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Excessive Fixation as a Source of Unbalance in Relationships (Illustrated with Søren KIERKEGAARD'S Theory of Personality Development Stages)

One of the fundamental premises in KIERKEGAARD'S theory of personality is the conviction that a person by entering a relationship does not lose any of her or his identity as an eternal individual. Kierkegaard believes that each human has a unique project with God and his or her primary goal remains eternal salvation, no matter what circumstances she or he encounters along the way. This premise can seem obvious when talking about a Christian thinker, but its implications in Kierkegaard's works have often been regarded with reservations and suspicion even by a number of Judeo-Christian thinkers (e.g. Martin BUBER).¹

Human Relationships as 1 + 1 + 1 + 1...

Søren KIERKEGAARD'S consequent defence of the autonomy and primacy of the individual (the subject) frequently provoked criticism on the part of authors who were intensely concerned with communitarian perspectives of the human existence (e.g. Theodor W. ADORNO or Knud E. LØGSTRUP).² On the other hand, KIERKEGAARD repeatedly criticised excessive emphasis on institutions of the community (e.g. family, church or state), as suggested by thinkers dealing with social paradigms. Undoubtedly the most influential counterpart to KIERKEGAARD'S project of religious subjectivism, and a reference figure throughout his life, was Georg W. F. HEGEL.

¹ BUBER Martin, *Die Frage an den Einzelnen (Das dialogische Prinzip)*. Heidelberg, 1984.

² ADORNO Theodor W., *Kierkegaard Lehre von der Liebe*. In: *Konstruktion des Ästhetischen*. Frankfurt am Main, 1966.

KIERKEGAARD'S concept of personality development is based on the idea of the increasing maturity of the individual. The individual follows a certain path in life and her or his ultimate goal should be her or his meaningful presence in the world, rooted in the mystery of transcendence. The transcendence is, however, ubiquitous and therefore a relation with it can be traced in all the relative relationships of the given individual. The way one approaches food or nature; how one treats one's dog, one's property, one's family or the way one smokes a cigar – all these seemingly non-absolute relationships point to the configuration of one's rudimentary relational patterns, which are invisibly present in one's own inside.

It is no surprise that KIERKEGAARD was deeply inspired by the narratives about SOCRATES. Although he was far from a mere follower of the ancient sage, in many instances he drew inspiration from SOCRATES' methods of personality formation. Like SOCRATES, KIERKEGAARD was an avid fan of the consequent deconstruction of illusions connected with interpersonal unions of whatever nature or goal (to household, school, monastery, etc.). He perceived the Greek master of irony as someone who called to people's minds not so much their responsibilities to their parents, spouses or superiors, but primarily to themselves. The impact of a person's internal world on her or his outer relations was obvious to SOCRATES and KIERKEGAARD alike; they united in the belief that the level of an individual's inner maturity determines the level of maturity of the relationships she or he creates.

Although the individual is born into an arbitrary social setting, in her or his later life it is largely up to her- or himself to decide in what measure her or his inside will conform to the expectations of the surrounding social structures. Although it would be misleading to see the road to maturity in the direction of increasing isolation, it is equally illusory to seek deep happiness through excessive fixation on a chosen reality (person, community, setting, etc.).

KIERKEGAARD'S radical emphasis on the value of each human individual brings him to sharp criticism of cases where the subject gets trapped in a certain "love"-based setting that successfully prevents her or him from further inner growth. In this respect he is equally strict with selfish hedonism (aesthetic paradigm), marital ghettoism (ethical paradigm) or ecclesial formalism (religious paradigm). Below we will try to present these cases within the framework of KIERKEGAARD'S theory of the stages of personality development, attempting to illustrate how they can lead the individual towards stagnation and conflicts.

KIERKEGAARD'S Theory of Life Stages

The traditional understanding of Søren KIERKEGAARD'S theory of stages speaks about three fundamental paradigms of human lifestyle (i.e. stages): the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. It must be pointed out, however, that the religious stage is to be understood as two separate stages: religious stage A and religious stage B.

The theory of stages does not describe a strictly chronological division of periods in an individual's life, although the stages are, in fact, to be viewed as consecutive. They are, however, not of an exclusive nature. In adult life, striving for maturity means encompassing all the four stages into one's inner life and discovering their respective roles. They should coordinate with one another, each having different charismas.

Nonetheless, there arise situations in life when one of the stages seeks hegemony and begins aggressively to attack and eliminate the elements of other stages from the life of the individual. It becomes a cancerous cell that ruins the equilibrium of the person from the inside. KIERKEGAARD'S works in many instances analyse cases where the stages succumbed to the temptation of self-absolutisation and the myth of self-sufficiency (i.e. fixation). In such instances, the stage aspiring to domination makes an attempt to devalue the relevance of the other stages.

In KIERKEGAARD'S writings the conflicts between lifestyle paradigms are illustrated mainly in stories, where individual stages are represented by imaginary characters. Then it can happen that a poet (aesthetic figure) ridicules marital life, a husband (ethical figure) ignores his religious vocation and a monk (religious figure) looks down on all the "lower" stages.

In a balanced human individual, who is not fixated on the seeming safety of one stage, stages coexist and live side by side. They represent specific vocations in life and virtually they concern different areas of life, where they can have a formative impact on how the capacities of the individual unfold.

Since the subject is in a constant evolution, at earlier stages of her or his life she or he is more familiar with the more immediate stages (mainly aesthetic), and as she or he grows older, she or he may increasingly realise the fundamental distinction between relative bonds in her or his life and the one absolute bond (with transcendence), which brings her or him closer to the less immediate stages. In an ideal case the individual proceeds from one stage to another without getting stuck in the aesthetic, ethical or religious paradigm A.

Religious paradigm B is the only paradigm that by its nature does not hamper the flourishing of other stages. Therefore the danger of unhealthy fixation concerns only the first three stages. In life, however, a more common situation is that of an individual becoming too attached to one or more of the stages that precede religious stage B. These then dominate the individual's life in their own way, causing more or less damage to her or his inner growth, depending on the intensity of their aggressivity.

We will not characterize the aforementioned stages in more detail, in hopes that from the exposition below it will become obvious approximately where the confines of the stages lie and roughly which areas of life they cover.

Excessive Fixation on the *Interesting* in the Aesthetic Paradigm

Fixation causing increasing imbalance in an interpersonal relationship can have many forms. In our analysis we will focus on negative aesthetic fixation, examining a case where it seeks ultimate dominance and tries to prevent the individual from entering the spheres of the ethical and the religious. For this purpose we will avail ourselves of the fabulous figure of *John the Seducer*, which KIERKEGAARD employs as the embodiment of aesthetic hegemony.

John the Seducer is a living example of a self-absolutised and highly refined aesthetic anti-hero. Contrary to Don Juan, he does not represent naïve carnality. His *catalogue* does not include 1,003 seduced women like the one of Don Juan. He focuses on one woman, but in a most concentrated and penetrative manner. His chief driving force is the quest for the *interesting* (Det Interessante) in life, and he treats other people as media for this quest.

John makes his lover *Cordelia* discover her own desires and cravings. He helps her uncover the exciting realm of passion that she was taught to ignore in the boring petit-bourgeois setting of her Copenhagen-based family. She discovers in their relationship the secret corners of the labyrinth of her own inside, all within the seemingly secure atmosphere of John's sham devotion.

It is a matter of course that the Seducer plays with his lover in order to satisfy his thirst for the interesting. He "strains the bow of love in order to hurt even more deeply."⁹ He strategises, calculates and plans in order to maximise the effect of his investment. Like Don Juan, John the Seducer is a hunter of pleasure (Nydelse), but a structurally very different pleasure.



Don Juan collects erotic trophies, i.e. immediate pleasure, whereas John waits patiently in order to be able to turn his lover Cordelia into an instrument that would help to enhance the most *interesting* inner process of his – that of self-reflection, a process that ultimately leads to a high-level self-love.⁴ It is in this process that it becomes manifest that Cordelia in his reflections never transcends the boundaries of an object. She is a muse, a responsive tool that provides for such exciting aesthetic sets of impulses as melodicy, eroticity or mysteriousness. She brings in beauty and poetry and even the thrilling anguish of love.

From the instrumental point of view, the tool perfectly follows the aim of the designer. John, who has made Cordelia discover her deeper self and has awakened in her a taste for the finer things in life, has simultaneously designed her to be an obedient stimulator of his self-scrutiny and self-admiration. Cordelia follows the path

paved by John, partly because she loves and trusts him, but also because she expects to be able to profit anew from discoveries of the *interesting* facilitated by the Seducer.

In situations where she starts to lose her capacity of being interesting for him, he invents new ways to keep the element of the interesting in their relationship. On one occasion he even confesses coolly that “to poeticise oneself into a girl is a piece of art, but to poeticise oneself out of her is a masterpiece,”⁵ which indicates how self-centred his interests are.

The aggressivity of the aesthetic fixation on the interesting is expressed in the aforementioned “love-story” most pregnantly in the final phase of the relationship, where John and Cordelia become engaged, even though this ethical institution never attracted John as a vital option for his aesthetic project. The engagement is entered into only to be broken and hence to enliven the fading colours of the interesting in their lives.

Both engagement and marriage (institutions of the ethical paradigm) are referred to by John as boring and dry. Since John is designed by KIERKEGAARD to represent solely the aesthetic stage, it is his aim to make Cordelia stay within the framework of this stage and to prevent her from moving on to the spheres of the ethical and the religious. To ensure this a game is introduced, in which the toy is an ethical commitment – the engagement. This ethical commitment should normally ripen into an ethical commitment of an even higher degree, that of marriage.

What happens, however, is that after some time Cordelia, infected by John’s obsession with the interesting, begins to admit to herself that the engagement is an obstacle. It makes their love too public, too straightforward and devoid of mystery and passion. With John’s help she starts to believe that the lost potencies can be regained if the bond is broken. Once again she feels on her shoulders the burden of the petit-bourgeois worship of duty and commitment. Thus she decides to sever the bonds with the ethical sphere in order to protect the realm of the *interesting* she discovered through John.

Obviously Cordelia does not know the real intentions of the Seducer. She does not realise that he is having fun while she is tormenting herself with her heavy decision. And what she cannot know either is the fact that the end of their relationship is near. In order to infuse the interesting anew into their relationship, she cancels the engagement. John is satisfied: “If I had cancelled the

3 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Forførerens Dagbog*. In: *Samlede Værker*. Bind 2. 323.

4 *Ibid.* 370.

5 *Ibid.* 341.

engagement, I would have missed out on this erotic *salto mortale* that is so seducing and such a clear sign of the courage of her soul.”⁶

Soon after their romance is over. John, who cannot bear crying girls, leaves the relationship behind. This game is over for him and in his mind he sees himself as a winner. Namely, he has accomplished his obsession with aesthetics – and more concretely, kept the pact with the interesting: “Have I really always been faithful to the *interesting*? Yes, I can admit it freely and openly in this secret talk. Engagement was interesting for the reason that it did not bring what is generally considered interesting. It preserved the interesting by means of the discrepancy between outer appearance and inner life.”⁷

Excessive Fixation on the *Marital Ghetto* in the Ethical Paradigm

The ethical for KIERKEGAARD is the general. Ethical realities go beyond individuality, transcend the needs of concrete individuals and take into account human society in its broadest sense. They are the basis for social structures. For human relationships the ethical paradigm offers institutions that ensure stability and safety. This study will restrict itself to a reflection on *marriage*, as an exemplary representative of ethical institutions.

Marriage is in a way the focal point of KIERKEGAARD’s considerations on the ethical stage, and several treatises of his present marriage as the most basic ethical way of life. Marriage is always taken very seriously and defended against ideologies that pretend to offer a better substitute.

Contrary to the aesthetic stage, where the lovers escape from the world to their hiding place and share their mysteries in secret, the ethical commitment of marriage goes public. In its mature form marriage realises the aesthetic nature of its roots and makes an effort to preserve and cultivate them. This is elaborated by KIERKEGAARD’s fictitious hero of the ethical paradigm, *Judge William*, in the tractate *The Aesthetic Relevance of Marriage*. Judge William is a happy husband who urges young aesthetes to secure an equilibrium of aesthetics and ethics in the personality’s development.

Compared to John the Seducer, William lacks the refined one-sidedness, but presents the reader with a much deeper and broader insight into life. He sees the potentiality of religious growth in marriage, as well as realises the geniality of immediate aesthetic

love.⁸ In his letter to an aesthete, he suggests that the magic of first love be combined with a commitment that turns this potentially transitory and ephemeral phenomenon into a permanent and life-long source of happiness.

Alongside Judge William there appear in KIERKEGAARD’s works other characters which even more pregnantly illustrate the stance of a married person who has found a way of incorporating into her or his marriage the mystery of transcendence and opening the gate that leads from ethics further into the realm of the religious. The characters that KIERKEGAARD avails himself of are married representatives of religious stage B: the Biblical figures of Abraham, Job, and briefly Mary and the literary figure of the Knight of Faith.

Although marriage can function perfectly as a home-base for an individual who remains open to both aesthetics and the religious, it can also become a harbour that keeps its ships home until they get too rusty to sail anywhere else. KIERKEGAARD’s criticism of excessive fixation on interpersonal unions is scattered all over his oeuvre, but in *Works of Love* he mentions two categories that signal whether the religious is present in marriage. These two categories are that of *conscience* and of *neighbour*. If the former is ruled out, transcendence (God) is locked out from the marital ghetto; if the latter is ignored, the marital ghetto raises a fence between its clan and the rest of the world.

Conscience is according to KIERKEGAARD a distinctly Christian element in marriage and was unknown, or at least unarticulated, in non-Christian Antiquity. Conscience brings into marriage the corrective categories of *sin* and *guilt*.⁹

Neighbour is a Biblical category and it serves to prevent marriage from basing itself on worship of the clan and from potentially uniting two selfish individuals in a selfish tandem. Neighbour is in KIERKEGAARD a more basic category than wife and husband, and therefore spouses should not forget to regard each other primarily as neighbours in order not to get too fixated on the roles of husband and wife.

Another danger inherent in marriage is that it becomes a setting that disfavours the development of individuality. If the ties are excessively tight, the members of the family begin to act like *one person* and their individual voices and opinions drown in their common project of marriage and family. Already in his disserta-

8 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Ægteskabet æsthetiske Gyldighed (Enten-Eller)*. In: *Samlede Værker*. Bind 3. 25.

9 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger*. *Samlede Værker*. Bind 12. 135ff.

10 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Om Begrebet Ironi*. *Samlede Værker*. Bind 1. 215.

6 Ibid. 393. / 7 Ibid. 403.

tion on the *Concept of Irony*, KIERKEGAARD points out in connection with SOCRATES that for the ancient sage “state and family were just a sum of individuals and therefore he always treated members of state and families as individuals.”¹⁰ This critique of his was not forgotten by the state, and during his trial he had to face the accusation of neutralising family life in Athens.¹¹

The development of personality entails not only the basic autonomy that has just been mentioned. It concerns also the fundamental vocation of a person to rise to a fuller existence by means of her or his journey through life stages. Therefore one of the most complex tasks of the ethical commitment of marriage is to teach its two protagonists that they cannot find the Absolute only within the ethical paradigm.

If marriage fails to teach this, it becomes a *temptation* (Anfaegtelse). Excessive fixation on the ethical stage, or on a combination of ethics and aesthetics, leads to a dead end similar to the radical fixation on aesthetics. Namely, both aesthetics and ethics should teach the individual not only to find a stronghold in them, but also – and this is even more important – to go beyond them.

With a little drama, KIERKEGAARD sums up this vocation in the case of marriage in the following way: “After all, marriage is a joke. A joke that should be treated with all seriousness (Alvor), but without supposing that the seriousness lies in marriage itself, since it is a reflection of the relationship with God, the reflection of the husband’s absolute relation to his absolute $\tau\epsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ and of the wife’s absolute relation to her absolute $\tau\epsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$.”¹²

Excessive Fixation on *Externality* in Religious Paradigm A

The *religious* necessarily starts to degenerate when it begins to behave like aesthetics or ethics. Although the religious stage must not cut itself off from the previous stages, it also needs to realise differences between the respective vocations. Similarly, aesthetics and ethics should not aspire to features that are characteristic of the religious paradigm.

We will not belabour here the differences between religious stages A and B, mentioning only that religious stage B is a specifically Christian Gospel-based paradigm, whereas religious stage A

exists outside Christianity, too, and has its own ways of approaching transcendence. It will, however, be obvious from the statements below that by far not everything that is commonly referred to as Christianity falls automatically into religious stage B.

For KIERKEGAARD the *religious* is the stage where the independence of the subject in decision-making reaches its peak. The subject deals with her or his religious vocation in a direct relationship with the transcendence (God) and often finds her- or himself incapable of explaining her or his inner processes to the neighbours. In Abraham’s, Job’s or Mary’s case even the closest people have to respect the silence of the one who believes and suffers for her or his individual vocation.

The religious vocation is between God and the subject. Although it concerns other people and necessarily has a social dimension, it might at times require a *teleological suspension of ethics*, as it happened in the case of Abraham. In his complex act of sacrificing Isaac, Abraham was bound to transcend generally valid ethical norms.

Since KIERKEGAARD was not familiar with other religions or spiritualities, his considerations concerned mainly Christianity and secondarily Greek Antiquity, with its spiritualities and religious sentiment. In KIERKEGAARD’S eyes mass Christianity (Kristenhed) is the death of Christendom (Kristendom). For him the bearer of the Christian faith is *the individual* (den Enkelte). The individual can create or join a religious community (church, order or family), but she or he never ceases to be responsible for her or his own inner growth and formation.

The main criticism of fixation on externality is directed against Danish popular Christendom. KIERKEGAARD refers to it in some places as *Sunday-Christianity*, since the Sunday worship service represented the only religious element in the lives of many Danish believers. The greatest “credit,” however, for producing masses of Christians rests with the Danish clergy. The Danish state employs one thousand officials who cannot afford to preach Christ’s words about the incompatibility (Uensartethed) of the world and the Reign of God, because they are in the first place paid to be obedient employees of the King of Denmark.¹³

To the contrary, the Danish priests had to preach lukewarm petit-

11 Ibid. 216.

12 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Afsluttende videnskabelig Efterskrift. Andet Halvbind. Samlede Værker*. Bind 10. 140–141.

13 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Bladartikler 1854–1855. Øieblikket 1–10*. In: *Samlede Værker*. Bind 19. 55.

14 KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Afsluttende videnskabelig Efterskrift*. 199.

bourgeois Christianity that respects the interests of the state, since they were all husbands and fathers and had to provide for their families from their salaries. Therefore, what they often sold was not the radical challenge of Jesus Christ, but rationalised and Hegelised toothless Christianity that would not harm anyone.

In this setting Christendom loses its inner passion and what remains is general reflection and religious rituals that become the signs of “faith.” The fixation and reliance on the external acts and symbols of religion are in strict opposition to *the religious* based on an individual inner passion, which claims that the religious paradigm necessarily involves self-denial (i.e. religious negativity). And as KIERKEGAARD remarks, “the religious stripped of negativity is mere aesthetics,”¹⁴ or at best – ethics.

Religious formalism and fixation on *externality* can exist also in religious institutions that in fact do cultivate inner passion. KIERKEGAARD sees such an example in medieval monasticism. This lifestyle was according to him not devoid of *passion* for transcendence, but it tried to tie it too much to outward expression, such as different clothes, spatial seclusion and societal status. This again was a step back and the notion of sanctity became too closely linked with clericalism. From this perspective, fixation on outward manifestations of sanctity is a paved road towards just another form of mass Christianity that KIERKEGAARD was so much afraid of.

Why All This Talk About Fixation?

Fixation is a mode of relating that the involved parties often consider favourable or even necessary for the relationship they cultivate. Fixation is in fact an excessive attachment to a person or another reality that causes inner unbalance and leads to an excessive emphasis on one reality to the neglect of other vital realities. This mechanism needs at times very careful attunement, since the overemphasized reality can be in itself important and beautiful, and vulgar solutions would cause unnecessary damage.

KIERKEGAARD’s examples of fixation at different levels have been used here as illustrations of how fixation can work in a variety of lifestyles. Sometimes it can seem naïve and childish, at other times refined and sophisticated or even altruist and loving. No matter whether fixation takes on the veneer of duty, love or worship, it needs to be uncovered and redirected at its deeper levels. Frequently the motives of a person who becomes fixated on a cho-

sen reality are very pure and it is only the extent that makes the relationship unhealthy. But there are cases, like the one of John the Seducer, where the motives for fixation stem from excessive pampering, strong egocentrism or even from the perverted pleasure of *schadenfreude*.

In marriage, submissiveness, lack of self-confidence, a tendency towards domination or illusory opinions on social roles can be parts of the game. In the case of religious clinging to externality, the motives can range from lack of security, weakness of character or fear of failure, to such phenomena as laziness or exhibitionism.

It has been claimed at times that KIERKEGAARD’s insistence on the preservation of the autonomy of the individual and the radical focus on inner growth and development lead the subject towards egoism and isolation. Although KIERKEGAARD would disagree, it is certainly a legitimate concern and should be taken seriously. KIERKEGAARD’s methodology, similarly to the *maieutika* of SOCRATES, tries to uncover the deeper strata of human personality in order to teach the individual more about her or his strengths and weaknesses.

This should prevent weakness appearing in the attire of strength and vice versa. If the individual is confused about her or his own inside, in interpersonal conflicts she or he will not be able to mobilise aptly the deeper parts of her or his personality, which are discovered and grasped through thorough study of the complex inner world. Therefore the journey through KIERKEGAARD’s stages of life equips the individual with much sharper tools for the scrutiny of where she or he stands and what she or he wants, which can be of great assistance in any kind of conflict.

Suggested Reading

- ADORNO Theodor W., *Kierkegaard Lehre von der Liebe*. In *Konstruktion des Ästhetischen*. Frankfurt am Main, 1966.
- BUBER Martin, *Die Frage an den Einzelnen (Das dialogische Prinzip)*. Heidelberg, 1984.
- KIERKEGAARD Søren, *Om Begrebet Ironi* (Bind 1); *Enten-Eller* (Bind 2/3); *Afsluttende livdenskabelig Efterskrift* (Bind 9/10); *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger* (Bind 12); *Bladartikler 1854–1855, Øieblikket 1–10*. (Bind 19). In *Samlede Værker*. København, 1995.
- KOCH Carl H., *Kierkegaard og "Det Interessante"*. En studie i en æsthetisk kategori. København, 1992.

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