

KIERKEGAARD:

THE IRONICAL THINKER OF HIS — AND OUR — TIMES

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ABSTRACT: This essay brings upon the works of Søren Kierkegaard in order to demonstrate his relevance for contemporary relations between the subject and the sociopolitical context. I recall his *Concept of Irony*, in which he brings the Socratic irony as a concept, which will be used as a method whereof depart all his later books and articles. One can say that Kierkegaard's whole life was a Socratic, ironical mission. From that point of view, we may appropriate from his work the desire to construct a whole new subjectivity, since the psychopolitical context has brought a great challenge for autonomous thinking.

KEYWORDS: Kierkegaard; Socrates; Irony; Subjectivity; Psychopolitics; Hegelian ethics.

KIERKEGAARD:

O PENSADOR IRÔNICO DO SEU — E DO NOSSO — TEMPO

RESUMO: Este ensaio recorre aos trabalhos de Søren Kierkegaard para demonstrar sua relevância para as relações contemporâneas entre o sujeito e o contexto sociopolítico. Lembro-me de seu conceito de *Ironia*, em que traz a ironia socrática como um conceito, que será usado como método do qual partem todos os seus livros e artigos posteriores. Pode-se dizer que toda a vida de Kierkegaard foi uma missão socrática e irônica. Desse ponto de vista, podemos apropriar de sua obra o desejo de construir uma subjetividade totalmente nova, visto que o contexto psicopolítico trouxe um grande desafio para o pensamento autônomo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Kierkegaard; Socrates; Ironia; Subjetividade; Psicopolíticas; Ética Hegeliana.



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In *The Concept of Irony* (KIERKEGAARD, 1989, *passim*), Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard brings a new perspective on Socrates' thought. In said perspective, the Greek philosopher is regarded as an ironic individual, although in a deeper sense than one would first expect. People usually view Irony simply as a way of putting things by saying the exact opposite of the intended meaning, but this sense is too narrow to understand the Socratic task, especially from Kierkegaard's point of view. Having in mind the concept of Appropriation, which refers to the construction of an individual meaning for knowledge, I shall demonstrate the importance of the Kierkegaard's approach on Socrates in order to suggest the same attitude for our present days.

Walking around the streets of ancient Athens, Socrates used to start conversations with his fellow citizens, asking them to teach him about the things they knew, since Socrates posited himself as an ignorant who knew nothing. He ironically praised his interlocutor as a wise man that certainly had something important to say about a specific subject. It never took long for Socrates to deconstruct the arguments of his—no longer teacher—opponent, making it clear that he was not at all an expert in the matter discussed. That opponent, heretofore proud of himself and his vast knowledge, perceiving his own ignorance, usually felt confused or even irritated at Socrates, after having his arguments brought down one by one. This state of angry bewilderment is called *aporia*.

With those conversations, Socrates did not intend to teach something to his interlocutors. Instead, he left them with nothing new, no knowledge or information about the subject discussed. The only thing they learned, by being brought down to *aporia*, is that they—as Socrates—did not know anything about the subject being discussed. This is why Socrates regarded himself as the wisest Athenian: at least he was aware that he did not know

anything, instead of having the illusion of false knowledge based on shaky grounds. Therefore, as a method, irony is a purely negative force mobilized by Socrates in order to annihilate misconceiving and the illusion of knowledge.

It is said that Socrates is a turning point in history, as his questions and refutations of the established knowledge and costumes—the immediate, consuetudinary ethical order (the *Sittlichkeit*, in Hegelian jargon) hitherto accepted immediately as unquestionable truth. With his *daimon* (a species of alter-ego, who advised Socrates not to do some things, including participating in the Greek public affairs, indicating a profound detachment from civic life) he introduces a new way of acting ethically. Instead of simply repeating the habits of his people, the Greek philosopher acts according to his own judgement (*Moralität*). Socrates therefore represents the dawn of subjectivity (HEGEL, 2009, pp. 385-389 and 421-425). I shall return to this point later.

Kierkegaard incorporated the Socratic method not only into his works, but also into his life, which he considered a Socratic task. His times are considered the Danish Golden Age because of the flourishing literature, arts and science during the first half of the nineteenth century. The philosophical thought of that era was notably influenced by Hegel, from which Kierkegaard also incorporated several concepts. Nonetheless, the conflict between Kierkegaard and the danish hegelians—especially Martensen and Heiberg—was the urge of the latter ones to mediate, namely, to reconcile the two contradictory parts of every dialectical relation in order to promote a synthesis. Hegel criticized Socrates for never going beyond negation, i. e., the second phase of dialectics. Instead, he remained in the phase of negation, in the aporetical stage where no knowledge is in fact constructed. Kierkegaard, however, stated in *Either/Or* (KIERKEGAARD, 1946, p. 39) that “the true eternity does not lie



behind either/or but before it”. This means there are some contradictions unable to be mediated into a final truth, and one has to deal with the two opposing forces instead of trying to solve the issue. At this point it is perceivable that the Socratic negation is not simply a step in the direction of a higher truth, but rather one of the two unsolvable opposites.

Kierkegaard often criticized the theologians and philosophers of his time for always trying to explain and unfold the difficulties and paradoxes of the dogmas of Christianity. His point, though, is that faith is something interior to the individual, not linguistically expressible nor teachable. It pertains to the field of subjectivity. He embraces a mission to deconstruct the false and/or simplistic, dogmatic views of Christianity postulated by the clergy. He also launched, in his final years, a heavy attack on the Danish Church. The series of articles he published, claiming that the clergymen were false Christians because of, among other things, their bourgeois and comfortable habits, very different from the martyrial life depicted in the New Testament. After this and other painful responses Kierkegaard got from his aggressive and dauntless way of putting things, he found some consolation from Socrates’ figure. The latter also suffered a reprisal from the Greek society, which punished him with a death sentence because of his ironical negation of established values.

The self-sacrificing Socratic task which Kierkegaard took upon himself was, in fact, more than simply critically analysing the posture of the clergy or the academia of his time (KIERKEGAARD, 1962, pp. 54-69). And his work has lasted longer than the Danish Golden Age. His legacy is similar to the aforementioned “turning point” brought by Socrates to world history. By criticizing the dogmatic view of his time and disconnecting (even fully isolating, if necessary) himself from the crowd (“know thyself”, for Kierkegaard, means precisely that one should separate himself from other people), in order to find a truth meaningful to him, Kierkegaard clears the

way for a rebirth of subjectivity, and gives innerness back to faith, hitherto objectified, constantly suffering a reification into a dogmatic teachable thesis.

In our world, patched by dizzying constant technological advances and social and political changes, one might often feel doubtful about his own role in society. Humanity came from tool-using primates to mini-gods who walk on the moon and craft robots. However, since these latter ones have been constructed, our roles seem to be eroded by theirs. Progressively, devices and machines substitute human work. Some robots, i. e., AI-programmed hardware, can even imitate human language and behaviour. That leaves the question of what makes each human individual unique, since every single external characteristic can be reproduced—not only can people mimic each other, but also computers, emulating human manners and habits.

In this—some may call it post-humanistic—scenario, one's single aspect as a person that cannot be trespassed by the advances of technology is his subjectivity. He may get paid to sit from 9 to 5 on a chair writing whatsoever on a computer. His clothes may come from the same two or three brands that monopolize the markets, as everyone else wears. His hobbies may be watching football every weekend or traveling to common tourist locations, like everyone else does. His culinary taste might be as simple as fast-junk-ultra processed-food. He still remains king in the domain of his own subjectivity. He is able to think for his own. Could it not be the case?

Unfortunately, it seems it could. Since the late 2000s, the development of social media and networks constitutes a new peril for the humanness of mankind. Algorithms of big tech companies are capable of slightly changing one's beliefs simply by determining what is shown on the screen of his smartphone, in the most profitable way possible. This



embodies a danger never before seen, since no television, radio or newspaper could intermediate almost every aspect of daily life—from making friends to working, from buying new shoes to sharing memes about one’s feelings.

This *psychopolitical* (HAN, 2017, *passim*) phenomenon, often disregarded in our culture (which keeps the profit gears turning), might represent the sinking of subjectivity. When our mobile devices are capable of making everyone think approximately the same ideas, there is little room for subjectivity to subsist. What might one possibly do? The philosophical posture is needed now more than ever before. Questioning the established values, the regurgitation of preconceptions, the existential meaning that technical advances can represent: that is what one might do in order to avoid the misleadings of mass culture and defend his mind from the uniformization process of late capitalism. The figure of Socrates interpreted by Kierkegaard can be an inspiration for us to ask such questions to ourselves, as the latter in fact did himself, in another context, but with a similar motivation. By fighting the current dystopian lobotomic digital order with weaponised irony, one might bring subjectivity to a new dawn by waking up from the nightmare of data-based society.

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