

KIERKEGAARD'S WAY TO TRUTH AND EXISTENCE

In his new book¹ Giuseppe Modica addresses Kierkegaard's thought in the light of the very actual philosophical debate on the limits of the objective, theoretical thinking, guided by the ideal of 'methodic truth', and the legitimacy, or even the superiority, of the 'extra-methodic' approach used by the subjective, existential philosophies. Leitmotiv of Modica's accurate analyses, which take into account the whole of Kierkegaard's philosophical production, is the conviction that true thinking and true experience can find their actualizations only in the dimension of the historical concreteness and of the unrepeatable uniqueness of man's individuality. Following Kierkegaard's view, the ontological possibility of such an individuality derives from man's primary relation to God: the *principium individuationis* that founds man's singularity is the outcome of his ontological relation with the Absolute. The essence of man himself, far for being concisely definable as 'animal rationale', is rather to be regarded as the one extreme of this fundamental relation, on whose score man's ontological constitution is described by the hendiadys of freedom and sin.

The philosophical presuppositions of Kierkegaard's views have been taken on and further developed – among the others, but with greater resonance – by Martin Heidegger and Hans Georg Gadamer. The philosophy of Martin Heidegger can be understood as the formal transposition of the theologically connoted existential philosophy of Kierkegaard. This great debt has been systematically neglected by the philosopher of Messkirch, with the only exception of an explicit line of recognition, excerpted from his *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles*². Hans-Georg Gadamer has been

1. G. MODICA, *Una verità per me. Itinerari kierkegaardiani*, Vita e Pensiero: Milano 2007, 259 pp.

2. M. HEIDEGGER, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles. Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung*, (WS 1921-22), GA 61, Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1985, p. 182. Here Heidegger makes a «dankbare Anzeige der Quelle» referring to Kierkegaard's *Einübung im Christentum*. In *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993) we find a further reference to Kierkegaard's philosophy (at the end of the footnote 1, p. 190) within the section dedicated to the analysis of the concept of *Angst*. Of course, according to Heidegger, the phenomenon of anguish as conceived by Kierkegaard can be regarded as 'ontological' – and not as merely ontic – only in «sehr engen Grenzen».

more willing to concede that, without Kierkegaard's 'Copernican revolution', it would have been impossible to imagine Heidegger's *Hermeneutik der Faktizität* and an Hermeneutical philosophy *tout court*, whose main assumption claims that the ontological basis of the phenomenological inquiry must draw upon an interpretation of the existence, thought of as an unexplainable and irreducible matter of fact, and not as a pure *cogito*, considered as the most typical ontological constitution of the most typical generality³.

The highlighting of the centrality of Kierkegaard's position in the history of western philosophy and of the turn that he has impressed to it by his radical opposition to Hegel's philosophy is the first significant merit of Modica's book. Its second merit consists in the author's remarkable ability to analyze Kierkegaard's thought in the light of both its internal articulations and of its controversial points as individuated through the investigation of Pareyson's, Stirner's and Lévinas' own positions, without ever making the least concession to the theoretical method of logical analysis and to the ideal of objective truth that he stigmatizes throughout his book.

Modica's investigations are guided by the assumption that Kierkegaard's anti-Hegelian position has constituted a kind of paradigmatic focal point, around which one of the main streams of western philosophy still rotates. The possibility itself to address the Danish thinker as the main heir of Socrates and as the father of all successive anti-Hegelian philosophies favors this presentation of Kierkegaard as the acme of a very ancient and omnipresent philosophical inspiration that has made of the 'extra-methodic truth' its main concern. Such extra-methodic truth presupposes the sharpest vindication not only of the legitimacy, but even of the superiority of a philosophy that gives up the temptations of its own *hybris*, i.e. the ambition to reach a complete transparency of being in the sense of a total *objective* mediation.

3. Gadamer emphasizes Kierkegaard's relevance not only as source of Heidegger's *Fundamentalontologie* (on this topic see, for example, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990⁶, p. 259), but also as starting point of all later existential and hermeneutical philosophies, whose main intent has been the rehabilitation of the practical philosophy. Kierkegaard's radical criticism of Hegel and the decisive role he has played in the crisis and dissolution of the Hegelian paradigm have constituted a turning point in the history of contemporary philosophy. In this respect, cf. also H.-G. GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode II: Ergänzungen, Register*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993, pp. 9, 210, and especially p. 362, where Kierkegaard is depicted as one of the most tenacious opponent of the «totale Vermittlung der Hegelschen Dialektik». At last, cf. *ibid.*, p. 22, where Gadamer acknowledges the role played by Kierkegaard in his own philosophical formation: «Was ist die praktische Philosophie? Wie kann sich Theorie und Reflexion auf den Bereich der Praxis richten, wo doch Praxis keinen abstand duldet, sondern Engagement fordert? Diese Frage hat mich von früh an durch Kierkegaards Existenzpathos angerührt».

Already in the opening quotation of Modica's book, excerpted from Kierkegaard's *Papirer*, we meet the contraposition of the objectifying theoretical knowledge, or 'approximation truth', to the existential knowledge, or 'appropriation knowledge' (p. 41), which aims at a more authentic access to the otherwise unexplainable negativity that characterizes human existence. The existential truth, at which all philosophies of subjectivity tend, aims at matching the necessity, expressed by Kierkegaard's words, "to understand my destiny, and *to find a truth that can be a truth for me*, an idea for which I am ready to live and to die"⁴. Around these words gravitate the four sections⁵, into which Modica has articulated his book.

The first section shows that Kierkegaard's decisive role in the dissolution of the Hegelian philosophical paradigm finds its main historical *analogon* in Socrates' abandonment of the cosmological inquiries and in his condemnation of the vanity and of the insufficiency of a philosophical thought that looks after the secrets of the cosmos in the effort to formulate objective, general, immovable truths (pp. 33-36). In Plato's *Apology* Socrates rejects the search for objective and conclusive explanations of physical phenomena, that he seems to consider at best as an intellectual *divertissement*, at worst as a delusional mystification, and exhorts human reason to kneel before the impenetrability of the ultimate secrets of human existence, i.e. the nature of moral misconduct and the true essence of a perfect moral life⁶. The final answer to the always reappearing question "*pôs biotéon?*" cannot be given once for all, but must be striven in a perpetual approximation process⁷. In opposition to all philosophies of the Hegelian kind, for Socrates, as well as for the

4. S. KIERKEGAARD, *Papirer*, I a 75, quoted at p. 9 (All quotations from the book of G. Modica are my translations).

5. The first section contains the chapters '*Dià-logos*' and '*inter-esse*, and *For an Hermeneutics of irony. The Socratic presuppositions of Kierkegaard's edification*. The second section analyzes *Kierkegaard and Don Juan's Aesthetics*, and *The original sin by Kierkegaard*. The third section counts three chapters, respectively dedicated to *Kierkegaard's ethics according to Pareyson*, *The dialectics of freedom for Stirner and Kierkegaard*, *Lévinas as interpreter of Kierkegaard*. The forth and last section is divided into *Otherness and Paradox by Kierkegaard*, and '*Ordet*' by Dreyer: *ways after Kierkegaard*.

6. "Paradox" is the category by which the reality of the sin can be represented. For, the paradox indicates the acceptance of sin's reality beyond any possible rationalization attained by the usual intellectual schemes. In this sense, sin must be thought of as an object of faith. Such an acceptance is echoed by the Socratic acknowledgement of the impossibility to give a logical account for everything (G. MODICA, p. 101). Such a recognition has of course a moral connotation and therefore constitutes a moral task.

7. At p. 30 of his book, Modica underlines that «it is necessary to reach a level, at which the *hybris* practiced by the possessor of the objective thought can be unglued by giving up both the comprehension of philosophy as a knowledge and an understanding of the absolute and a conception of the absolute as embodiment of the universal spirit».

Christian Kierkegaard, being's absolute transparency can just exist as a regulative idea, i.e. as the 'object' of a perpetual tendency and of an infinite passion. As such, this absolute can consist only of a *subjective truth* that is testified by man's daily moral choices and by each man's sincere commitment to their corresponding values⁸. In Modica's words, such subjective truth communicates "nothing to know, but the way how to live" (p. 31)⁹. The unmasking act of all falsely conclusive objective truths can be performed, for Socrates as well as for Kierkegaard, by the intellectual habit of the *complex irony*, whose practice, destined to unveil the illusionary character of all kinds of generality, requires as counterpart the definitive renounce to the comforts offered by all kinds of false objectivities. Irony requires the decision to live in the most anguishing existential insecurity and the attainment of the purest spiritual isolation, thought of as the form itself of the authentic existence¹⁰.

The insufficiency of theoretical thinking and the vainness of its pretensions are echoed, in the second section of Modica's book, by Kierkegaard's claim on the insufficiency of all existential possibilities that man *qua* 'animal rationale' can choose. Modica emphasizes the impossibility of the aesthetical life by outlining the only condition in which aesthetical life can be possible, i.e. as the 'musical idea' of Mozart's *Don Juan*. Don Juan, defined as 'sensual seducer', differs dramatically from the 'psychic seducer' of the *Diary*, inasmuch the aesthetical genius can live only in the perceptual immediacy and, therefore, can only be conceived on the score of music's perceptive abruptness. While Don Juan, as musical idea and 'sensual demons', can exist only in the instantaneous and his desires do not undergo

8. Furthermore, as Socrates has blamed the philosophers of his time for their passive acceptance of the established objective truths, so Kierkegaard stigmatizes the secularized Church, lazily addicted to its exterior rituals and dramatically forgetful of the authentic spirit of Christianity, which is not primarily doctrine, but rather «communication of existence» (MODICA, p. 55). If the core of Christian religion is the phenomenon of existence itself (MODICA, p. 61), then being a true Christian means for Kierkegaard to be anti-Christian, in the sense of being against the secularized Christianity (MODICA, p. 66).

9. Cf. also MODICA, p. 40, where Socrates' exclusive interest for the problems of human existence is well interpreted by the author, who writes: «subjective thought does not consider existence as its own object, but rather as its own goal»; therefore, «this thought is always an action and, as such, is ethically qualified. On the other side, existence is not only the goal of subjective thinking, but also its main presupposition. Then, subjective thought is not only ethically connoted, but also unavoidably existential».

10. The theme of the existential insecurity and of the anguish that follow the renounce to the worldly objectivities, on which our daily life essentially relies, has been taken on by M. HEIDEGGER's *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, GA 60, Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1995, pp. 98-107, where the German philosopher stressed – commenting Saint Paul's *Letters* – the lack of security and peace of the first Christian communities.

any temporal mediation¹¹ for the sake of their actualization, the *Diary's* seducer and Goethe's Faust, both examples of the 'spiritual demoniacs', constitute the existential translations of Don Juan's pure musical idea. As such, they must convert their immediate desires into a 'practical syllogism', so they must make use of reason and reflection¹². In the intellectual mediation undergone by the pure sensual immediacy, repetition and responsibility invade the aesthetical dimension so to make necessary the leap into the ethical sphere¹³.

While aesthetical life is concerned with sensuality, and shows to be unrealizable because of the existential impossibility of a pure sensual immediacy, ethics is concerned with the concepts of good and evil, and its impossibility derives from its inability to justify the reality of moral negativity. Ethics can only account for the manifestation of the evil, but it must renounce to explain its *raison d'être* (p. 91). Ethics still relies on logic and on its generalizing categories, and for this reason its attempts to find a positive explanation for the reality of moral sin must fail¹⁴. Only by a religiously oriented 'psychological way', i.e. through the philosophical interpretation of the main religious categories and figures, it is possible to comprehend the nature of the evil as a *paradox* and, consequently, as a *skàndalon* for every objective thinking. The *raison d'être* of the sin is for Kierkegaard the 'anguish', thought of as «the real possibility of the sin» (p. 91). This special kind of possibility must be distinguished of course from the Aristotelian concept of potentiality and must be rather understood as the predisposing precondition to the sin¹⁵. Freedom is the anguishing possibility of the self-determination

11. According to MODICA, pp.78-79, the category of temporality distinguishes these two kinds of 'seducers'.

12. Kierkegaard's Don Juan constitutes a sort «of deontology for the aesthetical sphere: he represents the aesthetical life as it should be, i.e. lived fully and completely at the level of the aesthesis, without undergoing any interference from the side of reflection, spirit, conscience, all elements that, while disturbing the aesthetical joy and truth, destroy its immediacy by introducing the anguishing sense of the sin» (MODICA, p. 86); therefore, «Don Juan is a positive hero, who must die in order to live forever as a musical idea» (MODICA, p. 87).

13. H.-G. GADAMER, *Wahrheit und Methode*, cit., p. 101: Kierkegaard has been the first philosopher to evoke «die Selbstvernichtung der ästhetischen Unmittelbarkeit (...). Seine Lehre von ästhetischen Stadium der Existenz ist vom Standpunkte des Ethikers aus entworfen, dem die Heillosigkeit und Unhaltbarkeit einer Existenz in reiner Unmittelbarkeit und Diskontinuität aufgegangen ist. Sein kritischer Versuch ist deshalb von grundlegender Bedeutung, weil die hier vorgetragene Kritik aus ästhetischen Bewusstseins die inneren Widersprüche der ästhetischen Existenz aufdeckt».

14. This way of explanation consists in the reduction of given realities to the corresponding possibilities; of course, this intellectual scheme is not applicable to the phenomenon of the sin, which cannot be reduced to pure possibility without disappearing *qua* sin. Cf. MODICA, p. 99.

15. This possibility must not be conceived as an occurrence under necessity, but rather as an occurrence with freedom. Cf. MODICA, p. 91.

tout court; as such, it is the most original of all ontological categories. Anguish constitutes the reality itself of the freedom *qua* freedom, i.e. the possibility for its own possibility (p. 92). This pure possibility conceived as anguishing freedom is the essence of man and the *raison d'être* of the sin; sin is therefore man's *principium individuationis*.

Three philosophical views, respectively by Luigi Pareyson, Max Stirner, and Emanuel Lévinas, are taken into account by Modica, in the third section of his book, on the ground of their essential affinity to Kierkegaard's conceptual standpoint. The choice made by Modica in favor of these authors seems to have granted him the opportunity to detect possible variations and different emphases of the common anti-Hegelian inspiration and, at the same time, the possibility to individuate and discuss through their positions some controversial points of Kierkegaard's philosophy.

Through the interpretation of the two academic courses delivered by Luigi Pareyson on Kierkegaard¹⁶ (p. 113ff.), which stress the independent relevance and though the insufficiency of ethics (p. 115), Modica has the occasion to underline that, in the ethical sphere, aesthetics is not annihilated rather but repeated as something subordinated and relative. In this context, aesthetical life is not any more a self-sufficient and absolute existential possibility, but it vindicates its own necessity, inasmuch it is able to confer a more human and attractive facet to ethics' moral strictness. However, ethics itself must be repeated in the religious sphere. Its constitutional habit to reduce singular acts to ethical norms' universality is the origin of ethics' insufficiency to face the reality of repent and sin¹⁷ (pp. 124-125). At this point, Pareyson distinguishes an autonomous ethics, dominated by the rigor of general moral rules, from a religious ethics, where suffering and repent subtract the individuals from the ethical laws' hardness and impersonal generality (p. 126). So ethics can be maintained as existential choice, whenever its categories are repeated in the light of the true spirit of Christian religion (p. 129ff.).

The study of Max Stirner's anti-Hegelian philosophy allows Modica to explain why Kierkegaard's concept of 'isolation' and 'singularity' cannot constitute an invitation to an egocentric self-concern and self-affirmation.

Max Stirner opposes the singularity of man (*der Einzige*) to the generality of man's Hegelian definition (p. 144). As for Kierkegaard, so for Stirner

16. L. PAREYSON, *L'Etica di Kierkegaard nella prima fase del suo pensiero*, and *L'etica di Kierkegaard nella "Postilla"*, now edited in: *L'etica di Kierkegaard e Pascal*, Milan, Mursia, 1998.

17. As Pareyson says, «if ethics were the supreme stage, then the categories of Greek philosophy would have been sufficient. Ethics' self-sufficiency is then paganism and anti-Christian attitude» *ibid.*, p. 125.

the universal has no prominent reality; on the contrary, every man must part from this abstract universality in order to become his own personality (p. 147). For Kierkegaard, this process must consist in the realization of man's freedom *qua* moral choice, while for Stirner this individual personality comes to be, whenever man arrives at a complete appropriation of his own self (*Selbstangehörigkeit*) (p. 149). In Stirner's view the individuality is the only criterion for one's own freedom (p. 156): 'being free' says the same of 'being mine', so that man can have «as much freedom as his own individuality allows him to have» (p. 157). Unlike Stirner, whose *Einzelne* has no other presupposition but himself, for Kierkegaard the individual must be understood as the result of the original sin, i.e. as the vertigo felt by man before his own freedom as pure possibility. As Modica writes, the *Einzelne* is such because is without God, whereas Kierkegaard's individual is such because of his essential relation with God (p. 164ff.).

At the end of the third section, Modica has occasion to face a crucial objection moved to Kierkegaard's philosophy thanks to the analysis of Emmanuel Lévinas' thought. Lévinas admires the 'Copernican revolution' accomplished by Kierkegaard. He agrees with him that the concrete existential experience of the individuality must replace the conceptual abstractness of the *cogito*; he consents that the subjectivity conceived as knowledge must be replaced by a subjectivity thought of as existence, which has been now rediscovered in its essential relation to God (pp. 175-179). Nevertheless, the experience of the Holocaust has induced Lévinas to stress more the ethical question of man's relation and responsibility towards his fellowmen rather than the religious problem focused on man's individual relation to God (p. 180). Lévinas affirms that man is ontologically characterized by his moral responsibility (p. 184), and that the conceptual impenetrability of God's Revelation can only be historicized by our acts of responsibility towards the our fellowmen: God reveals himself by this transcendental ethical responsibility (p. 186). The minor attention offered by Kierkegaard to this ethical issue and the greater emphasis given to the interiority of the religious suspension of ethical life is what Lévinas reproaches to the Danish thinker.

This relevant remark is discussed in the forth and last section¹⁸ of Modica's book. As the author underlines, by 'other' Kierkegaard means first of all the 'mass of the people' as distinct from 'me'. Secondly, 'other' connotes also the individual as distinct from the mass and as heterogeneous in respect to the crowd by virtue of his personal relation to God. At last, God him-

18. The forth section contains a final chapter dedicated to the philosophical interpretation of the «*Ordet*» by Dreyer, taken into account by Modica in its quality as cinematographic transposition of Kierkegaard's main views (MODICA, pp. 225-255).

self is for Kierkegaard the absolute otherness (pp. 201-202). Modica emphasizes Kierkegaard's conviction that the first meaning of otherness stays in an irreducible opposition to true religiosity, so that being Christian means the same of being in a constant struggle against the others thought of as homogeneous 'mass' (p. 202). This meaning of otherness says secularization, while true faith requires the renounce to this world (pp. 204-205), so that the difference itself between official Christianity and authentic religiosity can be traced on the score of the respectively reached levels of heterogeneity to the *mundus* (p. 207). But, as Modica writes, Kierkegaard has indicated a second sense of otherness, which is conveyed by man's individual relation to God: through the Absolute, each man is automatically referred to the human community, which must not be confused with the mass (p. 202), inasmuch it consists of the assembly of the heterogeneous individuals.

In other words, whenever truth coincides with subjectivity, thought of as an «infinite passion for the interiority» (p. 236), «through the same act by which the single man collides with the mass, he meets the dimension of proximity, for he has just found his way to God himself» (p. 223).

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