

Kierkegaard's early philosophy of history: A view for contemporary times

Leo Stan¹ & Martina Pavlíková²

“This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm” (Walter Benjamin)

Abstract

This study seeks to show that the ethical considerations put forward by Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonym, judge William, in *Either/Or* Part 2, stem from a novel and so far, completely ignored, philosophy of history. We start with a close contextualization of William's immediate motivation, namely, to help a friend overcome the existential despair which is typical of any aesthetic outlook on life. In so doing, we show how William implicitly advances a distinct representation of history, which is both tragic and spiritually meaningful. Next, we address very briefly the originality of William's meditations by contrasting them with Hegel's idealist theory of history. We conclude with the enumeration of several distinguishing characteristics of William's argument, which render it, not just philosophically and morally noteworthy, but also very relevant today.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, existentialism, philosophy of history, violence, ethics, hedonism, nihilism

Introduction

One of the most intriguing aspects of Søren Kierkegaard's authorship is its use of pseudonymity as a means of communication. Throughout his entire *oeuvre* the Danish philosopher engages us through the unique voices, existential beliefs, philosophical musings, and sometimes literary creations of over a dozen pseudonymous authors. Adding an extra layer of confusion, some of these pseudonyms seem to have read the writings off others and do not hesitate to comment on them – though not always in a positive manner. To make things worse, as it were, future commentators would unwillingly create a sort of epistemic hierarchy, wherein certain pseudonymous works are treated as “closer to the truth” or more representative of Kierkegaard's own views than others (Khan, 2020, pp. 2–10; Binetti, Kralik, Tkáčová & Roubalova, 2021, pp. 15–31; Kralik, Binetti & Kondrla, 2022, pp. 31–38).

The present article hopes to undermine such hierarchy by zeroing in on one of the “lesser” pseudonyms from the Kierkegaardian pantheon: namely, judge William. Indeed, Kierkegaard may have shied away from turning William into a major character in his authorial drama, given that

¹ Catholic University in Ružomberok (Slovakia); stan.leo@gmail.com; ORCID: 0009-0008-5901-9319

² Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (Slovakia); mpavlikova@ukf.sk; ORCID: 0000-0002-6738-3320

he gives the judge a rather common name and wants posterity to identify him only by his professional title. However, in typical fashion Kierkegaard subverts this possibility by encouraging us to believe that William is the author of two, philosophically rich and stylistically accomplished letters which make up no less than half of his first *magnum opus*, *Either/Or*, published in 1843. Equally crucial is that the Danish thinker envisioned William as the paragon of the ethical “stage on life’s way,” a unique accolade within the ranks of all pseudonyms.

In scholarly circles the judge’s image is less ambiguous since he appears therein as a relatively minor figure. William has never reached the high status of other Kierkegaardian pseudonyms, say, Johannes Climacus, Vigilius Haufniensis, Anti-Climacus, or Johannes de Silentio. From the very beginning, even when they took him more seriously, interpreters identified the judge with a kind of transitional figure that connects the aesthetic and religious spheres of life. The most recent situation has gotten worse, as critically minded scholars have been quick to find fault with William’s unabashed celebration of the modern Danish bourgeoisie and its urban, liberal, productive, family centered, and comfort driven values.

In what follows, we will unequivocally oppose this entire hermeneutic trend by painting a more cordial portrait of William. We do so via an unexpected and completely unexplored route: namely, the philosophy of history. Our principal claim will be that part of William’s unacknowledged brilliance lies in putting forth an original understanding of human historicity, which can still resonate with contemporary readers. Methodologically, we will combine hermeneutics with close contextualization. Regarding the latter, we will make our case starting from the immediate context of William’s text. As we will see, this context is the pressing desire to help a beloved friend prevail over a profound psychological crisis. From a hermeneutic standpoint, however, we acknowledge that William’s explicit goals do *not* include the construction of a fully-fledged, conceptually rigorous, and systematic philosophy of history in the tradition of, say, Augustine, Giambattista Vico, or Georg Friedrich Hegel. Moreover, the fundamental difficulty any interpreter faces in this respect is that historicity, though central to William’s worldview, is only barely sketched in his overall thinking process. However, in our view William’s ethical reading of human history as a whole deserves a careful consideration for reasons that will soon become obvious. Hence, its hermeneutic reconstruction is the key aim of the present study. Specifically, we will expand upon, combine, and rearrange the judge’s otherwise terse and obscure statements into a consistent argument so that the reader should be able to follow its inner logic, distinctive presuppositions, as well as philosophical brilliance. Albeit not entirely uncritical, our analysis is limited to the formulation of William’s views on history in a manner that is as faithful as possible to their immediate context and stated goals. Our hope is that, based on our reading, future scholars will be able to read William’s historiography much more critically, integrate it within the development of Kierkegaard’s multifaceted thought on this matter, and even identify its place in the broader history of the field itself.

A few additional caveats are also in order here. The present article does *not* intend to offer a thorough analysis of either the ethical or the aesthetic stage of Kierkegaard’s existentialism. Neither do we seek to address the relation between these stages or the kind of temporality underlying the personal experience of each stage.³ Instead, what is said about them pertains strictly to the topic at hand and is meant to reproduce as faithfully as possible William’s history-related ratiocination. Specifically, we attempt to answer the following questions: Does Kierkegaard put

³ For a detailed discussion of this issue see Stan, 2009.

forward, via William's ethical worldview,⁴ a particular understanding of history? If so, what does it consist of, how does the judge come about it, and how unprecedented is it? Next, what is the role of history in the larger picture of the individual's self-becoming? Finally, is William's discussion of history purely secular or can we also detect a spiritual component therein?

The aesthetic urgency of William's ethics

We already said that William's writings are occasioned by the inward turmoil of a friend who is in desperate need of moral support. This friend is a mysterious individual named A., who is also the presumptive author of *Either/Or* Part 1 and the exemplary embodiment of the aesthetic way of life.⁵ Thus, to understand how the judge comes across the problem of history, we have to understand first why A. is, according to William, in so much suffering.

The gist of William's diagnosis is that A.'s psychological travails spring from an inadequate attitude towards existence. To elaborate, A. is an obdurate hedonist. The satisfaction of desires, the maximization of pleasure, and the avoidance of pain are his defining life principles (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 179). When external reality does not seem pleasurable enough, the biggest ally in his ceaseless pursuit of enjoyment is found in imagination (Akimjak, Hlad & Datelinka, 2022, pp. 47–54). On such occasions, A. concocts and takes refuge in, fantastic existential possibilities. This tactic gives him the impression of a boundless inward freedom, a refined detachment, and even moments of ecstatic exhilaration (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 1, pp. 28, 281–300).

In William's eyes, the primary cause of A.'s existential disaster is a crippling inner chaos triggered by the ceaseless oscillation between opposite states of mind, e.g., elation and depression (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 1, pp. 42–43). Moreover, since his moments of bliss are rare and fleeting, A. is easily prone to boredom which proves to be the greatest nemesis of his existence (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 1, p. 20). In the long run, the inevitable conflict between these emotions cannot but subvert the formation of a cohesive and harmonious self.⁶

Graver still is A.'s lack of the most basic sense of morality,⁷ despite his otherwise impressive intellectual sophistication. Time and again, A. pours scorn over such virtues as self-restraint, responsibility, respectability, and social solicitude. He feels (and declares) a similar disdain for the institution of marriage. This is part of a sincere wish to cut all ties with the community around him. Next, as he revels in the raw and random multiplicity of life, A. prefers the provisional to all things perennial (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, pp. 225, 179). Therefore, granted that his attitude occasionally borders on cynical nihilism (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 1, pp. 38–39), it would not be wrong to conclude that he rejects all things divine.

As a result, William concludes that A. – and any other aesthete – cannot avoid being engulfed by meaninglessness, melancholy, or despair (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 1, pp. 20, 21, 24, 26, 29, 36, 41, 36, 37; Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 225); and in the worst moments suicide will become all too real a threat (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 1, pp. 29, 31).⁸ If that's the case, the judge cannot idly stand aside and witness his friend's psychological disintegration. Hoping to come to A.'s aid, William will contend that the cure for aesthetic despair consists in becoming an ethical individual

⁴ Throughout this study we refrain from conflating William and Kierkegaard. This is in keeping with Kierkegaard's explicit wish to treat his pseudonyms as self-standing authors. We should also mention that the extent to which William's views may coincide or not with Kierkegaard's, has no implications for our overall thesis.

⁵ For more complete accounts of Kierkegaard's aestheticism see Mackey, 1971, pp. 1–38; Perkins, 1995; Stan, 2017, pp. 1–36.

⁶ "The aesthete lacks...a proper continuity or sense of personality" (Watkins, 1995, p. 119).

⁷ For a disturbing example in this regard see Kierkegaard (1987, vol. 1, p. 23).

⁸ Also, Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 196, where the judge compares the aesthete with "a dying person".

who, in taking full responsibility for one's existence, chooses to abide by social expectations and moral obligations. But what exactly qualifies judge William to offer such life-saving advice?

William's existential record

The immediate answer should be the overall quality of William's life. Judged by his material prosperity and psychological well-being, not to mention his professional success, it would not be wrong to conclude that William is the opposite of A. in almost every sense. First and foremost, he is an ethical man through and through. As Sylvia Watkin explains, "his code of ethics" combines "a mild altruism" and "thriving in the world while doing one's duty" (Watkin, 2001, p. 405). More specifically, the core values William swears by, are the sanctity of marriage (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, pp. 10, 60–62, 94, 108, 111–112, 116–117, 208, 304–306, 316; Watkin, 2001, p. 405); domestic harmony (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, pp. 9, 135); an unconditional dedication to friendship (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 322); hard work (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, pp. 275, 280–283); patience (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 135); self-control (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 298); decorum (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 276); a refreshing optimism (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, pp. 275, 276, 323), and a firm belief in the emancipating powers of the modern age (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, pp. 130–141, 282).

The first conclusion we can draw is that, what awakens William's speculative historical gifts, what sets him on the path to acquiring an unsentimental representation of the past is not an abstract, academic interest in philosophy, but rather the fervent desire to strengthen a friend in need, stemming from a broader trust in the curative qualities of ethics. We will see that this path is far from straight. Yet, notwithstanding its tortuousness, it will eventually lead to an interesting understanding of human history. It is to the unexpected turns of this path that we will turn next.

From ethical self-choice to communal history

Returning to the trials of aestheticism, we said that for William, A.'s suffering originates in the lack of an ordered interiority. By contrast, the judge insists that such inner order can be obtained only by deliberately embracing an ethical existence, or to use his own jargon, by choosing oneself. William clarifies that the self-choice meant to cure the aesthete's malaise, entails: (a) the courage to assume full responsibility for one's existence (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, pp. 216, 262); (b) a life ruled by moral duties and obligations (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, pp. 146, 263–264); (c) a loving concern for the human other (be it spouse, friend, or fellow citizen); and (d) a genuine appreciation for the physical world around (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 323).

Of course, not all of these requirements are directly related to the topic at hand. Therefore, our starting point should be one of William's numerous candid confessions.

If at times I have a free hour, I stand at my window and look at people, and I see each person according to his beauty. However insignificant he may be, however humble, I see him according to his beauty, for I see him as this individual human being who nevertheless is also the universal human being. I see him as one who has this concrete task for his life; even if he is the lowliest hired waiter, he does not exist for the sake of any other person. He has his teleology within himself, he actualizes this task, he is victorious – that I do see, for the courageous person does not see ghosts but sees conquering heroes instead; the coward does not see heroes, but only ghosts (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, pp. 275–276).

What is the beautiful “concrete task” William refers to in this passage? It is nothing else than the act of choosing oneself. And what exactly are we expected to choose? The answer is: our personal immediacy in its entirety. Here is how William conceives the specific contents of this immediacy:

The person who has ethically chosen and found himself possesses himself defined in his entire concretion. He...possesses himself as an individual who has these capacities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits, who is subject to these external influences, who is influenced in one direction thus and in another thus. He...possesses himself as a task in such a way that it is chiefly to...produce an evenness in the soul, a harmony, which is the fruit of the personal virtues (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 262).

To understand William’s point, we should consider the fact that every one of us is a unique combination of bodily, psychological, social, and spiritual traits. Whether we know it or not, we are continually determined by our biological instincts and ever-present emotions. Furthermore, our intellectual, remembering, and creative capabilities play a comparably crucial role, not just in the way we act, but also in who we are. William’s key advice is that, in lieu of being at the mercy of our idiosyncratic, bio-psychological configuration – as is the aesthete’s case – we should freely, deliberately, and responsibly take possession of who we are. Moreover, this process should be ceaseless, fearless, and even jovial.

Put otherwise, instead of seeing myself as a mere victim of my personal determinations; instead of simply resigning myself to who I am; I ought to make the unusual, though salutary, choice to possess myself as “an individual who has these capacities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits.” For William, the indubitable result of this autonomous and unresentful self-appropriation will be a constant “evenness in the soul,” which is the opposite of (and cure for) despair. That is why choosing oneself is the royal way out of the devouring maze of unencumbered aestheticism.

In a subsequent step, William states that our immediacy goes beyond what we are from a physical and psychological standpoint. No one, he observes, is “an abstract self that fits everywhere and therefore nowhere” (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 262). Quite the opposite, every individual “is a concrete self in living interaction with these specific surroundings, these life conditions, this order of things” (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 262). Simply put, the “self that is the objective [of ethical becoming] is not only a personal self but a social, a civic self” (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 262).

What William observes here is that no one is just a mere collection of private drives, passions, talents, habits, and tastes. We are also intimately related to other people by virtue of our ties to family, friends, acquaintances, coworkers, and even the broader community of our shared language and geographical borders.⁹ Consciously or not, every self carries within it a series of meta-personal determinations which are as fundamental as its personal traits. Now, were we to become ethical with this realization in mind, we must assume the communal side of our existence as deliberately and passionately as our psycho-somatic individuality. The hyperbolic nature of such a choice is hard to miss. For in the process of choosing herself, the ethicist is required to appropriate the external – i.e., difference or alterity – as her *innermost* constituent.

In the following step – and this is crucial for the aims of this study – William notes that, since every individual is social in nature, ethical self-becoming must be linked with a definite awareness

⁹ Conceivably, this is what William means when referring to “life conditions” or “this order of things” (Guttesen, 2024, p. 14).

of historicity. The ethical individual, he writes, must “[discover] that the self he chooses has a boundless multiplicity within itself inasmuch as it has a history, a history in which he acknowledges identity with himself” (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 216).

Since William does not elaborate it any further, one way to understand this point is as follows. Moral values are transmitted from generation to generation through multiple channels, for example, via families, group obligations, and state institutions. Fundamentally, all intersubjective relations are regulated by moral precepts which belong to a particular community. But this community is a group of people who have in common a physical territory, a language, and *a certain past*. Put otherwise, if every society is structured by a moral code, that code reflects a particular ethical tradition. And since every tradition is perpetuated through time, moral values are, to a great extent, historically determined.

Going back to the main argument, this means that, insofar as she ought to appropriate her social determinations as intimately her own; and insofar as every community is held together by a set of ethical values which are historically transmittable; the genuine ethicist must also assume full responsibility for the history of her particular community.

The tragic crux of history

At this juncture, William introduces another momentous idea: the traumatic core of every community’s history. Since, as we said, his intellectual interests do not belong to what philosophers call metaphysics or ontology, he chooses to discuss the issue in predictably moral terms. To detail, the judge realizes that the history to be appropriated by the ethical person “is of a different kind, for in this history he stands in relation to other individuals in the race and to the whole race, and this history contains painful things, and yet he is the person he is only through this history” (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 216). It is for no other reason that “it takes courage to choose oneself, for at the same time as [the ethicist] seems to be isolating himself most radically he is most radically sinking himself into the root by which he is bound up with the whole...” (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 216). Nonetheless, the ethical person “can give up nothing of all this, not the most painful, not the hardest, and yet the expression for this struggle...is – repentance” (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 216).

Let us describe William’s train of thought in less cryptic terms. If we claim to be moral citizens, we have to look at the history of our societies in all honesty, i.e., in the most critical manner. We cannot selectively privilege only the self-congratulatory aspects of our communal past at the expense of the less flattering, historical truths. Since the past of *any* society contains unfortunate and morally condemnable events,¹⁰ the ethical person must have the courage not to hide, distort, or simply erase – in propaganda style – the damning parts of her communal history. But, if every single society has known past injustices and violent events, then human history must be essentially and inescapably traumatic. And if history is traumatic, then every participant therein will be marked by a constitutive guilt. That is exactly how William links ethical self-becoming with the universal obligation to repent.

Let’s recapitulate William’s argument so far. Because ethical existence requires us to assume our social determinations as our own; because all social interactions are historically determined; and because every collective history abounds in unspeakable acts of cruelty and violence; it follows that in becoming ethical, we must repent for a culpa which, albeit not necessarily personal, is an *integral* part of our personal identity. Just as when behaving ethically, William asked us to take

¹⁰ William thinks that historical violence is so pervasive that even foundational stories like the Biblical account of Cain and Abel, reflect it (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 40).

responsibility for aspects of our life, which were not immediately our own, here he insists that the same purpose should prompt us to repent for something we have never been personally responsible for.

In a subsequent and even more dramatic step, William adds that this historical (and communally determined) guilt should be extended beyond our particular group, society, or nation. The ethical person should not stop at the harrowing past of her distinctive community. She must delve deeper and assume the guilt of people or societies with which she had nothing to do whatsoever. Ultimately, William demands that she take on the wrongs of the human species as a whole.

At this stage, the person engaged in ethical self-becoming realizes that her guilt is so great that no one could ever truly and effectively repent for it. Unexpectedly enough, at this juncture William's understanding of history takes on a spiritual dimension, too. In seeking to come to terms with the endless evil and guilt of human history, writes William, the ethical individual "repents himself back into himself, back into the family, back into the race, until he finds himself in God. Only on this condition can he choose himself. And this is the only condition he wants, for only in this way can he [ethically] choose himself absolutely" (Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 216). This final step in William's representation of historicity, regardless of its seemingly consolatory function, should still be read in a dramatic key. On our reading, what William effectively implies is that our historical guilt is so abhorrent – as a matter of fact, so unforgivable – that only a transcendent (i.e., wholly other) being could overcome it.¹¹ Our need for the redemption of historical evil is so acute that we must believe in the existence of a divine, all-powerful, loving, and morally pure being. Hence William's pithy claim that in repenting for a historical and universal guilt, the ethicist should find none other than God.

William's unexpected originality

By now, it should be clear how judge William has drifted into a territory usually reserved for philosophers of history. Here, one may ask: was this move purely accidental? In our view, the answer is negative. That is because William defends a position on ethical life, which is both normative and communal. Insofar as his view of ethics orbits around the idea that every individual is part of a larger community and that community has a unique history, William *must* address the character of that history. But if it's the case, then why is his approach thereof rather sketchy and impressionistic? Here, indeed, there is a large room for interpretation and speculation. What we wish to argue is that, despite its unfinished and somewhat abstruse character, the judge's perspective on history is both coherent and novel within its context.

As regards coherence, we suggest that it can be easily seen if we reduce the entire argument to its basic tenets.

- (1) Every individual who chooses an aesthetic existence ends up in despair. The cure for this despair is to embrace an ethical way of life.
- (2) To live ethically requires one, not simply to accept, but to freely choose what one is in their immediate condition.
- (3) This personal immediacy consists, on the one hand, of a particular set of psycho-physical traits, and on the other hand, of a singular aggregate of social determinations. The latter includes the rules, laws, and institutions, which form the core of modern citizenry.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of this issue see Stan (2017, pp. 63–114).

(4) Since social determinations are always particular – i.e., they belong to a community which has a unique past – every individual existence must have a historical element, by virtue of which the person is part of a larger temporal continuum.

(5) At the same time, the recorded history of every society is mired in conflict, violence, and evil; hence, the traumatic crux of the historical experience.

(6) Consequently, given that ethics requires one to choose oneself; that sociality is integral to the individual; that sociality is inseparable from historicity; and that historicity is essentially traumatic; becoming ethical necessitates the appropriation of historical trauma.

(7) Since this appropriation must be free, deliberate, and as thorough as possible, the ethical individual must take responsibility – and repent – not just for the violence of her particular historical community, but also for the ferocious history of the *entire* human race.

(8) Next, the ethicist finds herself incapable of repenting for the totality of human evil throughout history. At this point, she realizes she has to choose between either hopelessly taking part in this immense historical guilt or believing that there is a God who is the only possible forgiver.

With respect to the issue of originality, our claim is that in terms of the philosophy of history, William would have had only one predecessor or rival, namely, the idealist German thinker, Georg Friedrich Hegel. At the time, Hegel was by far the towering spirit of the Danish philosophical scene (Stewart, 2003b). So, William could not have been entirely immune from Hegel's influence. Indeed, the judge may have had none other than Hegel in mind, when he insisted that ethical self-becoming must be grounded on both our temporal and social nature.¹² However, our claim is that the Hegelian view of historicity differs from William's on multiple other levels.¹³

To elaborate briefly, Hegel defended a monist, idealistic, rationalistic, teleological, and deterministic theory of history. Literally none of these attributes applies to William's position. Moreover, the next crucial difference is that Hegel conceives history in universal terms, i.e., as the vast process by which the absolute *Geist* (Spirit or Reason) realizes itself by knowing itself. This self-realization – which is the ultimate goal of history – is not a smooth, linear progression. Rather, it consists of a series of necessary stages, in which one stage is ultimately dissolved by its own internal flaws, thereby paving the way for the next. Interestingly, just like William, Hegel is aware that history is marred by conflicts and contradictions. But – and this is another major difference – unlike the judge, Hegel embraces a supersessionist and impersonal understanding of historical dynamics. That is, Hegel's focus is on the way in which civilizations or cultures manage to *overcome* their limitations so that the *transpersonal Geist* could achieve a higher level of self-awareness. Yet, there's more. Hegel insists that history has attained its ultimate expression in the modern rational state. The latter represents the definitive fulfillment of *Geist*, because, in Hegel's eyes, it has successfully reconciled all previous historical conflicts (Hegel, 1985; Taylor, 1975, pp. 389–427; Patios, 2014, pp. 6–26). This adds a quasi-eschatological dimension to the Hegelian philosophy of history, which, again, is completely absent from William's considerations.

¹² The fact that Kierkegaard was fully aware of Hegel's ethics can unquestionably be inferred from his pseudonymous work, *Fear and trembling*, published on the same year as *Either/Or*.

¹³ Jon Stewart (2003a, pp. 182–237) has carefully documented the Hegelian undercurrents of *Either/Or*. However, since his sole focus is on Hegel's influence, he tends to downplay certain key differences between Hegel and judge William, one of them being the topic at hand. For other, possibly anti-Hegelian positions held by William, see also Thulstrup (1980, pp. 322–338).

On the very same topic, the present authors could not help but notice that William's historical reflections have never been thoroughly scrutinized by any Kierkegaard scholars.¹⁴ This may be because, as we mentioned in the beginning, Judge William does not occupy an important place amongst Kierkegaard's pseudonyms. The only detailed and systematic analysis of Kierkegaard's philosophy of history we could identify belongs to George Patios. However, for reasons that remain unclear, Patios ignores William's reflections and relies exclusively on such works as *The Concept of anxiety*, *sickness unto death*, and *Philosophical fragments*. Patios' main argument is that Kierkegaard places "at the centre of ... history individuals-persons-selves-agents." As a result, the Danish thinker "shifts the crux (and the nature) of history from a theoretical understanding of the past (as in Hegelian philosophy of history) to an active union of personal choices that refer at the same time to the past, present and future" (Patios, 2014, p. 52). Patios thereby reduces historicity to personal temporality, an interpretive move that is not necessarily unproblematic. Be that as it may, in light of our reconstruction, had he paid any attention to William's discussion of history, Patios would have encountered a completely different picture, since, as seen by the Judge, history occurs at the *interpersonal* level, while its essence is violence.

Conclusions

Throughout this study, we have argued that the defense of ethical life from *Either/Or* Part 2 depends on a distinct philosophical outlook on history. Our general thesis has been that William's historical thinking – although inchoate and in need of hermeneutic reconstruction – forms an integral part of his understanding and practice of ethics, being at the same time very original. In conclusion, we suggest that, if our thesis is legitimate, then William's historical philosophy has at least eight distinct characteristics.

Firstly, given their immediate context, William's historical reflections have an essentially *therapeutic* dimension. That is to say, they are motivated by a fundamental concern with the existential well-being of every individual, whose goal in life should be a freely chosen and complete integration into society.¹⁵ Secondly, in William's estimation, historicity has an essentially *communal* core and should not be reduced to the limited, personal past of the individual. In this respect, Kierkegaard's paramount ethicist challenges us to accept that any reflection on history must tackle the human subject's constitutive solidarity with all other subjects, literally from the beginning of time onwards. Thirdly, William's philosophy of history is driven by an inner logic which is mainly *emotional*.¹⁶ This is to say that the Judge's logic appeals primarily to our affective nature and only secondarily to our rationality. In this regard, William's thinking proves, once again, anti-Hegelian. Next, anti-Hegelian is also William's rooting of history in *moral individualism*. To explain, the Judge implicitly and explicitly defends the radical singularity of personhood endowed with a genuine freedom to choose and so, able to make sense of individual existence. In simpler terms, when grappling with the problem of history, William is never interested in entities or events which end up annihilating the ontological importance of every single person. Indeed, as already

¹⁴ A seeming exception may be found in Mackey (1971, pp. 39–84). However, Mackey's discussion is not focused on historicity as such, but rather on ethical existence as a whole and its key differences from the aesthetic sphere.

¹⁵ For a theological perspective on this issue, see Králík (2024) and Máhrík & Králík (2024).

¹⁶ For instance, in practicing the radical self-choice described above, the ethicist is first confronted with the *traumatic* crux of human history; second, she *feels* compelled to assume responsibility and *repent* for human history as a whole; and third, she *despairingly* realizes that such repentance is powerless before the limitless character of this collective guilt. Furthermore, William's hypothesis that God must exist because, otherwise, the absolute evil of human history would condemn even the most righteous to eternal hopelessness, is and remains quintessentially emotional.

stated, history with all its inevitable culpability is and remains communal.¹⁷ But at the same time, the individual remains the ultimate building block of each and every historical process. Fifthly, William's reading of history is *secular* (and thus, incredibly modern) in two separate senses. On the one hand, the judge sees all human past as irreparably tainted by evil.¹⁸ On the other hand, William discreetly resists the monotheistic reading of human history as the unfolding of a providential, divine plan. When looking at history and despite his confessions to the contrary,¹⁹ what he takes into account in the first place is not God's will to overcome the ontological disaster of the Fall and to restore humanity to its primordial condition. Rather, just like Walter Benjamin almost a century later, the judge's philosophical gaze seems transfixed exclusively by the "wreckage upon wreckage" (Benjamin, 2003, p. 392) left behind by human brutality throughout its historical past. Sixthly and somewhat paradoxically, William's mediation on history is not completely atheistic, either. In point of fact, the judge is a religious thinker to the extent that he connects historicity with a transcendent deity understood as the only possible forgiver of humanity's historical culpa. The seventh characteristic concerns the eerily *prescient* quality of William's perspective on history. After all, around 1843, words like "world war," "gas bombs," "trench warfare," "genocide," or "nuclear conflagration" had absolutely no meaning in the public awareness of Western Europe. One could add that our historical guilt has reached even higher pinnacles given the unimaginable carnages of 20th century, not to mention the contemporary threats of global extinction. In this regard – and finally – William's attitude towards historical processes is essentially *realistic* (or anti-utopian). When looking at our past, his consciousness seems haunted by the very distressful possibility that, without divine forgiveness, nothing and nobody could ever help us tackle the horrors that fill the pages of modern history books.

Acknowledgement

This article was supported by The Research and Development Agency (APVV-22-0204 Religiosity and Values of Permanent Sustainability); EU NextGenerationEU through the Recovery and Resilience Plan for Slovakia under the project: Søren Kierkegaard within the East-European Context, No. 09IXX-03-V04-00594 and the KEGA project Cultural and ethical values in education of social workers 016UKF-4/2025.

References

- AKIMJAK, A., HLAD, L. & DATELINKA, A. (2022): Kierkegaard's reading of reality. In: *XLinguae*, 15(1), pp. 47–54.
- BENJAMIN, W. (2003): *Selected writings*, eds. H. Eiland & M. W. Jennings. Cambridge, MT: Harvard University Press.

¹⁷ William's understanding of guilt has primordially communal connotations: culpability seems to originate in others in the form of the history of particular communities. Thus, the culpa that the ethicist is expected to internalize through repentance is rather generational. Interestingly enough, this viewpoint directly contradicts Kierkegaard's Christian-soteriological view of guilt (and sinfulness) as primarily and almost exclusively personal (Stan, 2017, pp. 63–88).

¹⁸ In this sense, we should also note that William does not seem to look at historical negativity in terms of degrees. For him, history is utterly and indistinguishably ferocious.

¹⁹ William admits being a genuine believer in divine governance; Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, 13, p. 149. However, when it comes to his understanding of history, this declaration of faith seems questionable. Take, for instance, the following confession: "It is beautiful to see a providence satisfy all and take care of all, but it is even more beautiful to see a man who is, so to speak, his own providence." Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, p. 282. For similar statements see also Kierkegaard, 1987, vol. 2, pp. 12, 257, 286.

- BINETTI, M. J., KRÁLIK, R., TKACOVA, H. & ROUBALOVA, M. (2021): Same and other: From Plato to Kierkegaard. A reading of a metaphysical thesis in an existential key. In: *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, 12(1), pp. 15–31.
- GUTTESSEN, K. (2024): Freedom, creativity, time and wonderment in poetry education. In: *Acta Missiologica*, 18(2), pp. 8–28.
- HEGEL, G. W. F. (1985): *Introduction to the lectures on the history of philosophy*, trans. T. M. Knox & A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon.
- KHAN, A. (2020): Kierkegaard Americanus: towards establishing a comparative analysis unit. In: *XLinguae*, 11(4), pp. 2–10.
- KIERKEGAARD, S. (1987): *Either/Or*, 2 vols., trans. H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press (referenced as EO I and II).
- KRÁLIK, R. (2024): Narcissistic call for metaphysics. In: *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 20(6), pp. 1–10.
- KRÁLIK, R., BINETTI, M. J. & KONDRILA, P. (2022): The „Book of the Judge”. On the importance of Kierkegaard’s journals and papers. In: *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, 13(2), pp. 31–38.
- MAHRIK, T. & KRÁLIK, R. (2024): Theology of creation and beauty: Kohelet. 3:11. In: *ESPES*, 13(2), pp. 54–57.
- MACKEY, L. (1971): *Kierkegaard. A kind of poet*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- PATIOS, G. (2014): *Kierkegaard on the philosophy of history*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- PERKINS, R. (ed.) (1995): *International Kierkegaard commentary: Vol. 3. Either/Or I*, Macon: Mercer University Press.
- STAN, L. (2009): Kierkegaard on temporality and God incarnate. In: Ch. Ciocan (ed.): *Philosophical concepts and religious metaphors. New perspectives on phenomenology and theology*. Bucharest: Zeta Books, pp. 237–254.
- STAN, L. (2017): *Selfhood and otherness in Kierkegaard’s authorship. A heterological investigation*. Lanham, MA: Lexington Books.
- STEWART, J. (2003a): *Kierkegaard’s relations to Hegel reconsidered*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- STEWART, J. (2003b): Kierkegaard and Hegelianism in Golden Age Denmark. In: *Kierkegaard Studies*, vol. 10, eds. N. J. Cappelørn & H. Deuser. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, pp. 106–145.
- TAYLOR, C. (1975): *Hegel*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- THULSTRUP, N. (1980): *Kierkegaard’s relation to Hegel*, trans. G. L. Stengren. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- WATKIN, J. (1995): Judge William – A Christian? In: R. Perkins (ed.): *International Kierkegaard commentary. Either/Or Part II*. Macon: Mercer University Press, pp. 113–124.
- WATKIN, J. (2001): *Historical dictionary of Kierkegaard’s philosophy*. Lanham: Scarecrow.