a task of growing together, with ourselves as well with the other. It is for this reason that the existential turn denotes a far greater choice than any other, it becomes, as Judge William from *Either-or* would define it as a way for the individual to “choose himself” [25]. No other logic can uniform it, grasp it. Emanating from the event of vast triviality it can only begin to happen with the spark of interiority. Kierkegaard as the addresser meant for this message to reach anyone who dwells encapsulated or suppressed. The single individual is everyone and anyone, and yet the task remains to be fulfilled by the one amongst many.

## **6. Conclusions**

The overall aim of this paper was to show that Kierkegaard’s insightful depiction of his own time can provide the means to grasp the existential situation of the individual within a dispersed modern world. The authors showed that the existential turn cannot be placed amongst any other external project, for it is a project of the single individual who has the task of becoming an authentic self solely by communicating with others. By detaching from the levelling effect of an indifferent worldview, an individual can learn to turn toward his neighbour *via* a renewed horizon of communication that remains essentially paradoxical. The presented outlook can promote a way one could possibly aspire toward changing a hostile social reality into a communicative one. We believe that this possibility derives from fragile relationship-with-the-other, which is something

unconditionally excluded from the exchange circle of economy. Our task - if we talk about the philosophical task - is to create conditions for understanding a state of generosity as a prerequisite for the ability to be with the other.

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