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## **Crisis, Identity and the End of Modernity: When Critical Theory Met Existentialism**

**Abstract:** The topic of this essay will be the political reception of the existential thought of Kierkegaard, provided by Habermas and Matuštik. While Habermas attempts to use Kierkegaard's concepts of honesty and ethical choice in order to resolve the problems in constructing rational and democratic collective identities, Matuštik is concerned with the mode of existence that individuals within those collective identities must assume in order to safeguard them from totalitarianism.

Kierkegaard's work responds to a crisis at the end of Modernity, his conception of the authentic individual compelled to make leaps of faith represents an attempt to diagnose and remedy the situation of axiological vacuum and disillusion with the traditional forms of justification. We will proceed to show how this crisis reflects on both the individual and the collective identities, the breaks and continuations of Kierkegaard's work with both pre-Modern traditions and Modernity, and finally, point out the implications of Kierkegaard's position as well as that of Habermas and Matuštik.

**Keywords:** the end of Modernity; Identity; Crisis; Kierkegaard; Habermas; Matuštik;

### **Introduction**

Søren Kierkegaard is traditionally considered a thinker of irrational individuality, concerned only with the innermost thoughts and anxieties of an outcast individual. However, recent closer readings provide a wholly new aspect of his thought, dealing primarily with society, politics and culture and the crisis that took place in his time. His first work, *Either/Or* provides us with the first clue of his vision of the end of Modernity: "Our age reminds one very much of the disintegration of the Greek state; everything continues, and yet there is no one who believes in it."<sup>1</sup> The demise of Modernity's promise to establish an unconditional foundation of subjectivity was now evident, according to Kierkegaard, and yet, somehow European philosophy seemed to go along as if nothing had happened. What the world now needed was "another Socrates" to uncover the state in which European culture has found itself. Kierkegaard

<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, part II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 19.

was to take this task upon himself. In his following work, *Repetition*, he covertly provides a somewhat lengthy depiction of the life of the European individual in such a state of crisis:

When a fellow has settled himself cosily and comfortably in his quarters, when he has a fixed point like this from which he can rush out, a safe hiding place to which he can retreat and devour his booty in solitude – something I especially appreciate, since, like certain beasts of prey, I cannot eat when anyone is looking on – then he familiarizes himself with whatever notable sights there may be in the city. If he is a traveler ex professo [by trade], a courier who travels to smell what everybody has smelled or to write the names of notable sights in his journal, and in return gets his in the great autograph book of travelers, then he engages a Lohndiener [a temporary servant] and buys das ganze Berlin for four Groschen. This way he becomes an impartial observer whose utterances ought to have the credibility of any police record. But if on his journey he has no particular purpose, he lets matters take their course, occasionally sees things others do not see, disregards the most important, receives a random impression that is meaningful only to him. A careless wanderer like this usually does not have much to communicate to others, and if he does, he very easily runs the risk of weakening the good opinion good people might have regarding his morality and virtue.<sup>2</sup>

By contrasting, on the one hand, a person who knows exactly what his starting point is and what is to be his life's agenda, and on the other hand a "careless wanderer" with no discernible purpose to his life, no way to establish if her life is being lived properly or not, Kierkegaard provides an account of the void that the European individual faces at the end of Modernity. By replacing traditional conceptions of Divine Providence with conceptions of the historical progress of Reason, Modernity has provided individuals with a new vantage point on life, the universe and themselves. However, the failure of the project of Modernity has left the individual in a desolate world, devoid of meaning and value. However, Kierkegaard notices, the majority has continued living their lives as if no change has occurred. His mission was now to uncover that state, which he calls "Christendom", a Christianity without spirit, concerned only with concealing the axiological vacuum that had come about.

The task Kierkegaard undertook included bringing about a disillusionment with both Hegelian philosophy and the official state religion. This was in turn to provide individuals with the opportunity to honestly face the crisis they had found themselves in, and deal with that crisis in an authentic fashion. The primary question Kierkegaard poses to himself and his contemporaries is: "What does it mean to be a Christian?" The answers he wants to disprove fall along the lines of "Because I am baptized and I am a

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<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 153.

member of the official Church” and “Because I have grasped the truth of Christianity through concepts of Hegelian philosophy”. Playing the part of Socrates, Kierkegaard uses his works to challenge the assumptions that inform such answers, whether it is by means of showing what is to be included in the Christian faith, or by depicting all the numerous ways that we can be (self)deluded into believing that we are Christians. His most famous account of faith is provided in his work *Fear and Trembling* in which he shows the “knight of faith” as a man who has to give up all of his most prized earthly possessions, including his own reason, morality and even his identity, and yet hold on to them as fast as he had done before he had given them up. This paradox of faith: believing that we will both lose and keep that which we hold most dear and intimate, is what prevents faith to be communicated or justified. Thus, faith severs the individual from other individuals, preventing him from communicating to them that which is the basis of his innermost being. Furthermore, faith is not something that enables the individual to be in any kind of intimate contact with God, because he has no guarantee that his faith is justified. Thus, the individual is left to her own resources, with no sanctuary in both metaphysical and political realm. The ready-made solutions for this state provided by society and the Church can be comforting and may serve as a temporary consolation, but Kierkegaard maintains that the inauthentic existence that they encourage only lead the individual to a state of despair, a depression-like experience that can only be overcome by an authentic dealing with the void that the individual is plunged into.

### **Habermas’s political appropriation of Kierkegaard’s concept of honest radical choice**

In his text “Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity: The Federal Republic’s Orientation to the West”, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas uses yet another of Kierkegaard’s key concepts in order to show how they apply to the political context and the situation of determining or constituting a collective identity, namely, the identity of the Federal Republic of Germany during the *Historikerstreit*. Habermas’ issue was the deliberation on the problem of collective identity, on the historical consciousness of a nation in a moment of crisis, i.e., in the moment in which it can choose between a multitude of interpretations of its own past, its role and place in the world, including both its current political constellations and its projections for the future. In order to confront revisionism, Habermas turns to Kierkegaard’s concept of honest ethical choice that serves as a constituting act for the ethical self:

In *Either/Or* he focuses on the decision, taken in solitude, through which the moral individual assumes responsibility for his life history and ‘makes himself the man he is’. This practical act of transformation has a cognitive side as well; with it the individual is converted to an ‘ethical view of life’: he ‘discovers now that the self he chooses contains an endless

multiplicity, inasmuch as it has a history, a history in which he acknowledges identity with himself' [...] In this way he arrived at a concept of personal identity that is clearly more suited to our posttraditional, but not yet in itself rational world.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, this honest choice *a priori* excludes some of the collective formations that serve as ready-made answers presented to the individual in order to discourage the honestly made ethical choice.

It is easy to see that nationalism could not serve as such a complement to Kierkegaard's ethical view of life. Nationalism does, to be sure, represent a first step toward reflexive appropriation of traditions to which one identifies oneself as belonging; national identity is already posttraditional. But this form of consciousness develops a strong prejudicial force: that can be seen in the limiting case in which it actualizes itself in purest form at the moment of mobilization for patriotic war. This situation of voluntarily falling into line is the sheer opposite of the existential 'either/or' with which Kierkegaard confronted the individual. Apparently, in the identifications that the nation state expected of its citizens more was predecided than Kierkegaard, with the interest of the individual in mind, could allow.<sup>4</sup>

However, in order to avoid some of the less desirable traits of Kierkegaard's conception of ethical choice, such as decisionism, Habermas employs his conceptions of rational public debate, communication community and constitutional patriotism, formed not around any substantive norm or privileged life-form, but around abstract procedures and principles directed towards regulating the communication between different, equally privileged coexisting life-forms and collective identities, without the existence of a central focal point. Such a community would, according to Habermas, serve as an adequate framework for the individual to form his honest and authentic life-choices. Thus, the identity of the individual would be protected from the sways of both state and religious ideologies.

### **Matušík's interpretation of the "crisis individual"**

Czech philosopher Martin Matušík continues Habermas's appropriation of Kierkegaard's concepts, but turns the question around. Instead of asking, as Habermas did, what kind of community would serve as a proper context for making honest authentic choices, he asks: what kind of individual identity could safeguard Habermas'

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity: The Federal Republic's Orientation to the West," in *The New Conservatism*, ed. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), 260.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

communication community against perils of totalitarianism? This encounter between critical theory and existential philosophy serves to overcome the respective one-sidedness of each of them:

A Kierkegaardian critic is explicitly focused on the attitudinal orientation that permeates a given sociopolitical critique, yet is only implicitly interested in shaping economic and political institutions - Honesty about motives does not guarantee that we reach the level of material praxis; yet the latter does not deliver the critic into sufficient sobriety about what motivates any emancipatory theory and action. Habermas' critique of the systematic distortions of symbolic orders is explicitly sociopolitical and economic, but it is only implicitly concerned with the ways in which motive informs the very material critique. Thus, the critic of the present age must learn to resist all abstraction from political and economic life, yet also embody the radical honesty about critical theory and action.<sup>5</sup>

Matuštik finds new contemporary examples of the axiological void that Kierkegaard's individual is faced with, this time in the "cultural and ideological void" following the end of communist totalitarianism in Central and Eastern Europe. He is well aware of the urgency of the issue due to the rise of nationalism, religious and/or secular fundamentalism or neo-Nazism that came in to fill the void. How can we employ Kierkegaard's concepts in order to prevent the rise of new totalitarianism in place of the old one? Matuštik champions the idea of "existential revolution", a constant wake of individual responsibility. In order to provide a basis for this revolution, Matuštik appraises both Habermas' categories of ideal communicative community of "transcendental" individuals and Kierkegaard's ideal of the radically honest individual. According to Matuštik, it is doubtful whether Habermas' intersubjective conception of identity can safeguard the individual's ability to resist and transcend the collective to which she initially belonged to. There is no degree of transparency in the transcendental subjectivity that would guarantee the risk-free choice of one's own identity. Matuštik then turns to Kierkegaard's conception. Although it initially seems as though Kierkegaard's individual is irreparably decisionistic and monological, since he can neither justify nor communicate his faith to other individuals, Matuštik gives us examples of revolutionary scientists and activists (whether they are political, religious, or the like) as proof that individualism need not necessarily be *de facto* incommunicable or irrational.

Hypotheses push beyond the conventions of the community. The individual researcher, while sustained by the rules and data of the scientific community, is often a unique source of qualitative change in community [...] One may understand Kierkegaard's literary and philosophical portraits of personal health along the lines of the experimenter at the

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Matuštik, *Postnational Identity: Critical Theory and Existential Philosophy in Habermas, Kierkegaard and Havel* (New York, London: The Guilford Press, 1993), ix.

limits of her own times [...] The second example comes from Martin Luther King Jr. [...] King argues that activists like the prophets, Socrates, Jesus, Paul, Martin Luther, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson and others were all extremists who had a vision of another, more just world. In confronting the racist status quo King gives himself the title of extremist. He would agree that the African-American struggle might be a domain deemed monological, decisionistic, and untranslatable to the safe discourse of the white mainstream, which will not wake up from the marginalizing, dogmatic slumber on its own.<sup>6</sup>

But still, if this is the case, how can such an individual coexist and communicate with others, and what form of community would they constitute? Matušík contrasts Habermas' "transcendental" members of the ideal communication community with Kierkegaard's conception of the temporally existing individual. In the existential mode of communication, the equality of collocutors is preserved through respect for the temporal existential actuality of the participants of the communication. That is what Kierkegaard calls "indirect communication". It is a communication of the ethical and/or religious. It can only be actualized in the first person, because otherwise it would have to abstract from the act of radical self-choice. The self-choice is not a choice of a certain lifestyle, or a certain conception of the good life (what Kierkegaard calls "the what"), but the choice of the individual mode of life ("the how"). In other words, Habermas' model would not be capable of distinguishing whether a certain communicative practice is being conducted by an individual that has chosen that practice through a radically honest self-choice (as Kierkegaard would say, "chose it passionately") or by an indifferent individual with no personal relation to it whatsoever. The act of such radical honest self-choice allows the individual to distance herself from the tradition: the further she is away from the tradition, the more concretely she will be able to assume her place within it. This distancing is at the same time the intensification of her existence, through it she becomes what she had already been in immediacy (through birth and socialization within a given tradition), but now she becomes that in a de-centred, post-traditional way.

But in order to communicate existence (and with it, the ethical/religious), we must take great care not to confuse the objective content with the subjectivity that holds the truth of our existence (as Kierkegaard puts it in his famous formulation: "Subjectivity is Truth"). Although I can communicate to others e.g. my choice of philosophy as a life calling, that subject matter of communication would be worthless, because it would only convey the result of the choice, but not my inward relation to that choice. The same thing could be communicated by a person who has chosen that calling passionately and a person who has done so indifferently, flipping a coin.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>7</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript for Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 189.

Furthermore, even the communication of reasons that made me make my choice would only be objective communication. But what remains then? Matušík answers by providing another example: in order to teach Kierkegaard's philosophy to someone, I must *not* teach him Kierkegaard's philosophy, but only use it as an *incentive*, as a footnote to a basic text which is that person himself. The only subjective communication is a communication between two subjects, two temporally existing individuals, which resembles a never-ending Socratic task to be "drawn from a hypothetical-meta-physical slumber into an existential drama".<sup>8</sup> The constitutive factors of that drama are the uncertainties of the beginning of communication, its presuppositions, its goals or the procedures for its attainment. Because of this, none of the collocutors can give a concluding interpretation of his own identity, or the identity of the other. Communication is not to resolve the crisis but to bring it to light.

### Concluding remarks: What remains of Modernity?

It may well be the case that Kierkegaard would consider Habermas's model of ideal communication community as just another "congregation of phantoms", a community of anonymous individuals in which they would persuade each other that they actually exist or that they actually have an identity. However, that is not to say that Kierkegaard falls into the category of anti-modernists or reactionary opponents of Modernity. Matušík recognizes that Kierkegaard's religious monologism presents at the same time a critique of the traditional justifications of religion. No institution or ideology is holy and no justification is excluded from criticism. But in order to be honest, that criticism must neither have a determinate starting point nor an established ending. The project of Modernity failed to provide both a transcendental unconditional onset and an eschatological conclusion of history. One could say that the crisis is not the result of the failures of Modernity, but that the failure of Modernity occurred due to the ongoing crisis that it could not successfully resolve. It may have started with Descartes' meditations by the fire, or even prior to that. Its beginning is also indeterminate, its ending is perhaps unlikely. What Kierkegaard urges us to do is not get lulled easily into solutions that are offered to us daily. A sincere crisis is to him more desirable than a false ease. His comical paraphrase of Shakespeare puts it well: it is better to be well hanged than ill wed.

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<sup>8</sup> Matušík, *Postnational Identity*, 136.

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