

CĂTĂLINA ELENA DOBRE

Teaching Assistant of Philosophy

PhD Complete

Department of Philosophy

University "Dunarea de Jos" of Galati

Romania

Research Fellow Hong Kierkegaard Library

St.Olaf College, Northfield MN, USA

***KIERKEGAARD BETWEEN ESTETIC AND RELIGIOUS
The Movement of Reflection***

Abstract

*The main focus of this paper is Kierkegaard's movement of reflection from the earlier to the later stage of his work. I shall designate the movement of reflection as the shift in Kierkegaard's understanding of his own works due to the difference between the esthetic and the ethic-religious existence. Throughout my paper I assume that Kierkegaard never had a fully developed plan for his entire corpus, and that he merely attempted to find a proper way to communicate with his readers. Even if many scholars agree that his pseudonymous works are mainly philosophical, in his "edifying authorship" Kierkegaard comes to address the reader in a direct fashion. The explanation of his movement of reflection is explicitly approached in two particular works *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Point of View on My Work as an Author* which will be the main focus of my paper.*

As a reader of Kierkegaard's works someone can already observe that his style of writing is a puzzling one. In this context, the reader has too chosen *to use Kierkegaard in order to interpret Kierkegaard*, according to his own indications. Scholars disagree but I will try to develop Kierkegaard self-explanation about his particular way of writing.

It has been pointed out that Kierkegaard's goal is to share his ideas with the reader. He wants to make us participants in an indirect-direct communication in which we have a decisive responsibility for our own genuine understanding. In this way,

understanding is dependent on the hermeneutical approach of the reader. Actually, Kierkegaard writes for his readers in order to help them to recognize that beings human it is not an easy task, developing in this way a reciprocal relation with the reader. Moreover that for reflection the presence of the other is necessarily. Therefore, within Kierkegaard's relationship to the reader, there is a positive and the other a negative connotation. As a communicator who forces the reader or the recipient to discover for him the truth expressed in the ambiguity of the communication, Kierkegaard's position is

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negative¹. The main intention is the conception of a new strategy based on a dialogical modality within in the act of communication. By dialogical I understand the relation between the whole authorship and the reader, a relation where in the reader become an interlocutor or a conversational partner. Dialogical is also a dialectical movement of reflection, it is the movement of ideas not in an abstract way but in a personal relation (a communion²) between communicator and receiver or between the author and the reader. Kierkegaard wants to enter into an existential dialogue with his reader, making him aware of his authentic responsibility. One can conceive the reader as a “middle term” [*Mellembestemm else*] between Kierkegaard as author and Kierkegaard’s works. Kierkegaard imagines reader being in front of his eyes, but in an imaginary way of being and this is the reason that he addresses to the reader in an indirect manner, reproducing for him existential possibilities, or life orientations, with an incredible art.

¹ J. Lorentzen considers that “Positing himself negatively as an author, readers more likely examine for themselves what it mean to be a human”. (*Kierkegaard’s Metaphors*, Mercer University Press, 2001, 3). Kierkegaard is negative and his example is Socrates. Socrates was negative too.

² “Idea de la comunicación no es un concepto formal sino un movimiento basado en el movimiento metafísico de la interioridad de los individuos para existir con la consciencia de ser espíritus, en otra palabras, idea de la comunicación en Kierkegaard significa comunión”. Rafael Garcia Pavon, *El problema de la comunicacion en S. Kierkegaard a partir del contra-argumento de Vigilius Haufniensis a Hegel en el Concepto de la Angustia* (MA) Universidad Panamericana, Mexico, 1999, 16

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In this way the reader is transformed into an independent participant in Kierkegaard’s game that is the game of indirect communication. Thus, Kierkegaard admonishes the reader to judge the subject matter for oneself³. The main idea is that Kierkegaard guarantee the reader’s freedom, as Stephen Evans⁴ says, letting him to think or to choose for himself, and this is Kierkegaard’s main auctorial: “to wake up” the reader, to make him aware of his existential possibilities. In this sense Kierkegaard writes:

*“I can compel him to be aware. That this is a good deed, there is no doubt, but neither must it be forgotten that this is a daring venture. By compelling him to become aware, I succeed in compelling him to judge. Now he judges. Perhaps he judges the very opposite of what I desire”*⁵.

As a reader one assumes the freedom to understand Kierkegaard’s relation with his authorship and methodology.

Some scholars notice that beginning with *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard’s writing and thinking, take a new and interesting turn. Kierkegaard holds that this it is neither an esthetic work, nor a religious one. Kierkegaard let us presuppose that this book constitutes *the turning point* or *the middle point* in his entire work because he

³ “By inviting readers to begin to imagine themselves through metaphorical construction, Kierkegaard prompts them to think for themselves in a qualitative way, and then become human on ethical and religious levels in etymological sense of existence”. (J. Lorentzen, 2001, 9)

⁴ S. Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript*, New York, 1983, 52

⁵ JP, I, X, 22

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uses a peculiar kind of communication and a new strategy which is very suggestive for his intention to conclude his writings. Thus the *Postscript* became the starting point of a “second”, and more engaged, authorship. Through its telling title it seems that Kierkegaard plans to put an end⁶ too and assume the role of a pastor or a “theological professor”⁷. Here we have a *Kierkegaard who obviously communicates his intention concerning the pseudonyms literature*. In “*A First and A Last Declaration*”, he makes explicit the nonexistence of a “general plan” for his work:

“Formally and for the sake of regularity I acknowledge herewith (what in fact hardly anyone can be interested in knowing) that I am the author, as people would call it, of *Either-Or* (Victor Eremita), Copenhagen, February 1843; *Fear and Trembling* (Johannes de Silentio) 1843; *Repetition* (Constantin Constantius) 1843; *The Concept of Dread* (Vigilius Haufniensis) 1844; *Prefaces* (Nicholaus Notabene) 1844; *Philosophical Fragments* (Johannes Climacus) 1844; *Stages on Life’s Way* (Hilarius Bookbinder, William Afham, The Judge, Frater Taciturnus) 1845; *Concluding Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* (Johannes Climacus) 1846; an article in *The Fatherland* 1843, no. 1168 (Victor Eremita); two articles in *The Fatherland*, January 1846 (Frater Taciturnus)”⁸.

⁶ Gregor Malantschuk claims that an explanation for Kierkegaard’s intention to put an end is that “he was firmly convinced that he would not live beyond the age of thirty four”. (*Kierkegaard’s Concept of Existence*, Marquette University Press, 2003, 43)

⁷ Kierkegaard, CUP, xiii

⁸ Kierkegaard, CUP, Princeton University Press, 1968, 551

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For most Kierkegaard scholars *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* marks the definitive shift from earlier to later works. However, I conjecture that the *Postscript* does not imply such a drastic change and represents rather an explanation of how Kierkegaard’s authorship is a movement of reflection of inward reflection, is a movement in thought and spirit at the same time.

Another important writing for Kierkegaard’s view of his own authorship is *Point of View*. It is Kierkegaard’s “official” explanation of his productivity. Walter Lowrie holds that this book is the central point and is the conclusion (*I prefer explanation*) of his whole authorship⁹. Kierkegaard notes:

“In my work as an author I have now reached a point at which it is possible... once and for all as directly and openly as possible to explain what is what, what I as an author say I am”¹⁰.

According to Kierkegaard, a work like POV not only that is “a little piece” about his authorship, but also help the reader to make his own imagine from which to judge the meaning of his entire production. POV seems to resolve away the “mysteries” of Kierkegaard’s authorship. Kierkegaard also wants to convey to the reader of the pseudonymous works that he is not their true. In trying to clarify his position in *Point of View*, Kierkegaard claims:

“With the present little book, which thus also belongs to a bygone time, I bring to an end the entire earlier work as an author, and then as the author (not as an author, but as the author) I go forward into the future”¹¹

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ SV XIII; 551, cf SFV, 5

¹¹ POV, 94

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Here we detect a shift in Kierkegaard's perspective on his writing: a *movement of reflection from complex to simple, from an impersonal writer who is hidden behind a pseudonym to a fully acknowledged author*. Kierkegaard knows that this movement is, above all, a natural way of developing his inwardness. This movement of reflection must be understood as an inward dialectic. It is Kierkegaard's dialectical struggle to revealing himself. It is known that the majority of his earlier works are published pseudonymously but, at the same time, we cannot ignore that Kierkegaard is the real *author* or *creator* of these pseudonyms. He is the creator of their ideal personalities¹². In other words, Kierkegaard is simultaneous an author of the pseudonymous and an author in himself. Through his pseudonym he detached himself from them while, at the same time, leaving the reader alone with the work.

There are a few reasons for Kierkegaard's uses of pseudonymity. A significant reason consists in helping his contemporaries to come into a relation to God; a second intention is to help the reader to understand oneself in different existential

¹² In his *Journals* he argues his attitude: "the most thankless existence is and continues to be that of an author who writes for authors. Authors can be divided into two types: those who write for readers and, genuine authors, those who write for the authors. The reading public cannot understand the later type but regard such writers as crazy and almost scorn them – meanwhile the second-class authors plunder their writing and create a great sensation with what they have stolen and distorted. These second-class authors generally become the worst enemies of the other – it is, of course, important to them that no one finds out about the true relationship". (JP I 160, n.d. 1847)

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situations. By his duplicity of communication Kierkegaard creates a mirror for the reader¹³. For example in *Stage on Life's Way* Kierkegaard quotes Lichtenberg saying:

"Such works are mirrors: when a monkey peer into them, no Apostle can be seen looking out"¹⁴

For the readers these pseudonymous works are mirrors in which they can see or find themselves in different existential situation. A third important reason is that Kierkegaard himself wants "to become a Christian". The decisive point remains, actually, to assist the reader in understanding oneself. Basically, through the pseudonymous, Kierkegaard intends to move the reader from the esthetic to the religious stage and to "force" him to make a dialectical movement of reflection. In this case the reader is placed in a puzzling situation in which raises many questions about Kierkegaard's strategy. Any reader finds oneself asking: "when does Kierkegaard change his way to communicate with the reader, is a change or is a movement of reflection?"

There are two possible answers at this question: *one is that Kierkegaard changes his strategy in a definite moment; the other implies that a movement of reflection is*

¹³ Moreover, I am certainly convinced that through pseudonyms Kierkegaard offers his person as a mirror for the reader.

¹⁴ "Solche Werke sind Spiegel: wenn ein Affe hinein guckt kann kein Apostel heraus sehen". Georg Christoph C. Lichtenberg, *Ueber Physiognomie wider die Psyognomen, Schriften*, I-IX, (Gottingen 1800-1806; ASKB 1764-1772) III, 497, in Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, Edited and translated by H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1988, 8

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present from the beginning in Kierkegaard's entire corpus. The argument for this last idea is that the first published books appear under pseudonymous but, at the same time, a series of *Discourses* are published in his own name. Despite these intrigues, my argument is *that his entire creation is not divided in an esthetic and a religious period. In other words, Kierkegaard is not an esthetic author who comes to change his methodology and becomes thus a religious one writer. Rather, Kierkegaard is religious from the beginning. Conceived in this sense his movement of reflection begin with his first important writing Either-Or.* Kierkegaard starts the pseudonymous authorship having *in mente*, a religious teleology. That is why his writings have a theological undertone using a strategy of duplicity.

Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* is published pseudonymously on February 20, 1843. *Two Upbuilding Discourses* are published under Kierkegaard's name on May 16, 1843. For seven years thereafter these two series of writings go hand in hand. This constitutes precisely Kierkegaard's duplicity. He writes in parallel an aesthetic literature and a Christian one, being fully aware that his entire work will be divided into pseudonymous works and upbuilding, religious writings, both having their idiosyncratic characteristics. For example the writings of the first period are eminently Socratic. Even the religious discourses of this period are esthetic, because they represent a religiously oriented psychological reflection, approaching man's needs, existence, youth, joy, suffering in relation to God. In the later period, Kierkegaard starts with God, instead of man¹⁵. In this sense, Kierkegaard's movement of reflection has its own consequence.

¹⁵ G. A. Arbaugh – G. B. Arbaugh, *Kierkegaard's Authorship*, London, 1968, 40-41

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Kierkegaard hides behind a mask but at the same time he wants to be understood by his reader; then he needs to speak very openly making his reader to participate in a direct way to his messages. As can be seen, the reader follows Kierkegaard's movement, a creative and inward dialectical movement. Moreover, the reader became seduced by Kierkegaard's seduction. And it is already known that Kierkegaard seduces the reader with his language, with his way to make the reader to follow him, in his inward dialectical game of communication.

Communication is in general an art, a work of art, especially for Kierkegaard. He knows how to build it, how to make the movement - from the indirect communication to direct communication, and coming back from direct to indirect – so seductive. Moreover, Kierkegaard knows very well that a genuine communication is seduction. Seduction is the way to bring into existence with passion an inward secret. Kierkegaard communication is an indirect way to speak about a secret. Direct communication has no secrets. Or, indirect communication has secrets, and to communicate them is a work of art, a seductive work.

Kierkegaard's view of communication (indirect and direct) is predicated on his conception of the true, that of introducing Christianity. The real Christianity is described directly, but at the same time, the "illusion of Christianity" is formulated Socratically through the indirect method which is the pseudonymity. In developing a particular manner of Kierkegaard takes Socrates' *maieutic* (dialectical method) as a starting point. Thus he builds a real agenda of Christian *maieutics*. Kierkegaard begins maieutically (the indirect communication) with the esthetic production because all his pseudonymous writings have a *maieutic* character. But at the same time, the religious dimension is present from the very

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beginning. One can see then that the author is and was a fully religious author. Because of this, his pseudonymous authorship and his religious writings are a natural consequence of his message. He did not have a specific plan for his work even if he gives us the “illusion” of a plan. Kierkegaard’s strategy of duplicity or ambivalence is a specific way to enter into a dialogue with the reader. Even when he is direct or hidden under a mask, Kierkegaard’s message is clear: to help the reader understand what must be understood, to give him existential possibilities, and to make him co-participant at the act of existence.

Kierkegaard understands this “methodology of duplicity” as a dialectic trajectory in communication, as I already pointed out: from indirect to direct and back from direct to indirect:

Indirect – Direct Esthetic – Religious
Direct – Indirect Religious – Esthetic

In this way, he makes with his reader a part of a game of movement from objective knowledge to subjective knowledge. For Kierkegaard objective knowledge is an illusion because the object is far away from the knower and is an intellectual way of understanding. In contrast to objective communication, subjective communication is the communication of capability, or an existential communication. The object is not the knowledge but a personal secret truth and the capacity to communicate it. The true is not a characteristic of abstract knowledge but of a concrete human being, and the understanding of the truth must be made with passion. In this sense, Kierkegaard takes Socrates as an example. Socrates knows that the truth can be discovered in our inwardness and all he wants is to aid his interlocutor in becoming aware of it. Socrates is the midwife of the latent truth; Kierkegaard intends to be a midwife for Christianity. His desire is to make people

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aware of their illusory Christendom. Kierkegaard’s idea is that people live with the deceiving conviction that they are Christians, while they are not. They live in a fake (*falsum*) Christianity (Christendom), and alienate themselves from the true spirit of Christianity. For Kierkegaard all that has to be done it must be done indirectly. Thus, he begins with an esthete who tries to approach to the religious in an indirect manner. He wants to start from that point where a human being is the esthetic, while continuously pointing to God. But this cannot be said directly, and Kierkegaard finds himself in the position of having to deliver the message by means of a mask. He begins with the esthetic but the intention is to bring forth the despair, in which he lives, in order to reveal a deep religiosity. Despite his ambivalence, Kierkegaard is a religious person.

That is why it is necessary to understand that Kierkegaard is a religious writer and that the whole work has a religious motivation. We are confronted with an author and an authorship, which are profoundly taken up with the desire to eliminate the falsity Christendom and to rediscover the real spirit of Christianity. Kierkegaard was obsessed with the way in which he could become a Christian, his entire creation becoming thus a justification for his own “practice in Christianity”. In this sense we do not have solely a progression in his strategy, but also a development of his attitude and his life. Therefore, I assume that the origin of his esthetic works is derived from the religious problems, which are deeply hidden in his soul. These profound issues originate in his strict childhood upbringings the personality of his father, and the image of Christ. Kierkegaard perceives the negativity of Christendom, which dominates all his contemporaries, end is that:

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“Most people in Christendom are Christians only in imagination, in what category they do live? They live in esthetic or, at most, esthetic-ethical categories?”¹⁶.

This assertion is, actually, ironical towards the “so-called Christianity”. Religious people are less preoccupied with their own relationship to themselves. For Kierkegaard *this relation is extremely important*: the religiosity is inwardness and inwardness is defined by the relationship of the individual to himself before God, a relation traversed by despair and suffering. Kierkegaard knows what suffering is and therefore considers it the existential expression for existential pathos. Suffering is the reason for his disguised creation or the redoubling of his activity. Actually, his entire corpus is a dialectical redoubling. By dialectical redoubling I mean the process by which Kierkegaard reduplicates his thought in communication understood as a dialogical process. He wants to keep his own religiosity under a mask; he wants to be religious but, at the same time, to impart this in a specific manner: *indirectly*. In being dialogical Kierkegaard’s works entail a movement of reflection.

In this sense, his entire corpus describes not only philosophical, esthetical, or poetical problems, but also to the author’s personal education and discipline, to the task of becoming a Christian. However, Kierkegaard from the beginning was fully aware that nobody would take him seriously as a religious writer and that is way he “shrouds” his message in pseudonyms, reducing his condition to that of a *souffleur*¹⁷

¹⁶ POV, 43

¹⁷ “What is written therefore is in fact mine, but only in so far as I put into the mouth of the poetically actual individuality whom I produced, his life view expressed in audible lines. (...) For I am impersonal, or I am

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who has poetically produced other authors Kierkegaard’s awareness helps the reader understand his position in relation to his work:

“That is an author who in the beginning was an esthetic author and then, later, changed and thus become a religious author from very beginning and is esthetically productive at the last moment”¹⁸.

Kierkegaard opens thus from the beginning an interest in both the esthetic and the religious and ends in the same manner as he began. He takes his strategy seriously and understands it as his duty or a responsibility. **My crucial point is that Kierkegaard does not write according to a plan. Even if he knows very well what the message of his works is, and even this message is expressed by a mask, he knows what the aim is: to make the readers judge from themselves!**

As I already pointed out, he wants to keep a distance from his own creation, in order to allow the readers to find a proper way to understand themselves. He is neither an esthete, nor an ethicist. Neither does he identify with any of the imaginary persons... But, actually, Kierkegaard is more because he knows what his intention is: to become an authentic Christian. At the same time, he wants to be a genuine writer, a writer that takes seriously his spoken and unspoken messages that are not only beautiful metaphors, but also ways of life, existential possibility. In this way, we can find him on the gaps between esthetic and religious, trying to build with passion an existential relationship between these stages of life, to

personal in the second person, a *souffleur* who has poetically produced the authors...”. (CUP, 551)

¹⁸ POV, 31

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communicate the secrets of this relationship, and to help us to understand their meaning.

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