



SELF-REFLECTION AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY— KIERKEGAARD'S WRITINGS ABOUT HIMSELF

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The general subject of this workshop is 'Kierkegaard—a European Thinker'. This title seems to be rather exaggerated, at least with regard to Kierkegaard's self-assessment. For in his own view he belongs to the provincial areas of Europe, to the 'small town' Copenhagen, although as a 'genius'.¹ Therefore Kierkegaard cannot be considered a European cosmopolitan, for he hardly experienced another country than Denmark—except for his short journeys to Berlin. In comparison to other great and really 'European' thinkers—e.g. Erasmus of Rotterdam, Leibniz or Schopenhauer—Kierkegaard's biography is rather simple. Moreover he has not founded any international school or fellowship during his life-time, so that his thinking could have been installed as an important step within the history of European thinking. By the way—this would have been a complete misunderstanding of his intentions, for he has written with regard to the individual and not with regard to a school—'away from the public to the individual'.²

What makes Kierkegaard a 'European Thinker' is of course not geographical categories, but categories of the history of ideas. The latter are primary motives even today—apart from political or historical interests (e.g. the European Market or the anniversary of the discovery of America)—for a reflection of what 'European' could mean. A very urgent motive for such an investigation seems to be the world-wide ecological crisis we all are concerned with, which—justified or not—is considered to be a result of the two roots of European spirit: ancient Greek logos and the so called '*dominium terrae*' of the Old Testament within the Christian tradition.³ In general: the origin of Europe is Greek philosophy and Christian faith. Together—although with an antithetical tension in Kierkegaard's view—these two roots have caused a life-style ('*Lebensform*') which can be called 'European'.⁴ This life-style oscillates in many different ways between Socrates and Jesus Christ, and these two main figures of European thinking are very important for Kierkegaard, although not of equal value. With regard to his aesthetical writings Socrates is the example of how to 'fool' people into truth within the modern area of reflection,⁵ but Jesus Christ is the truth and the absolute itself.⁶

It is not the intention of Kierkegaard to harmonise Socrates and Jesus Christ by a humanistic spirit of peace, which might have been a reason for the romantic concept of unity and Catholic piety as Novalis has suggested in his essay '*Die Christenheit oder Europa*' of 1799.⁷ In contrary to this concept of unity it is Kierkegaard's intention to show antagonisms and break-downs of human life by pointing out Socrates and Jesus Christ dialectically. Just by this, the fragile and manifold existence of man could be considered a microcosmos in comparison to

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the macrocosmos 'Europe', which is not unified and harmonised at all.⁸ These tensions and antagonisms of human existence seem to be a result of Kierkegaard's position: 'subjectivity' is the truth.⁹

Within the European history or philosophy this position could be the consequence of the following steps of development: the overcoming of mythology by the 'logos' since Heraclitus and Plato; the elaboration of the platonic logos to categories by Aristotle; the systematic deduction of categories from the transcendental 'ego' by Kant and Fichte, since Descartes has found the '*cogito*' to be the modern '*fundamentum inconcussum*' for European philosophy; the change from categories to vivid and personal powers ('*Potenzen*') in the later writings of Schelling in order to distinguish the ontological status of dead things from personal beings; finally Kierkegaard's dialectic of existence, which has its consequence in the so called '*Existenzialien*' of human life in the work of Heidegger.

As far as the history of European theology is concerned, we have to recognise the role of conscience before God since Paul the Apostle, Augustine and Luther, to understand Kierkegaard's thesis of subjectivity as the principal of truth.

Kierkegaard calls the inevitable connection of all our thinking with the '*ego cogito*': 'reflection'. Reflection is the sign of his time, not in the sense of optimistic pride, but rather in the sense of a fatal burden: 'The tragedy of our age is reason and reflection. No spontaneous enthusiast will be able to help us any more, for the reflection of the age is consuming him'.¹⁰

It is precisely the religious existence—the most important one for Kierkegaard—which will be destroyed by means of reflection. And now it is our task to gain faith as the 'spontaneity after reflection'.¹¹ But this aim is not reachable without or against reflection, only by going through reflection to the simplicity of faith: 'The religious is put completely into reflection, but in such a manner, that it will be taken back completely into simplicity by reflection'.¹² This program contains the 'European' problem as Kierkegaard settles it. It is the problem of Christianity in the nineteenth century up to now: how is it possible to overcome reflection by means of reflection, if subjectivity is the truth? (Probably this 'European' problem can be transferred to the ecological crisis caused by European science and technology today: how is it possible to overcome the disastrous results of technology by means of technology, if technology is a kind of truth?)¹³

The rough explanation of Kierkegaard's thesis that subjectivity is the truth, given by some hints to the history of philosophy and theology, points out two phenomenons of European thinking, which are extremely emphasised in Kierkegaard's work and which make him a 'European Thinker' *par excellence*: the self and the conscience.¹⁴ These two phenomena show up the problem of self-assurance. In other words: It is the problem of autonomy and realising of oneself, of individuality and the 'ego'—not of subjectivity as such and in general, as it is proclaimed as 'transcendental ego' in the philosophy of Kant and Fichte, but of the personal, concrete 'ego' (the 'empirical ego' in the words of Fichte): 'one of the tragedies of modern times is precisely this—to have abolished the 'I', the personal 'I'¹⁵—for the benefit of the public without responsibility, the masses and the press.¹⁶ In contrast to this, Kierkegaard claims in his own way the ancient Greek programme of '*gnothi seauton*': 'Self-knowledge (not fantastically the pure

self-consciousness and the pure I').¹⁷

Therefore Kierkegaard is a 'European Thinker' *par excellence*, because he discusses the problem of self-reflection in a way nobody else has done before. As far as I can see, nowhere else in the history of humanities can we find such a methodological and existential concentration in respect to the self (there are even caricatures of this, as we know: The whole world turns around S.K.). The Buddhists, for example, refuse to propose a self or an 'ego' ('*anatta*'), or, to give another example, in old Israel the individual is nothing else but a part of the tribe or the people, similar to the so-called primitive religions of nature. This concentration on the self—critised as 'eurocentrism' or 'anthropocentrism' today¹⁸—combined with the typical European category of history¹⁹ makes it obvious that the perfect genre of this self-reflection must be the autobiography.

In my opinion Kierkegaard's writings in general belong to this genre, although not in the naive way of direct self-reflection like memoirs.²⁰ He is aware of all the problems of self-reflection by means of his pseudonyms as well as by means of his literal elaboration of his relationship to his father and to his fiancée—for instance in his writings 'Fear and Trembling', 'The Repetition' and in many parts of his 'Diary of the Seducer' in 'Either-Or' I.

Kierkegaard is not a naive autobiographer, he does not look upon his life with a certain pride, which critics have often pointed out to be a failure of the autobiography.²¹ He is a manifold broken autobiographer and uses his typical 'indirect communication' even against himself. Therefore he figures out an inner problem of the literal form of autobiography.

In my opinion Kierkegaard's writings are the summit of what a Christian autobiography could be, because he overcomes this form through internal reasons, that means: by reflection. For he knows about the 'riddle of the self',²² which can never 'have' or 'possess' itself totally as we can have or possess dead things, as he says: 'Life can be interpreted only after it has been experienced . . .'.²³ Therefore the 'riddle of the self' cannot be solved by self-description. It still remains a riddle. But for Kierkegaard there is a demand to become 'transparent' to oneself, that means: to have our self in order to look through our self until we can see its bottom, its substance, that is God: 'in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it. This formula in turn . . . is the definition of faith'.²⁴ As far as the 'ego' becomes 'dissolved in the divine all', 'existence . . . gains a transparency'.²⁵ Only by becoming transparent in relation to God can we overcome our desperation arising because of the antagonisms and tensions in trying to become a self (without God) or to get rid of our self (before God), as Kierkegaard says.²⁶ Only by this can we reach a balance of the antithetical elements of the self as Kierkegaard describes them in 'The Sickness unto Death' part I: 'A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity . . .'.²⁷ With regard to the tension of time and eternity Kierkegaard describes the demand of becoming transparent as follows: 'To be contemporary with oneself (therefore neither in the future of fear or of expectation nor in the past) is transparency in repose, and this is possible only in

the God-relationship, or it is the God-relationship'.²⁸

This seems to be mysticism, and in fact there are a lot of remarks especially in Kierkegaard's early diaries, which show a certain relationship to mysticism (this is a hint of Wim Scholtens), for Kierkegaard shows the importance of leaving the self, which should become a part of God's higher reality. For being a self is not an honour but a burden: 'How horrible if all history disappears for a sickly brooding over one's own wretched history',²⁹ and: 'There is nothing more dangerous for a man, nothing more paralysing, than a certain isolating self-scrutiny...'.³⁰ And in an extreme temper: 'to me all existence is infected, I myself most of all'.³¹ Therefore Kierkegaard preaches 'true humility' like Meister Eckhart and other mystics: 'In order to learn true humility..., it is good for a person to withdraw from the turmoil of the world...',³² for '...here the soul opens willingly to every noble impression..., he feels a need to surrender to this power that rules it all'.³³

Could it then be the task of the specific Christian autobiography to write the self away, knowing that the 'ego' is not capable of the 'unified point of view' to describe its own life?³⁴ Would it then be the consequent result of 'European' thinking and its emphasised subjectivity just to leave the self and the 'ego' (and so the 'European' as well)? A short note of Kierkegaard gives a hint in this direction: 'The category 'to continue to stand' can be used in connection with Asia. The Jews continued to stand; China has continued to stand; India has continued to stand—on the other hand, the category for Europe is: to fall. Rome fell. Greece fell'.³⁵ In my opinion this means: the 'ego' leaves itself, or better: should leave itself or become transparent.

But how could this be possible? For to become transparent with regard to the power which established the self can only be realised through the paradox of becoming a self by leaving the self—that is to say: never. For 'I can abstract from everything but *not from myself*'.³⁶ Just for this reason the self has become the modern '*fundamentum inconcussum*' since Descartes and Fichte. Only by means of irony this paradox of leaving the self by becoming a self (or the other way round) is understandable. And this legitimates Kierkegaard's way of autobiographical writings. For it is irony which can hold the gap open between the wish and the ability of leaving the self—but not in the mood of desperation, but in the mood of reconciliation, as it is told by the gospel of Christ, although it is not thinkable: 'Irony is the unity of ethical passion, which in inwardness infinitely accentuates the private self, and of development, which in outwardness (in association with people) infinitely abstracts from the private self'.³⁷ By means of becoming ironical with oneself the problem could be 'solved' of how to overcome reflection—that is: the self—by means of reflection—that is: by means of the self, the problem of becoming transparent—whenever.

Irony is the essential form of autobiography with regard to the riddle of the self, to the paradox, that I can only leave myself by becoming a self, makes Kierkegaard's writings a work of art. This means: they are not just stories about the self and what it 'really' is. Kierkegaard's form of autobiography is 'the story of one's own life as true poetry' in the shape of a work of art, 'which only can be true as far as it is considered to be a work of art'.³⁸ With this insight of Kierkegaard he is—in my opinion—a 'European Thinker' *par excellence*,

because he jokes with the literary genre of the autobiography—for he is the 'master of irony'.

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NOTES

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2. S. Kierkegaard, *On my Activity as an Author* (= *Activity*), German edition XIII, 499pp. (own translation).
3. Gerhard Friedrich, *Ökologie und Bibel* (Stuttgart, 1982).
4. Reinhold Schneider, 'Europa als Lebensform', in *Der Friede der Welt* (Frankfurt/M. 1983), 222pp.
5. S. Kierkegaard, *Point of View*, p. 541.
6. S. Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. Hong/Hong (Princeton, 1991), No I, IV ('Christianity as the Absolute').
7. Ernst Wolf, Art. 'Europa I', in *RGG*, pp. 734–737.
8. Reinhold Schneider, *Europa als Lebensform*, p. 224.
9. S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. Swenson/Lowrie (Princeton: 1974), part II, chapter III, §1.
10. S. Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers* (= *JP*), ed. Hong and Hong (Bloomington/London: 1975), III, p. 428 (3129).
11. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* V, p. 447 (6135).
12. S. Kierkegaard, *Activity*, p. 495.
13. Martin Heidegger, *Die Frage nach der Technik*, in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: 1987), pp. 16ff.
14. Reinhold Schneider, *Europa als Lebensform*, p. 222.
15. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* I, p. 302 (656).
16. S. Kierkegaard, *Activity*, pp. 496ff.
17. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* I, p. 270 (649).
18. Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott in der Schöpfung*. (München: Ökologische Schöpfungslehre, 1985), p. 149.
19. Reinhold Schneider, *Europa als Lebensform*.
20. Therefore Hayo Gerdes doubts whether Kierkegaard's diaries can be considered autobiographical (see his introduction to his own German edition of Kierkegaard's diaries I, 2). In contrast Emanuel Hirsch considers Kierkegaard's writings about himself to belong to the history of European autobiography (see Hirsch's introduction to his own German edition of Kierkegaard's writings about himself XIII, XIV).
21. Wolfgang Trillhaas, 'Die eigene Geschichte erzählen. Über Sinn und Unsinn von Autobiographien', in *EvoKomm* 11/1978, pp. 715–718; Walter Sparn, 'Autobiographische Kompetenz', in *Marburger Jahrbuch Theologie* III, ed. Wilfried Härtle and Reiner Preul (Marburg: 1990), p. 63.
22. Walter Sparn, *Autobiographische Kompetenz*, p. 55.
23. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* I, p. 449 (1025).
24. S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Hong and Hong (Princeton: 1980), p. 131.
25. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* II, p. 379 (1946).

26. S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, part I.
27. S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, p. 13.
28. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* I, pp. 456–457 (1050).
29. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* II, p. 390 (1970).
30. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* II, p. 390 (1971).
31. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* V, p. 131 (5383).
32. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* V, p. 33 (5099).
33. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* V, pp. 33–34 (5099).
34. With regard to the ‘unified point of view’ as a specific element of the autobiography
see Janos Szavaj, *The Autobiography* (Budapest: 1984), p. 126.
35. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* IV, p. 144 (4122).
36. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* V, p. 69 (5142).
37. S. Kierkegaard, *JP* II, p. 276 (1745).
38. Walter Sparn, *Autobiographische Kompetenz*, p. 62.