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Disunited identity. Kierkegaard: traces towards dividuality

1 Introduction

In Kierkegaard the self has a dissonant structure. The self is not only a relation of different relation-poles but also a relation related to itself (see the famous definition of the self in *Sickness unto Death*). That implies, besides other points, that the self is simultaneously related to the external and the inner reality: a conglomerate of one's own subjective actuality including the surrounding world, socialisation, personal actions, body, thinking, normative values (ethics), (possible) religious convictions etc. Relating all that together, therein lies self-awareness. Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonymous author of *The Concept of Anxiety*, names it 'self-consciousness' (SKS 4, 443/KW 8, 143¹), i.e. the consciousness of the self (as embodiment of the person's subjective actuality). It represents self-reflexivity and the ability to evaluate one's own possibilities, actions, and convictions in life. In other words: the self is a multilayered and self-reflected web (or set) of relations.

However, when it comes to the systematic examinations of being oneself or how self-identity is characterised in Kierkegaard, the secondary literature gives almost exclusively a line of interpretation in which Kierkegaard is considered as a philosopher who develops an understanding of identity as 'unity'. This perspective on Kierkegaard has its own justification insofar the terminology and argumentation Kierkegaard uses and develops (especially in his pseudonymous works) often implies 'continuity', 'wholeness', and/or 'completeness'.

This article takes another stance. The aspect of identity will be examined in the light of 'dividuality', which is understood here as the multiplicity of heterogeneous and juxtaposed self-views in the individual. The perspective is, therefore, to look at the subjectivity of the individual and his/her self-understanding; thus the following explanations offer an interpretation of subjectively recognised identity in its hermeneutic structure and existential instantiation.

Firstly, I will discuss identity and its conditions by combining the category of becoming and the social embeddedness of the individual.² Hereby, I refer to the

¹ For the citation of Kierkegaard's writings, see the references.

² I need to emphasise here that this article looks at the 'social' foremostly as an immanent and important *structural* aspect of one's self-relation.

pseudonymous voices of Johannes Climacus (*Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) and Judge Wilhelm (*Either-Or*). Secondly, I will show how the Pseudonyms of Kierkegaard's literary production themselves give an example of a multilayered self-view of the individual. Accordingly, this article looks at existential self-awareness by considering both the literary form and philosophical content of Kierkegaard's work.

2 Existential becoming and social embeddedness

In opposing the philosophy of idealism, Kierkegaard offers a philosophy of the *concrete* individual. Johannes Climacus, for example, develops the category of 'concrete thinking' (e.g. *SKS* 7, 303/*KW* 12.1., 332), which is understood as self-reflexivity that considers one's concrete embeddedness into the world. For the purposes of this article, two aspects of this embeddedness are most important: the becoming and the social embeddedness of the individual.

2.1 Becoming

Johannes Climacus is the pseudonymous voice in Kierkegaard which discusses *Dasein* or existence from an ontological perspective of becoming, which has to be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, becoming means to 'become subjective'³ which implies not only an instantiation process of existential actuality as *increasing self-awareness*, but also a *becoming new* by looking in new and different ways on the already existing personality. On the other hand, becoming includes the constant becoming of the world, which implies *constant change and unpredictability*.⁴ As long as the individual is part of the world, he/she is also changing.

From an existential and, therefore, subjective perspective, both understandings need to be combined. The individual recognises him/herself by considering the facts of change and uncertainty. It implies that being oneself (identity) is withdrawn from any kind of descriptive objectification and/or factual stabilisation. The self is not a fixed actuality. Increasing self-awareness, which is intended by

³ See the *Postscript*, part two, section two, chapter one. For a short discussion, see Dalferth 2006, 242f.

⁴ 'The perpetual process of becoming is the uncertainty of earthly life, in which everything is uncertain' (*SKS* 7, 85/*KW* 12.1, 86).

Climacus, has to be seen, then, as a process of always changing views of oneself. Consequently, identity dissolves in the fluidity of change.

On the one hand, Kierkegaard does of course not emphasise such conclusion, because of his permanently stressed point of self-decision.⁵ However, on the other hand, we will see that the immanent interpretation of Kierkegaard's thought underlines the structural importance of this conclusion.

2.2 Social embeddedness

Kierkegaard's philosophy of existential concreteness implies a distinct awareness in the individual of how he/she becomes the person he/she is. The conditions of actual self-awareness are, firstly, social embeddedness, and, secondly, how the individual interprets him/herself out of this social embeddedness. By that, Kierkegaard gives, especially in *Either-Or*, the first suggestions of a sociology of identity, almost 60 years before Georg Simmel. However, regarding the first point, Judge Wilhelm notes, that the self 'is not an abstract self [...], but a concrete self which stands in living interaction with these determinate surroundings, these conditions of life, this order of things. The self which is the aim is not just a personal self, but a social, a civic self' (SKS 3, 250/EO, 553⁶).

Like George Herbert Mead, Wilhelm does not underline the idea of entelechy for the individual. The self appears as fundamentally relational. Every self-relation is intertwined with the society in which the person is located. That implies, firstly, that the individual is confronted with a number of ideas and narrations of what it means to be oneself,⁷ through which he/she interprets his/her own person. (This is important for our discussion of the pseudonyms.) Secondly, it implies that the inner and the external worlds of the particular person are always entangled; thus the self becomes an expression of a singularly developed participation in the surrounding community and cultural contexts. It means, on the one hand, that character traits are always an expression of socialisation.⁸ On the other hand, it might

⁵ Beside the long explanations in *Either-Or*, part two, we can read in the *Postscript*: 'Through the decision in existence, an existing person [...] has become what he is. If he sets aside, [...] he has lost himself and must start from the beginning' (SKS 7, 443/KW 12.1, 489).

⁶ On *Either-Or* I use the translation by Alastair Hannay; see the references.

⁷ '[F]or instance, cultural structures such as educational, political, religious, and economic institutions offer various ideas about selfhood. Thus, there are a variety of different possibilities of selfhood that compete with each other for the attention of each person' (Jøthen 2014, 50).

⁸ The individual 'has these abilities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits subject to these external influences, [...] influenced thus in one direction and thus another' (SKS 3, 249f./EO, 552).

imply, more generally, that the self is fully determined by the external world. But such a perspective thwarts Wilhelm's understanding of freedom as the capability of choosing between alternatives and possibilities in life as the basis of choosing the self. (Wilhelm takes hereby an ethical stance; only those possibilities are worth including in one's self-view which express and relate the individual to the obligations of socially practiced humanity.) However, although the individual can choose between alternatives of action in self-becoming, the individual is also determined by all the alternatives and possibilities he/she does not consciously choose in life. That gives, thirdly, a picture of one's self-determination. The self needs to be seen always as a heterogeneous expression of an actively willed development of choices and, at the same time, as a passively occurring determination by the imposing and impinging external reality with which the individual is confronted. This emphasises, fourthly, the aspect of contingency: not only in the sense of uncertainty and coincidence, but also in the concrete sense of historical contingency. The self is determined by the historical-political point of time, the topographical place, and the social position (class) the person is born into (it is no coincidence that Wilhelm characterises the self as a 'civic self'). From an existential perspective, the individual has to deal with that historic contingency. If the individual wants to understand its own identity, it has to deal with its socio-historical givenness of identity.

2.3 Contingency and self-choice

If we focus more on contingency and relate it to the self-awareness of the individual, then it is important to consider how the individual relates him/herself to his/her own past, present, and future (see also Engmann 2017, 162f.). From such biographical point of view, the future is a concrete expression of contingency. The single person does not know what will happen; the future includes in its ambiguity the stabilisation as well as the loss of the current self-being. Such unpredictability also applies to the past, since it too was full of socially impacted possibilities. The biographical self is, therefore, just one emerged possibility out of different possibilities of self-being. The present represents this possibility in its actuality which is furthermore only a transition into the possibilities of future.

Thereafter, the biographical self is characterised by an openness of possibilities. However, at the same time, the self is precisely that particular and definite self it became through its socialisation. Having such *inter-esse* between openness and cohesion of the self in mind, it is important for our discussion when Judge Wilhelm notes, '[T]he self [...] contains an infinite multiplicity inasmuch as it has a history, a history which he acknowledges identity with himself. [...] [H]e is only the one he is, with this history' (SKS 3, 207/EO, 518). Out of all the possibilities

of how his/her own biography could have been, the individual has to take the standpoint that the factually emerged biography needs to be taken as basis for his/her own identity; thus the individual *relates and positions* him/herself to his/her concretely experienced socio-cultural embeddedness, and, therefore, to all the impacts which have an influence on his/her own self-view(s). The individual chooses, then, its being in all its contingency,⁹ and chooses, therefore, its own self-acquisitions from the socio-cultural environment¹⁰; it chooses 'absolute continuity with the reality one belongs to' (SKS 3, 237/EO, 541). The individual takes, thereby, responsibility for what he/she became,¹¹ even though the individual has no full control over what he/she became. And precisely by that, the individual recognises the actuality of manifold possibilities in life and keeps that awareness of potentiality as basis for its own self-view¹²: that it can 'become something else and more' (SKS 7, 122/KW 12.1, 130).

In the light of contingency, self-choice describes a process in which the individual 'produce[s] himself' (SKS 3, 239/EO, 543) by becoming aware of his/her dependency and potentiality. To say it in dialectical terms: the individual chooses, in his/her givenness, the openness of self.

2.4 Self-interpretation

By taking responsibility for socio-cultural self-determination, our interpretation implies that the individual subjectively *identifies* him/herself with the external impacts and influences on the own person. The conditions for such a subjective creation of identity are the distinct perception and retroactive interpretation of the own person in time. This does not mean that the individual reacts only passively. Through self-interpretation, the individual gives his/her personality a contour. The hermeneutic process of self-understanding implies then, that the individual traces *and* shapes the development of personality by embracing *and* negotiating

9 'Everyone can, if he wants, become a paradigm man, not by wiping out his contingency but by remaining in it and ennobling it. But he ennoble[s] it by choosing' (SKS 3, 249/EO, 552).

10 'The individual thus chooses himself as a diversely determined concretion [...]' (SKS 3, 240/EO, 543).

11 'The individual is [...] aware of himself as this definite individual, with these aptitudes, these tendencies, this instinct, these passions, influenced by these definite surrounding, as this definite product of a definite outside world. But in becoming self-aware in this way, he assumes responsibility for it all' (SKS 3, 239/EO, 542).

12 '[H]e chooses himself as a product; [...] As a product he is pressed into the forms of reality, in the choice he makes himself elastic, he transforms all of his outwardness into inwardness' (SKS 3, 239f./EO, 543).

the perceived values, roles, and self-narrations. By taking the thoughtful perception and reception of his/her own personality seriously, the individual discovers consciously and productively the surface and the hidden parts of his/her own being, and confronts him/herself with both the trustworthy and shameful character traits of the own personality. To deal with such unavoidable multiplicity truthfully defines self-responsibility regarding the hermeneutics of self-understanding. The individual reaches, then, honest and upright self-acceptance.

Such self-acceptance is not to be confused with equanimity since the constant actuality of becoming prevents any kind of finished self-understanding. This is an important point. As long as life is ongoing, the person is constantly in the progression of time and gets confronted with external reality and inner actualisations, thus the person's own self-understanding is never finished. Insofar as identity depends on the subjective perception of life, the individual has to recognise a constant possibility of change. Such correlation between life-perception and the consciousness of self-change emphasises the process of self-understanding necessarily more as a process of *self-discovering* than of self-determining. By that, one's self-understanding is based on a constant learning in which the individual acquires the own self through self-discovery. Such self-learning does not only connect the individual more closely to him/herself but expresses and remains as an existential striving for which Johannes Climacus notes, '[T]he continued striving is the consciousness of being an existing individual, and the continued learning the expression of the perpetual actualization, which at no moment is finished as long as the subject is existing' (SKS 7, 117/KW 12.1, 122).

Finding identity is, hereby, an active search in which the individual becomes an observer of itself (and its surroundings) and interacts hermeneutically with the overlapping self-aspects and -narrations. As observer of itself, the individual is part of the observed system that changes by the sheer fact of observing and the involved intentions. By that searching, the individual's identity is changing the result. In other words, the identity recognized through a conscious/deliberate self-perception is different from the self-awareness of a non-searching individual. The immanent contingency of the searching process itself shows that identity is always a process with open ends and indefinite results.

If the individual takes the conscious stance that permanent becoming and openness characterise the development of the socially and culturally determined self, he/she is confronted with an ongoing epistemic lack of self-transparency. Identity emerges only through its ongoing self-discovery and actual implementation by the becoming individual, which, by that, never can reach an 'Archimedean point' overlooking the whole personality. Therefore, the individual always has to deal existentially with the expected *and* unexpected, from the external

world as well as from his/her own 'inner world'. Existential self-awareness always includes the negative. One way to handle such lack of self-transparency is the constant negotiation between the external impacts on the own person and one's self-hermeneutical processes, thus all the socio-cultural and personal impacts on oneself have to be balanced out.¹³ Self-awareness and self-understanding occur then as a continuous adding of self-knowledge and simultaneously as a constant denying of what the individual might know about him/herself. By that, the self appears as *palimpsest*, i.e. a multilayered interpretation of what the person is and becomes,¹⁴ which implies furthermore that the individual embodies this multilayered interpretation and interprets such embodiment at the same time; thus one's self-relation occurs as a constant re-interpretation of (lived) self-interpretations.

This point becomes very clear, if we look at the biographical dimension of identity creation. As long as the individual is socially embedded, which includes for Wilhelm also the 'family' (*SKS* 3, 207/*EO*, 518), he/she is confronted with different stories of him/herself, also from that part of the past of which the individual has no concrete memory. But as long as these stories are reconstructed through the memory of the ones who are narrating them, the individual is confronted with fragments of memory and interpretations. From the existential standpoint of becoming subjective, the individual has to relate him/herself to these interpretations, which purport to understand his/her personality, by interpreting them. This is, of course, also the case in terms of one's own memory, which is always fragmented, reconstructed, coloured by emotions, interpreted. There is no objectivity in memory. To relate subjectively to one's own memories for self-understanding, turns out always as a process of self-interpretation-interpretation.

13 There is a short passage in *Either-Or* in where Judge Wilhelm proposes a striving for self-harmony. 'The person who has chosen and found himself [...] has himself as specified in all his concretion. He has himself, then, as an individual who has these abilities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits subject to these external influences, and who is influenced thus in one direction and thus another. He has himself, then, as a task in a way in which the task in essentials is that of ordering, tempering, kindling, repressing – in short bringing about a proportionality in the soul, a harmony that is the fruit of the personal virtues' (*SKS* 3, 249f./*EO*, 552f.).

14 Edward F. Mooney underlines this understanding of identity too: 'We can take the self that's found or received as a fluid mix of capacities and aspirations and convictions, of relationships and roles, of character traits and sensibilities, more or less in and out of environing strands of culture and convention' (Mooney 2002, 218).

3 Pseudonyms

From a subjective point of view, personal identity is a multilayered structure of narrations, interpretations, and interpretations of self-narrations and –interpretations: unfinished, never fully transparent, and always impacted by the diverse reality of the individual. Even though the self is, therefore, determined by the socio-cultural context, one's self-interpretation(s) is not meant to create finished/stable self-image(s) (for oneself and/or the public sphere). The important existential point above all, is to take the personal stance of subjective openness to the openness of the self. That implies simultaneously the awareness of potentiality, the focus on the discovery of the constantly emerging personality, and the awareness that existence is always an interpretation of life-and-self-perception. To conclude in short terms, however, identity is characterised as an *open self-narration*. The interesting point now is that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous production gives an emblematic example for that. The guiding question is how the individual becomes aware of him/herself, if he/she is confronted with the pseudonymous works. The answer will help us to concretize the structure of subjectively recognized identity. The perspective on the pseudonyms I will take does not examine the poetic role of Kierkegaard's literature, but looks instead at its existential function.

3.1 Pseudonymity and existential appropriation

In Kierkegaard's opposition to the philosophy of idealism and its aim to explain the wholeness of the 'world' by systematising it thoroughly, he not only implements a philosophy of the concrete individual but presents the subject of concreteness in forms of self-narrations (and not systematisations¹⁵): his pseudonyms.

The relation between Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms can be interpreted foremostly in two ways. Firstly, the pseudonyms are authors within an author: simply different fictional perspectives and positions on the matter of existence and/or juxtaposed approaches to life and its possibilities. The *person* Kierkegaard represents, then, a transcendental subject unifying an array of different texts (see e.g. Adorno 2003, 20). Secondly, Kierkegaard and his fictional pseudonyms are separate writers. The (not very detailed) individualities of the pseudonyms embody various stances on existence by their poetic actuality. This appears firstly in the pseudonyms'

¹⁵ Of course, books like *The Concept of Anxiety* or the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* have a strong tendency of systematisation, but no one should overlook the inherent gaps in their systematisations and the constant performative change between systematic language and narrative passages. See Engmann 2017, 81–95.

self-descriptions, and secondly in their responding to their fictional existence as earnestly and ironically as if they lived concretely. The *name* Kierkegaard becomes, then, one more pseudonymous personality (see e.g. Hagemann 2001, 69).

However, Kierkegaard's communicative aim regarding his pseudonyms lies in his understanding that the idea of human existence inherently implies the interpretation and presentation of its possibilities (see Deuser 1985, 75). In this regard, the reader of the pseudonyms gets confronted with manifold perspectives and positions on how to deal with existence. (This is mirrored by the social narrations which tell the individual how to be oneself.) The textual presentation helps the individual to understand his/her own life-situation, how to read and relate to the world and oneself.¹⁶ The artificial concreteness of the pseudonyms supports that existential effect. Fictionality opens up the possibility of dramatising the inner sphere, and engaging the reader by dramatising the existential thought. On the one hand, the reader mirrors him/herself in the pseudonyms, i.e. one has the impression of finding sides of one's own personality in the pseudonym's descriptions. On the other hand, the reader recognises (unexpected) possibilities of the self. In both perspectives the reader becomes subjectively involved in the intended existential process of thought through an opening up of the reader's frustrations and curiosities; thus the usage of pseudonyms gathers the reader's imaginative capacities and focuses them on the important matter, the complex reality (see Mooney 2013, 206).

For a better understanding we have to consider the fields of existential appropriation and (Socratic) maieutics. Both encourage the reader's free response across a range of affect and content. The reader's own reflection – on the presented existential situation in the context of someone else (the pseudonym) – impacts retroactively the own stance to him/herself: namely by finding new perspectives on and positions to the given life. Existential appropriation is a process to *increase self-awareness* and to *become new* by actualising one's own possibilities, initiated by a guiding example. However, such guidance ultimately needs to be left behind since appropriation is not imitation but a personal articulation of what is read, without actually repeating it. Self-appropriation is an 'act of self-activity' [*Selv-virksomhedens Akt*] (SKS 7, 222/KW 12.1, 244) and implies the autonomy to take a critical position (to the text) with the aim of actualising the *own* self-being.

¹⁶ If the one reads, for example, Constantin Constantius, the pseudonymous author of *Repetition*, then he/she can read the following lines: 'I cannot rise above myself. I cannot find the Archimedian point' (SKS 4, 57/KW 6, 186). Constantin mentions here the important point that was made above. The reader becomes confronted with an idea of existing, which implies a never finished and in-transparent self-understanding.

3.2 Hermeneutics of openness

In the process of personal appropriation, the reader interprets (in a self-reflexive manner) Kierkegaard's interpretations of 'existence' as presented in juxtaposed narrations of poetic individuals and their dialogue.¹⁷ As long as the pseudonyms embody existential possibilities, the reader reaches hermeneutically only possibilities of possibilities of understanding. The reader not only constructs his/her own interpretation of an open narration of 'existence', Kierkegaard intends that particular effect by the pseudonymous form of the presentation of the content. The reader's confrontation with the pseudonymous production contains, then, a specific retroactive effect: the reader recognises his/her own interpretative existence, unattainable in its full potentiality of meaning; an important point we made above.

To support this point, we have to consider firstly, that inner differences characterise the pseudonymous production. The presentation of various viewpoints on existence embodies talk about the same issues in different contexts and situations. Hence, the reader is always confronted with the matter of existence, but in the way of 'heterogeneous thought worlds' (Poole 1997, 159). Each pseudonym talks about existence in a context-dependent manner, which implies that all the given and verbally identical concepts (like 'the ethical', 'inwardness', 'truth', 'faith' etc.) have to be read and understood out of their differences. If the reader is to interpret 'existence' for him/herself, it has to be done out of the specific situation and context of the considered pseudonym. Consequentially, there is no univocal meaning of words, which impacts furthermore the existential appropriation of the reader. The various presented meanings provide a hermeneutics at hand which opens up the horizon of understanding; thus the reader sees him/herself in the light of multiplicity and potentiality.

Another important point emerges from the relationality of the pseudonyms. For our discussion here, it is less important that the pseudonyms are fictional representations of individuals who are always engaged in world-relations.¹⁸ If the reader wants to understand him/herself *through* the pseudonyms, he/she has to consider his/her own cultural and social relations. However, more important is the dialogical structure of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous production. The fictional personalities are not isolated islands of existence-interpretations. They are entangled by commenting on each other. Therefore, the contextualised hermeneutics

¹⁷ In the following I will consider only argumentative points which are related to Kierkegaard's pseudonymity. For a different perspective regarding the hermeneutic status of Kierkegaard's terminology, see Engmann 2017, 81–9.

¹⁸ See, for example, Climacus' self-description: Engmann 2017, 100–8.

of each pseudonym open up to a multilayered and intersectional palimpsest of added, denied, and corrected meaning. Such complex dialogue includes possible perspectives, positions, and attitudes of the reader who interprets the pseudonymous writings. From the standpoint of existential appropriation, the reader is already and always part of the pseudonyms' dialogue and thereby involved in the palimpsestical narration of 'existence'.

If the individual discovers him/herself by reading the pseudonyms, he/she recognises not only the openness of self-interpretation but also its embeddedness in already existing ways of understanding the meaning of life and self.

3.3 Disunited identity

If we consider now that *one* person created the pseudonyms as different perspectives and positions (on the same issue), the latter then represent the contradictory sides of that person, corresponding on and fighting with each other. The pseudonymous production shows, on the existential level, the complex web of inner conflicts of every living person (see Carlisle 2006, 36f.): that no one is fully consistent. Kierkegaard gives an emblematic example for all the contingencies, ruptures, breaks, gaps, more developed sides, suppressed and restrained parts etc. of one's own personality, which appears then – hermeneutically and structurally – as an *open unity*.

If the personality is (systematically) an unfinished *palimpsest*, the self-appropriating individual has to resist existentially the temptation of avoiding contradictions. Such kind of rejection and/or process of harmonisation of one's own personality would undermine complexity and the sheer fact of reality, which is never a simplifiable point of concern. Embracing the openness and recognising the fact of being 'simultaneously old and young, happy and sad, single and legion' (Mooney 2013, 198), the reader of Kierkegaard understands him/herself in all his/her inner juxtaposition and multiplicity. To maintain that in lived consequence expresses an existential honesty (truthfulness) and a responsibility for oneself.

Such way of self-actualisation includes that any conscious and intended creation of public self-images avoids self-honesty and -responsibility (see Stewart 2015, 108ff.). Hence, actualising one's own self-appropriation by sticking to just one of the pseudonyms (a created image) erodes hermeneutically the whole idea of existential self-awareness. Therefore, existential appropriation leads systematically to the personal knowledge of all the different voices in oneself, to recognising them all as meaningful, but accompanied by the awareness that no single voice represents oneself completely, although it says something (limited) about oneself.

Insofar as the different voices represent not only different personal characteristics, attitudes, and convictions, but also different self-narrations, we have to consider two points. As long as the different self-narrations are juxtaposed in oneself, the individual is divided into different self-articulations. At the same time, these self-narrations and -articulations are constantly overlapping in oneself; therefore, the individual constantly lacks self-transparency. Given the fact that nobody knows all the different layers of their own personality, since their mixture is practically too complex, existential self-awareness expresses here again only an epistemic approximation of self-understanding. The interpretation of oneself is never finished and never fixed. And the existential task is to live with that without working against it.

4 Conclusion and outlook

The interpretation advanced by this article underlines the structure of the self as a multilayered web of relations, since subjectively recognized identity is a multilayered structure of narrations and interpretations, unfinished and in-transparent. Kierkegaard's presentation of thought in the literary form of different masks (pseudonyms) not only underlines that point but adds the aspect of direct experience of the inner conflicts in the self-awareness of every individual. The philosophical content of Kierkegaard's work, hereby, mirrors the form of its presentation and vice versa. This is also the case in regard to existential potentiality and determining dependency.

In the light of existential self-appropriation, the individual depends on the meanings of self given by the pseudonyms. Even so, the individual has to 'go his own way' (*SKS* 7, 251/*KW* 12.1, 277); becoming aware of the own self is a process of self-discovery, in which the individual reacts upon the given meanings and possibilities of self. The same systematic characteristics arise in terms of social embeddedness, insofar as the self-understanding and identity of the individual depend on the socio-cultural environment, in which he/she discovers him/herself by reacting to the impacting influences.

This kind of reaction to the socio-cultural environment as well as to external meaning sources needs to be seen in the light of freedom, and therefore in the light of self-choice. Regarding existential appropriation, the individual has to reflect and concretise the given self-possibilities of the pseudonyms in his/her own ways. The, hereby, underlined autonomy of the individual, to choose between self-possibilities (or not), mirrors the self-choice regarding social embeddedness, in which the individual has to deal with different self-possibilities in life. Insofar as this article suggested and argued for an understanding of self-choice as

choosing the openness of the self (out of its social and cultural givenness), it takes its own systematic stance between an esthetical understanding of freedom and the ethical quality of self-choice as it is presented by Kierkegaard in *Either-Or*.¹⁹

Given these three main characteristics – the multilayered structure of identity, the self-discovery in dependency, and the freedom in self-choice –, personal identity needs to be seen, then, not only as an open awareness of the self but also as an *organic nexus* of changing and overlapping self-interpretations, concrete self-actualisations, and personal positioning. The identity is never just given and

19 The two pseudonymous voices in *Either-Or*, the *esthetician A* and *ethicist B* (Judge Wilhelm), have different approaches on self-awareness that emerges through the way of living. 'A' is interested in the possibilities which life offers, and he tries out and practises his own personality in those given alternatives of life, but without choosing any of the alternatives as a base for a stable personality. 'A' wants to enjoy the play of different masks (possibilities of personality), because he does not want to betray his freedom of oscillating between different possibilities. 'B' contradicts that, because any kind of mask denies for him the true personality and leads to self-distraction. He insists on choosing, and that can be read as a process of finishing the personality in a stable self-picture that denies further possibilities of the self.

The interesting point for our given interpretation of identity emerges if we consider that the perspective of 'A' productively contradicts the perspective of 'B' (see Gräb-Schmidt 2017, 198–203). 'A's stance, that one should not finish one's own personality by choosing, takes it seriously that the individual is always bound to social roles, personal masks, and different narratives of the own personality. By that, 'A' insists not only on a process of taking over the roles, masks, and narratives. He also recognises the juxtapositions and contradictions in the self. This implies that 'A' refers to the fact of the givenness of identity, and that every individual has to deal with the multilayered expressions and conditions of the own personality. In that way, 'A's point of view represents, on the one hand, very neatly Kierkegaard's play with the pseudonyms, namely the fact of the non-onesidedness of the personality; and he asks, on the other hand, how responsible it is to cut the own self off from its potentiality.

However, such multilayeredness recognises 'B' too. The concept of self-choice is simply the reaction to this awareness. However, as we showed above, ethical choice does not necessarily imply fixating the self. It can also mean to choose, on the one hand, the givenness of self (roles, masks, narrations) and, at the same time, the openness of the self (potentiality). But this specific way of looking at ethical choice seems closer to the stance of 'A' than of 'B', because the earnestness of holding the possibilities of self becomes important. If we combine the matter of (ethical) choice with the stance of 'A' like this, we should not overlook the exegetical fact that 'A' does not want to fixate himself. He wants to keep ironic distance from any kind of willed self-determination. Thereby, he misses the energetic effort to understand truly the own personality, which is in contrast to the existential aim of 'B'.

Precisely in here lies the systematic character of the interpretation of subjectively recognised identity given in this article. It combines the esthetical characteristics of freedom with the existential (inward) quality of the ethical self-choice. Therefore, it brings together the recognition of existential possibilities (the multilayered personality) with the willed and intensive energetic effort to contour the self. By that, this article differs from the offered perspectives in Kierkegaard's *Either-Or*. Nevertheless, it takes these perspectives seriously and brings them into a new systematic conclusion.

never just freely chosen, but a constant interpretation and instantiation of self-views and -stances.

Interpreting Kierkegaard like that gives, thereby, also an idea of how existential striving for truthful self-understanding wants ‘to construct a life which makes sense, but also to gain a sense for one’s life which one cannot construct’ (Campbell 2000, 48). To understand life, the individual has to understand him/herself in life. And if the individual understands that he/she cannot understand him/herself as a whole, the individual understands life equally as a well and web of potential meaning that lies beyond the own understanding. From here, we could refer to Kierkegaard’s understanding of existential religiousness. The permanent becoming and creation of one’s personal identity would, then, turn out to ‘receive’ the self from *the* meaning source as such, God.²⁰

However, we can, finally, examine four important points on the given interpretation of self and identity by drawing lines to more (or less) current philosophy.

Firstly, identity appears as an *inter-esse* (a term used by Climacus: SKS 7, 286/ KW 12.1, 314) between a ‘porous’ and ‘buffered’ understanding of the self. Using, hereby, the terminology of Charles Taylor in a (more or less) associative way, it is important to underline that Kierkegaard insists on the openness (porousness) of the self, since any hermetic understanding of the self cuts down the concrete actuality of human self-relations and their inherent contingencies.

Secondly, identity is never a stable wholeness of self-understanding, a position which was mirrored in the first half of the 20th century by many philosophers, e.g. Heidegger or Dewey. Dewey said, ‘The *whole* self is an ideal, an imaginative projection’ (Dewey in *A Common Faith*; see Joas 2000, 145). Like Kierkegaard, Dewey shows that the individual can never recognise and actualise the whole self since every self-reflection and every (social) action gives only an understanding and an awareness of sections of one’s personality (see *ibid.*, 144f.). This aspect points not only to the self-understanding illustrated through the pseudonyms, but also to the process of self-learning and -discovery in social embeddedness.

Thirdly, insofar as identity represents a web of inter-related and overlapping self-stances, particularly shown by the pseudonyms, the individual does not only recognise an inner plurality or multiplicity, but also recognises the other (not to be confused with ‘stranger’) – or better: the possibility and actuality of otherness – in him/herself. This perspective correlates with Hannah Arendt’s examination of Socrates’ insights into the structure of thinking as such. In thinking, the individual engages in a dialogue with him/herself and is, therefore, in his/

²⁰ On the concept of receiving in a more general perspective, see Ringleben 1983, 101–7. On receiving in Wilhelm, see Mooney 2002; in Climacus, see Engmann 2017, e.g. 278–81.

her thought processes always a 'split unit' (see Arendt 2016, 56f.). The individual stays, thereby, in relation to him/herself but cannot be congruent with him/herself. Self-congruence implies the non-actuality of thinking. Therefore, the thinking individual has to be understood as a unity of plural voices. This, by its core conflictual, situation points precisely to the given interpretation of identity as a web of hermeneutic thought processes (self-interpretations).

Fourthly, the inter-relationality of identity with the external reality and inner self-actualisations gives a basis for a systematic comparison with current socio-theoretical philosophy. As long as personal identity is always an actualisation through the embeddedness in socially given ways of living, identity in Kierkegaard can be related, for example, to some aspects of Rahel Jaeggi's (2014) understanding of *Lebensform* ('way of living'). Jaeggi argues that *Lebensformen*, such as the family, are compounds of social practices and attitudes which determine the structure of human world relations and offer, therefore, the framework for our social appropriations of values and rules, our actions and self-understanding. Insofar as the individual is always withdrawn from strict control of his/her *Lebensformen* (see *ibid.*, 119), the individual is also withdrawn from the full control of the self-being that emerges through his/her *Lebensformen*. This points to the analysis of this article.

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- EO *Either/Or. A Fragment of Life*. Abridged, Transl. and with an Introd. and Notes by Alastair Hannay, Reprint 2004, London: Penguin Books, 1992.
- KW *Kierkegaard's Writings*. Ed. and transl. with Introd. and Notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989–2000.
- SKS *Søren Kierkegaard Skrifter*. Ed. by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al., København: Gads Forlag, 1997–2012.

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