

RELIGION AND MORALITY IN KANT AND KIERKEGAARD

[RELIGIÃO E MORAL EM KANT E KIERKEGAARD]

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Religion and morality in Kant and Kierkegaard

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Abstract: On this paper, we will seek to analyze how the ethical (also as morality) in connection to religion changes between Kant and later with Kierkegaard, giving more attention to the latter. We will first go on how Kant defines morality and, later, on how he states that religion supports and is in fact morality, criticizing along the way how he elaborates his argument, and what evidence he brings forth to support his ideas. On the second part, we tackle Kierkegaard with his contrasting concept of religiousness in Abraham and how he changes the concept of the religious and the ethical with that but bringing to the surface throughout the analyzes some weaknesses in his argumentation, having in mind a possible continuity between the first and second Kierkegaard's literature.

Keywords: morality, ethics, religion, belief, Kierkegaard, Kant

Resumo: Neste artigo, procuraremos analisar como o conceito ético (também como moralidade) em conexão com a religião muda entre Kant e Kierkegaard, dando ênfase ao último. Abordaremos primeiro como Kant define a moralidade e, depois, como ele define que a religião dá suporte e é, de fato, a moralidade, criticando também como ele elabora seu argumento e que evidências ele traz. Na segunda parte, abordaremos Kierkegaard com seu contrastante conceito de religiosidade em Abraão e como ele muda o conceito de religioso e ético com ele, mas trazendo à tona no decorrer da análise alguns pontos frágeis em sua argumentação, tendo em mente a continuidade entre o primeiro e o segundo Kierkegaard.

Palavras-chave: Moral. Ética. Religião. Crença, Kierkegaard. Kant.

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KANT

For Kant, religion is only religion if not *revealed* but natural. It must be something born inside every human being, a knowledge to do the right thing. And this doing is Kant's practical reason. This practicality is always towards the right and the good. For reason in every human being is also towards an action and not only thought and abstraction. All human action is guided by a compass, a practical reason, that is called morality.

On the other hand, although an individual knows what is to do the right thing, Kant has in consideration that humans are imperfect – rational – beings and therefore susceptible to do wrong. And this is where morality shows its role.

(...) morality demands that we set ourselves certain ends, and that we therefore need, morally, to believe in the **possible attainment of those ends**. One such end is the **perfection of our own virtue**. Kant argues that we cannot reasonably hope to reach perfect virtue in any finite period of time, and that the only reasonable way in which we can seriously take perfect virtue as an end, as morality demands, is by believing in an **immortality** which makes possible **an infinite approximation to perfect virtue**. More comprehensively, Kant holds that morality demands that we take as an ultimate end the **highest good** that is possible in the world. **The perfection of our own virtue is only a part of this highest good**. (ADAMS In KANT, 1999, p. VIII)

Let's analyze this quote by parts. Adams here states that morality offers a horizon for the individual to reach, a good deed. By means of reason it should be possible to *practice* one's way into "those ends". The important word here is "possible". But, as quoted, Kant argues that man should struggle on meeting this "end". To reach it is the "perfection of our own virtue". But perfection even on *these* grounds is not something a finite man can grasp. For this reason, Kant sees that only by a belief in immortality it could be done "an infinite approximation" to it, perfect virtue. So, man can reach the highest good and virtue with the belief in an afterlife and judgment. These would be a better argument for man towards morality: eternal punishment or happiness.

Hence Kant could only use God for moral or — using Kierkegaard's concept — universal ends. God reaffirms human laws as an idea and cannot transcend it since morality comes from the natural inner ability to do the right thing — or at least knowing there is this "must" to do it. Punishment and award in the afterlife come only as a last resort argument for those who take doing the right thing as not enough by itself.

But why even bother going that far? Isn't the knowledge of doing the right thing enough to do it – as once said by Socrates? For Kant, knowledge is not enough. And by adding immortality – and consequently although not so explicitly a heaven or hell –, prize and punishment are placed as the ultimate finish line for any moral individual.

With an immortal soul, one can have a better argument for doing the right thing for the alternative in afterlife is not so desirable. And perfect virtue can only be reached by an unlimited period, that means not *while* one is alive. So, in a sense, Kant can only see – practical – reason working with the help of *um*-reason, i e, belief. In the kierkegaardian terminology, it's a qualitative

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leap to believe in immortality – and have one’s virtue become perfect. Although virtue can still be there despite an absence of belief, just not in a perfect sense, as Kant puts it.

In order to run from this label “un-reason”, Kant will use the term “rational belief”. By doing that he is covering his corners. But despite putting it in a *reasonable* fashion, it doesn’t help his case to be stronger. Even though considering the soul to be “*a simple substance and therefore it cannot be destroyed*” (EWING, 1964, p. 386). This would be a good argument only if we assume souls do exist. He will argue that, as Ewing points out in his paper, “*we must remember that he [Kant] holds time to be merely appearance so that the real self is not in time. Consequently, the goal [perfect virtue], if attained at all, must be timelessly attained*” (EWING, 1964, p. 387). Thus, if we are to attain it then our souls must be immortal. But that’s a big “if”.

At the same time Kant here finishes his point that this immortality is an *a priori* principle, one can’t stop wondering if this exactly point isn’t just his way of getting out of both not having a strong case for virtue and morality. This may be why the essence of religion is – in the end – religion itself and not morality alone.

So, despite knowing the good and that one should do the right thing, morality inside of all humans isn’t enough. The knowledge of it is not enough. Kant will argue that a second point for morality is not in this finite world, but a final judgment. By doing that he puts the individual’s – eternal – happiness at risk while also adding more weight and value to it. But only in a sense that everyone will be perfect virtuous and together in the afterlife or by the fear of losing this opportunity, which it can only be taken seriously if – as said before – it is a necessary fantasy in order for people to act right in society, despite the lie they have to be told.

However, if not, Kant takes from his argument that ‘ought’ to do good/right implies that people ‘can’ do it. In a sense he reverses the logical causality, telling from the – ideal – effect that a cause is possible and not that after seeing the cause becoming the effect it was possible. Thus, we find ourselves only with a goal not attainable anywhere in history and in any person, because his only “proof” is by death itself.

We can argue that 'ought' implies 'can' (in some sense of 'can'). And it is an argument of this type which Kant is using. He says that we ought to strive for the *summum bonum* and concludes from this that the *summum bonum* can be attained. Now this would no doubt follow if what we knew was that we ought to attain the *summum bonum*. But we do not know this: we only know that we ought to strive towards it, and it is not so clear that it follows from this that the *summum bonum* is attainable. (EWING, 1964, p. 393)

So, people can only *know* this goal *a priori*, and not from experience nor even from any literature. It’s a knowledge without anything to support it in the world and yet “we know”. Kant defends that we ought to do it without knowing if anyone can actually do it. By doing that he creates a mirage which we can only walk towards but never really reach it. We agree with Ewing in his critique that:

The proposition that we can strive towards the *summum bonum* is indeed true, but it only justifies us in saying that we ought to strive towards it, not that we

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ought to or could attain it. This destroys at any rate the possibility of giving anything like complete logical cogency to the argument, but Kant did not hold that the argument was logically but only that it was practically coercive. But is it even this? Kant oscillates considerably in his attitude. (EWING, 1964, p. 393)

And Ewing continues: “He [Kant] sometimes speaks as if we could not be moral unless we believed in God and immortality, but it is very hard to see on what grounds he could hold this view” (EWING, 1964, p. 393) . By this way Kant seems to think that God and immortality are incentives – or even coercion – towards morality – maybe the only ones –, and this may be the link to label morality as religion, or as the essence of religion. Only to answer his concept of – possibly although not proved – achievable *summum bonum*. Thus, for Kant, man can know morality but, in order to be moral, there should be a morality beyond time to correspond to his concept and make man *act* or *practice* on what he *knows*. Although maybe, above all, Kant uses religion to be the guiding star of society despite being something impossible to be proved. But that is apparently also because it has been like that almost forever in many societies. So, it would appear that, from observing empirical ethical behaviors in some societies, he tried to take the universal law from it, a science – because it is *a priori* – that could tell the need and universality of thinking immortality and God. However this argument lands at the coast of morality itself that seems to be not reasonable or seducing enough on its own to be achievable unless there is a “*notion of God [that] seems to be brought in to ensure that if we do our duty it will have pleasant consequences for us*” (EWING, 1964, p. 394) Morality, thus, works as both mirage and coercion so human beings and at one time walk towards morality but also run from immorality.

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On the other hand, Kierkegaard tackles the matter from another entirely perspective. For him, the ethical is an obstacle for it means reflection, mediation and the universal – but it’s also something the individual must live. They stay on the way to faith, immediacy and the becoming of a singular individual that can re-signify the universal under God. Contrary to Kant, Kierkegaard thinks the highest goal is indeed possible to achieve. It’s just not morality as the German philosopher believes. But the teleological suspension of the ethical.

To explain that, Kierkegaard uses the example of Abraham who despite being 100 years old was promised that could have children and his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. And in the end, he has a son, Isaac, who God asks as sacrifice when he is 30 years old. His only son. So how would God keep his promise while sacrificing the only possibility for it to happen? Kierkegaard’s answer is the absurd¹.

Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym in *Fear and trembling*, explains that Abraham cannot talk about it with his wife or any other human being. For his situation was not mediated, reflective and passible of being understood. As de Silentio says: “*he didn’t speak the human language. And even if he did speak all the languages in the world, (...) he would still not be able to speak – for he speaks in a divine language, he speaks in tongues*” (KIERKEGAARD, 1983, p. 114). Abraham

¹ Although it could be said the absurd is the precise lack of – a *reasonable* – answer.

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was communicating – infinitely – with God in silence, solitude and in secret for reason can only go so far – finitely. Only by having faith in virtue of the absurd – that Abraham would have innumerable descendants while sacrificing his only son – he could do the infinite leap towards the relation to God.

On this process, it's possible to see that – differently from Adam – Abraham does not face the unknown in anxiety and distress but the nothingness of losing something actually known. He receives the universal, i.e., the race from God through Isaac but he must lose it again paradoxically. God asks from Abraham something impossible to be understood and yet it's one's duty to follow God's commandments. And Abraham can only do it because he believes that by the absurdity of the request, he by virtue of the absurd or another absurd he will have God's promise fulfilled despite sacrificing his only way to be delivered, Isaac. Thus, because of his own impotence he must have faith that for God everything is possible and hence gain the universal, race again through the coming of the angel and stopping him from sacrificing Isaac. He doesn't actually picture the whole solution himself for he finds himself on the void of the unknown disclosure of his test which he must jump into. Abraham has only his faith on the *what* he will achieve but not on *how* – that is God's business. But for this absurd to be subjective true, for Kierkegaard, is only the *how* Abraham relates to it that matters. And by giving up on his most treasured thing, his son, he finds himself in infinite resignation.

At that moment, Abraham experiences his own rebirth, repetition for he can be himself in faith and in relation to God having the universal back again under – now – Him. The double movement consists here on giving up exactly the world, the universal, reflection, Isaac, so he can regain it with God as its pillar. In some sense, he gains everything back and in another one he gains everything changed. That is his repetition of getting it back again but not quite the same. For when God has His fingerprints on the world then, the world acquires a new meaning and it's not the center which the individual spins around anymore. This somehow revolution – in the astronomical sense – of values which God becomes the highest point of relation on relating to the world – and not denying it – is what Edward Mooney calls gestalt-shift (MOONEY apud DAVENPORT, 2008, p. 199).

Kant can only look at this as the ethical person he is, and as de Silentio says, with a “*horror religiosus*” (KIERKEGAARD, 1983, p. 61). The Kantian religious person would never unburden himself and resign the world as Abraham does. That would be just going to the opposite way from the highest good or the perfect virtue. For Kierkegaard, one cannot just follow what is already inside him in an endless continuity as Kant tries to say about the religious person. Contrary to that, there would be no such a thing as being religious or Christian but only *becoming* both. And for that, the individual needs a discontinuity in his life. As Michael Wyschogrod (1954) writes, Kierkegaard doesn't believe there is a degree of existence even though there are – at least – three life's stages but a rupture, a discontinuity, a change of quality rather than a quantitative one². For Kierkegaard, as Niels Eriksen writes, change cannot become something immanent to thought (ERIKSEN, 1998, p. 298). In the sense that the transition – which is immediate – should mark a new beginning, a discontinuity from the past. In other words, Kierkegaard deals with a transcendence which annihilates possibility (ERIKSEN, 1998, p. 298) – of being himself stuck in the ethical, that is, in the possibility of the individual becoming actually himself³. By destroying this, he actualizes himself, which is something that Kant takes for granted since one is

² Like with Suárez, Descartes and Spinoza.

³ As he says also in *Sickness unto death*: “*if a person is truly not to be in despair, he must at every moment destroy the possibility.*” (KIERKEGAARD, 1980, p. 15).

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already himself either he does the right thing or not. Unlike Kant, Kierkegaard wants to apparently use God – and immortality – for achievable goals – although an impossible goal for Abraham but not for God – and not just for a guiding star. But since no one can spot a man of faith or understand his reasons – if this individual could talk about those –, he can only be a speculative man, a distant role model that Johannes de Silentio can only be a poetic admirer (KIERKEGAARD, 1983, pp. 57, 112). of since he is not a *living proof* or example of his own case⁴. There is no modern one at least. Only Abraham and Jesus, the God-man. Plus, he builds such an *unreasonable* argument in favor of the absurd and the paradox that the reader can only *understand* if he experiences the subjective truth himself. Thus, in some sense Abraham does work as an unreachable guiding star but also – and maybe only – because one cannot reach God through him, Abraham, since “*anyone who loves God needs no tears, no admiration*” (KIERKEGAARD, 1983, p. 120). That is, to use Abraham or any other man of faith would be to mediate and not be immediate and subjective as faith requires for a man to become religious. In fact, when Silentio refers to Luke 14:26 when Jesus says: “*If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.*”⁵, he jumps into the new testament only to make a point. He explains that “hate” in this context means “*love less, esteem less, honor not, count as nothing.*” Thus, in order to God⁵ rise above all, hate must work by pushing the universal/ethical as it is away. Because the strongest love can only be directed to God and at the same time it’s by doing this that one can love the universal; that one can really be ethical. This true love towards the universal must be indirect, immediate by relating itself to God so it can slingshot its way to the universal now transformed – the gestalt-shift. Not in a sense of mediation but this love must be reflected in God. And even Abraham, the father of faith, in this sense shouldn’t be “admired poetically” as de Silentio does – but also criticizes – in an excuse to be far away from being a protagonist in this story, his own story, for, if one wants to become himself, he must take responsibility with God, and his hate must even include Abraham.

CONCLUSION

So, it’s possible to say that, for Kierkegaard, a person becomes religious only by accepting his own impotence on achieving the highest good, becoming himself. That is, it’s necessary to relate to God in life in order to be a self, and on doing that the ethical, morality and the universal, which are the same, need to be at the same time negated (for a murder is happening) and elevated (for the world will be regained with God as its pillar), like with Abraham and the sacrifice of his son, in a way that the ethical, as Kierkegaard (or Johannes de Silentio) puts it, needs to be *lost* in order to be *regained* by God.

On Kant, the contrary is posited, which God reaffirms what is there in morality. The religious is a call for action in the moral field since the knowledge of it is already in every human being – not its practice though. This call is based on an *a priori* principle, immortality, and on the belief that there must be a God to judge man in the afterlife, which of course can’t be proved. Using the Kierkegaardian terminology, Kant seems to stuck man in the ethical by luring him into religion or at least a notion of religion which could reinforce the ethical, that the takes as morality.

⁴ At least, since Faith is not communicable, we can never know.

⁵ Here, a God-man, Jesus.

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Therefore, in a sense, Kant uses the concept of God to finitize man and Kierkegaard to infinitize it while relating to Him. However, both authors fail to show a good case to the reader since for Kant to show a man whom achieved the highest good and virtue, he would have to show a corpse or a blessed soul in the afterlife; and for Kierkegaard to show a man whom achieved the highest goal of becoming himself by having related to God in faith, he would have to show a silent man since his *truth* is in immediacy, that is, he can't communicate it.

Kierkegaard even with his various pseudonyms can only show to the reader a list of “people”⁶ that could not have faith. In a sense, it could be said that maybe because faith cannot be seen, one can't tell which one had it. In another sense, it could be said that his goal is to present the books as a mirror for the reader. There, the reader would not only see himself as a sinner or a person who lacks faith, but that by doing this consciousness would rise in him in order to – maybe – achieve faith. In a sense, Kierkegaard urges the reader to *practice* – just not in a reasonable fashion. He can only show a narrow path to walk towards the door, that is, infinite resignation and, later, faith which must be open inside the reader. Indeed, he does not show a *living proof* with his pseudonyms but with what is called indirect communication he shows as in facing a mirror and in a somewhat Socratic fashion that the reader who thinks that has faith actually lacks it. Apparently, because Christianity must be lived, he does not want the reader to *understand* its truth but to live it. By showing Christ and Abraham, it would seem he has no desire to incentive admiration; the same is possible to say about his pseudonyms. In a sense, with the latter he walks the reader through a rise of consciousness but when it comes to faith – and even with the pseudonyms – he can only expect that by being aware of an example or role model one could also *live* it; *exist* that way. It's a reflexive communication.

Still, while both value the ethical in their own way. Kierkegaard maybe only for historical reasons assumes that morality or the Kantian ethics must be overcome in order to be religious. While Kant has religion supporting what is moral/ethical; Kierkegaard has the ethical to support what is religious by having God giving back the world, the universal, the ethical transformed to the man of faith. The ethical is suspended in a sense that is put away so – as seen with Abraham – murder can become a sacrifice but also in a sense that the ethical is elevated because is *returned* by God and with Him as its basis now. So, the individual must lose his *understanding* of the world, hence also the world as it is, the universal, ethical, mediation. On the other hand, Kant keeps the understand of the world, morality and religious *alive* by the ultimate religious concepts of immortality, judgment and God. These are his ultimate arguments in order to justify a conviction concerning morality. That is, Kant goes to the abstract to prove his point, while Kierkegaard needs only a living man to “prove” God's.

Addendum

However, it's important to know that, according to a recent paper by Mélissa Fox-Muratón (2018) called *There is No Teleological Suspension of the Ethical: Kierkegaard's Logic Against Religious Justification and Moral Exceptionalism*, where she analyzes the non-published book *The book on Adler* and *Does a Human Being Have the Right to Let Himself Be Put to Death for the Truth* (from *Without Authority*) both written by Kierkegaard. Her

6 Characters or pseudonyms.

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enterprise seeks to bring to light a change in Kierkegaard's opinion on the concept of suspension of the ethical. On the first book, Kierkegaard argues with Adler's statement that he would have had a revelation from God; on the second, he argues against the use of so-called justified violence by a religious person.

She states that in *Fear and trembling* the example of Abraham cannot be imitated. He is unique. And to do otherwise would be a "sin and an abomination" (FOX-MURATTON, 2018, p. 3). The reason for that we can find in the books cited above⁷. On those, the moral exceptionalism⁸ and the suspension of the ethical are seen on a different perspective. Both can't be justifiable by religion and because we have a moral duty towards others. Indeed, it's not possible to find reasons, for religiousness is silent, immediate and unreasonable. But what it seems that Kierkegaard is trying to show – although he never published *the book on Adler* – is that one cannot communicate this divine truth like Adler intended to⁹.

Fox-Muratton points out there are indirect evidence against the suspension of the ethical (FOX-MURATTON, 2018, p. 10) and that "*Kierkegaard does not necessarily defend the idea that being an apostle – as Adler tries to be – is an 'effective possibility for contemporary humans'*" (FOX-MURATTON, 2018, p. 9). But as she says:

The conclusion that we are to draw from the arguments given is not that Adler did not have a revelation or even that revelation is (or is not) possible in our age, but rather more simply that having had a revelation from divine authority can never be used as a justification for exempting oneself from the general / the universal. (FOX-MURATTON, 2018, p. 14)

In the eyes of the universal, society, "*Abraham's sacrifice can only be understood as a crime and an offense*" (FOX-MURATTON, 2018, p. 10, our stress). That is, one sphere cannot justify or be understood by the other. They speak different languages. And, for that, there is a risk on this attempt on communicate it, but even more on suspending the ethical. For even though – the first – Kierkegaard writes in *Concluding unscientific postscript*: "*if only the how of this relation is in truth, then the individual is in truth, even if he related in this way to untruth*" (KIERKEGAARD, 2009, p. 168), – the second – Kierkegaard won't accept it for this "untruth" as the "what" could be too dangerous and even unethical. In conclusion, for Mélissa, "*the extraordinary individual must act in the same way as the ordinary individual*" (FOX-MURATTON, 2018, p. 18). So, we, as part of the world and society, can never accept moral exceptions for they are not understandable to anyone but the "criminal".

On *Without Authority*, Kierkegaard appears to show an ethical solution for a religious problem. First, he points out two issues an individual must face if he wants to become a martyr as Christ to awake other:

- 1) how can one be sure that one is really in absolute possession of the truth,
- and 2) if by suffering death for the truth one makes others guilty of a crime of

⁷ Although they both mark a change in Kierkegaard's writings.

⁸ Term employed by Charles Taylor.

⁹ As he himself did in a confusing and self-contradictory way.

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murder, has he not himself committed a worse crime than had he left them in untruth? (...) he fails to see that Christ's self-sacrifice brought redemption, and thus erased the guilt by the same act, whereas the death of a "truth-witness" does not have that power, since the truth-witness is and remains, despite his faith, merely a human being. (FOX-MURATTON, 2018, p. 20)

We agree with the second problem, but the first one leaves out the uncertainty connected to faith and the "how" of the relation. It seems that raising this problem undermines the whole concept of faith if certainty is needed. Christ's redemption, on the other hand, makes a good argument for not trying to copycat Him – although not for Abraham. What appears to be missing and the reader is left without an answer is that if it's true that we cannot imitate either Abraham and Christ, the two only examples of spirit in history, there is no other clear way to become it as well. That is, if we cannot lose the "world" as the universal through violence – or what it could be called a violent act – in order to receive it again from God, what other way do we have? Indeed, Abraham didn't actually kill his son, but it was his intent for three days: violence. So, if we accept that this idea continues what Kierkegaard wanted to say in earlier works, we find ourselves left in an aporia not being able to accomplish the first suspension – at least as putting the ethical away – and no sacrifice in the world would be possible. However, the gestalt-shift would be possible, i.e., have faith, following an infinite resignation which wouldn't involve a suspension of the ethical. It's possible that one way to do it could be "simply" to deny a marriage¹⁰ and then, if possible or if not with God's help, regain the world again. No need for violence or any suspension. Only the second suspension on which the ethical is in a higher sphere. Indeed, Kierkegaard will also show the way of love in *Works of love*, but would be important to ask at this point why show the example of Abraham if it can't be repeated or followed? One possible answer is a redundancy: to show that the moral exception Abraham represents – even though he hasn't killed anyone – is actually the only one. By his exception the rule is made. Another answer would be that even though a murder would be committed; a sacrifice would be done, still nothing was finished, only the ethical. That's how the world is regained, by stepping back from the paradox, the religious to the ethical and universal. Otherwise, as Ettore Rocca writes, "*Whoever wants to repeat that silence falls into the demon's lure, is caught in the demonic paradox, which is merely the other side of the divine paradox*" (ROCCA, 2002, p. 254). So, whoever tries it falls short. If we were to agree with this line of thinking we have only exceptions¹¹ for repetition is an impossibility. Hence, we are left without examples to follow. And maybe it's exactly that what Kierkegaard wants to show us. That we must not follow, for that would be "admiration" and not St. Mark's "hate" towards everybody but God. Every "example" is an exception because is a subjective truth. It's not a co-experience or one passible to be relived. Everyone must be a single individual that way¹². Thus, what Kierkegaard seems to offer the reader is a mission with no certainty of being achievable for it falls outside rationality and, what is even more terrifying, a call to be "another exception".

10 As Kierkegaard did with Regine Olsen.

11 Christ and Abraham.

12 Even though Ettore Rocca would disagree with this argument. For him, only Abraham is the single individual.

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