From Weltanschauung to Livs-Anskuelse: Kierkegaard’s Existential Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by Schleiermacher’s Weltanschauung, Kierkegaard develops a concept of life view that lays the theoretical foundation of his works: In his existential philosophy, life view describes different modes to relate to oneself and to reality. In his ideas on aesthetics, a life view is the necessary condition for the unity of a novel. Even stronger, the author has the ethical responsibility to confront the reader with the existential task of developing a life view individually. Finally, the paper discusses ways of integrating Kierkegaard’s concept of life view into a socio-cultural perspective: A life view can link people as individuals and create social forms and movements that build upon individual responsibility.

Introduction

In the 18th century Kant defined Weltanschauung as the transcendental subject’s capability to construct a perceptive totality (Kant, 1968, pp. 254–255 [KU B92–93]; Thomé, 2004, p. 453). Weltanschauung describes a universal cognitive ability that makes sure that we are talking about the same “world”.

Thus, in the beginning, Weltanschauung is merely an epistemological term, and it is regarded as a universal capability and not as an individual perspective. These semantics are slightly modified by Hegel, who adds a historical component: For him, Weltanschauung is the total perception of nature, society and deity that changes according to the evolution of spirit. Thus, Weltanschauung is historically relative, but it nevertheless has “objectivity” for every epoch, nation and Volksgeist (Hegel, 1970, p. 330). Schleiermacher makes

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another crucial modification. He stresses that Weltanschauung is not the automatic consequence of being born in a specific historic epoch, as Hegel indicates. Rather, it demands a life-long effort everyone has to make individually.

The most famous successor of these thoughts is Wilhelm Dilthey. Despite references to individual spontaneity in his work, he concentrates mainly on general aspects by developing a typology of Weltanschauungen (Dilthey, 1968). The subject’s activity and the individual feature of a Weltanschauung are not in the focus anymore.

Another Schleiermacher-inspired author of the 19th century makes Weltanschauung a crucial component of his philosophy: Søren Kierkegaard. He stresses the individuality of a Weltanschauung and the effort it takes to get the right one: Developing an adequate Weltanschauung becomes an existential task.

Kierkegaard uses world view (Verdens-Anskuelse) and life view (Livs-Anskuelse) synonymously, but life view prevails in his works. This paper argues that Kierkegaard’s emphasis on life view instead of world view is not coincidental. It shows how Kierkegaard translates the epistemological concept of German Idealism into an existential concept with ethical dimensions. Mainly focusing on Kierkegaard’s signed works From the Papers of One Still Living, A Literary Review, and Book on Adler, this paper investigates the implication of Kierkegaard’s reinterpretation of world view as life view. First, it discusses the theoretical context, especially the influence Kierkegaard’s Schleiermacher-reception has on his definition of life view (1.). Then, it analyses the function of life view in Kierkegaard’s work (2.): In his existential philosophy, it describes different ways to relate to oneself and to reality (2.1). In Kierkegaard’s aesthetics, it is the conditio sine qua non for the unity of a novel (2.2). Linking Kierkegaard’s aesthetics and his existential philosophy, the paper shows that according to Kierkegaard, an author also needs to live up to an ethical responsibility. However, only by succeeding in «individual ethics», that is, by developing a personal life view in opposition to the «demands of the age», the author can be a role model for the reader (2.3). The last section focuses on the rela-

tion of a life view to its socio-historical environment, which according to Kierkegaard can negatively influence the individual’s effort to develop a life view (3.1). Finally, the paper discusses an additional way of integrating the individual life view into the *socio-cultural perspective* presented in Kierkegaard’s *A Literary Review* (3.2).

1. The Theoretical Context

1.1. Denmark

When Kierkegaard starts his authorship in the 1830s, *Weltanschauung* is already a dominant concept in the academic world, especially in aesthetics. In Denmark, *Anskuelse* is applied in the evaluation of art production. Johan Ludvig Heiberg for instance, the most influential critic and *homme de théâtre* of Golden Age Denmark, stresses in a discussion with the German writer Christian Friedrich Hebbel that art needs to demonstrate the world view that is adequate according to a (pseudo-)Hegelian scheme of a developing world spirit.² Heiberg can be regarded as a model critique for Kierkegaard (Pattison, 2009). Still, their opinions about philosophy and literature are strongly differing, especially with regard to Danish Hegelianism. So when it comes to finding the Danish source of inspiration for Kierkegaard’s application of world view, Poul Martin Møller, professor of philosophy, is the more adequate candidate. Kierkegaard’s friend and mentor is the first to openly oppose Hegelianism in Denmark. Furthermore, Møller criticizes his epoch for not having a *Verdsanskuelse* (world view). He especially finds fault with the then contemporary arts for expressing only negativism and not an adequate world view (Møller 1856, pp. 90–92; see de Mylius, 2006, pp. 35–37; Jones, 1965, p. 81; Pattison, 1999, p. 126; Walsh, 1994, p. 30). As shown later, this is exactly the criterion that Kierkegaard applies in his reviews and his own works, too.

1.2. Schleiermacher

Although Møller has been very influential on Kierkegaard, there is strong evidence that Kierkegaard develops his concept of life view by reading Friedrich

² This long and detailed discussion has been published in *Fædrelandet* and *Morgenblatt* in 1843 (see Heiberg, 1861; Hebbel, 1913).
Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher’s influence on the Dane has been controversially discussed (for an overview, see Anz, 1985, and Crouter, 1994). As Crouter points out, Kierkegaard himself does not direct the attention to Schleiermacher’s influence on him, so «only when we are aware of the issues running through the mind of Kierkegaard at distinct times of his life are we able to [...] assess how he views Schleiermacher’s teaching» (Crouter, 2007, p. 203). One of these issues is Weltanschauung. It shows that for Kierkegaard Schleiermacher’s work is an unobtrusive, but deep source of inspiration.3

A direct reference can be found in Kierkegaard’s journal from October 1835, when he comments on Schleiermacher’s Confidential Letters Concerning Schlegel’s Lucinde, which has been reissued the same year by Karl Gutzkow. This edition of fictional letters provides an intense critique of Friedrich Schlegel’s novel Lucinde (1799), which caused a scandal due to its permissive treatment of erotic love.4 Schleiermacher praises Schlegel’s Lucinde for communicating a world view, and he stresses that people need to deal with the issues of modern life not by an intellectual approach, but rather by Anschauung. Therefore, the task of a work of art is to express a world view: «Who takes theory seriously today, and seeks the link to life in theory? [...] A work of art holds a view [Anschauung], this is the ground for everything» (Schleiermacher, 1907, p. 98).

In his note, Kierkegaard calls Schleiermacher’s Letters a «true work of art» itself, and a «model review» which is

an example for how a review can become extremely productive, because he [Schleiermacher] constructs many personalities out of books. By shedding light on the work, he at the same time sheds light on the individualities. As a consequence, we are not placed into different points of view, but rather, we get to know many personalities who represent these different points of view. These personalities are complete beings, so we are allowed to look right into each

3 Except for Schleiermacher’s Lectures on Education, Kierkegaard owned all the works in which Schleiermacher develops his concept of Weltanschauung. The Lectures on Dialectics and On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers. Although he does not himself own every work, we can assume that Kierkegaard thoroughly gets to know Schleiermacher’s philosophy (Crouter, 2007, pp. 198–201).

4 For a comparative approach to Schleiermacher’s and Kierkegaard’s reception of Schlegel’s Lucinde see Dierkes, 1983. Dierkes does not consider Kierkegaard’s comment on Schleiermacher’s review and its influence on Kierkegaard’s Livs-Anskuelse.
one’s individuality, and, through many, although only relatively true judgments, create our own ultimatum. (SKS 19, p. 99)

Kierkegaard’s early reference to Schleiermacher’s *Letters* gives strong reason to regard Schleiermacher’s *Weltanschauung* as the core of Kierkegaard’s conception of *Livs-Anskuelse*. As we will see below, Kierkegaard’s tribute to Schleiermacher is interesting from several perspectives: It shows Kierkegaard’s preference for vivid personalities over theory and advocates a more literary approach towards existential issues instead of a Hegelian systematic approach. Additionally, the goal is to activate the reader.

2. Kierkegaard’s *Livs-Anskuelse*

2.1. Life view and existential philosophy

Kierkegaard claims that individual existence cannot be the subject of abstract theory, as it can only be *shown* – and this is what the pseudonyms in Kierkegaard’s works do. As fictive authors and publishers they express different life views. Kierkegaard stresses in «A first and last declaration» supplementing the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, that «what I have written is mine, but only as far as I put a life view [...] into the mouth of the producing poetical-real individuality» (SKS 7, p. 569).

For instance, in *Either/Or*, Judge William describes himself as having a life view (*Livs-Anskuelse*, which is based on the «destiny to choose»), albeit no system (SKS 3, p. 203), and he comments on his opponent, the aesthete A: «Besides, you do not have a life view [Anskuelse af Livet]. You do have something, that resembles a life view and gives your life a kind of calmness, which should not, however, be taken for the secure and refreshing confidence in life» (SKS 3, p. 195). Getting a true life view is difficult, since it does not automatically come by abandoning the false, aesthetic attitude towards life. It demands an effort that includes the acceptance of one’s actual and concrete life after having seen its relation to the eternal. This is an effort not everyone has the strength to take, as the young man in *Guilty? – Not guilty?* experiences. His aesthetic view collapses under a crises caused by an impossible love. He describes himself as «stranded» due to his «individuality’s maladjustment»: «My life view consisted in hiding my melancholy in my inwardness» (SKS 6, p. 365).
Life view can be understood as orienting people on their different existential stages. One needs to leave behind the preliminary life views (the aesthetical and the ethical life view), since these views are only *illusionary* life views: the only one that can truly be called a life view is the Christian life view (McCarthy, 1978, p. 135). Thus, life view «goes to the heart of Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy», since it «emphasizes the duty and importance of the individual to understand himself, [...] his conditionality and his freedom» (McCarthy, 1978, p. 135).

There are many ways to fail in developing a life view. According to Kierkegaard, most people evade this existential demand at all. It is the task of the modern author to make his audience pay attention to themselves – by confronting them with the author’s own life view (be it preliminary itself, and be it the life view of a pseudonym or of a real author). In this dimension, many authors fail. Therefore, “life view” is the main criterion in Kierkegaard’s aesthetics to categorize and judge a work of art.

### 2.2. Kierkegaard’s Aesthetics

For Kierkegaard, three aspects are key when evaluating a work of art.\(^5\) First, *is it supposed* to have a life view — defined as «transsubstantiation of experience» (SKS 1a, p. 32)? Second, does it *actually* have a life view? Third, is this life view *adequate*? Kierkegaard develops this scheme already in September 1838, in *From the Papers of One Still Living*, an extensive review of Hans Christian Andersen’s *Only a Fiddler (Kun en Spillemand)*. Originally supposed to be published in Heiberg’s journal *Perseus*, but probably published separately due to Heiberg’s disapproval of its style (Garff, 2006, p. 84), the *Papers* accuse Hans Christian Andersen for having failed as author. Admittedly the booklet might be motivated by strategic interests like the wish to be accepted in the Heiberg circle (Koldtoft, 2009, p. 1), and its personal critique might be unjustified (Westfall, 2006). Still, it profoundly lays the foundations for Kierkegaard’s aesthetics. Moreover, the view of authorship that is developed in his debut book stays dominant throughout his whole work and can also be found in later reviews like *A Literary Review* and *Book on Adler* (Verstrynge, 2006).

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\(^5\) It is mostly literature and drama that Kierkegaard is occupied with.
Influenced by Heiberg’s genre theory (Connell, 1985, p. 26; Pattison, 2009, p. 177), Kierkegaard distinguishes between «immediate art» (lyric productions) and «reflective art» (novels). For both, unity is essential, but in each genre, it is achieved differently. For novels, a life view is a necessary condition:

A life view plays the part of providence in the novel; it is the novel’s deeper unity which provides it with an interior centre of gravity; it prevents the novel from becoming arbitrary and pointless, because the purpose is immanently present everywhere in the work of art. (SKS 1a, p. 36)

Kierkegaard refers to the *Everyday Stories* of Thomasine Gyllembourg (a contemporary author who publishes anonymously) as ideal novels. Each of them achieves unity by representing her life view. In contrast, a poem achieves its unity by a singular mood, as Kierkegaard shows at the example of Blicher’s work: «there stands forth here [...] a deep poetical mood wrapt in the veil of immediacy» (SKS 1a, p. 25). This mood is echoing an archaic, super-individual spirit instead of an individual life view, thus, Blicher is «the profound voice of a collective consciousness» (*ibidem*).

By characterizing the work of Gyllembourg and Blicher, Kierkegaard «establishes the characteristics of aesthetically valid immediate and reflective art, thus setting the boundaries of aesthetically illegitimate no-man’s land within which he intends to place Andersen» (Connell, 1985, p. 26). The harsh critique of Andersen is based on the main argument that there is no life view in his novels, thus, they fail aesthetically because they lack unity. Kierkegaard relates the external unity of a work to the internal unity of a person, so he proclaims that Andersen cannot write aesthetically valid novels because his personality is split: he does not have a life view himself (SKS 1a, p. 32). According to Kierkegaard, Andersen is not a personality, but rather the possibility of a personality (SKS 1a, p. 26). His comprehension of life is not structured by a consistent life view; rather, it is dominated by his changing moods. This has consequences for his works: his novels lack the unifying life view, while his lyric productions lack a single, unifying mood: Andersen’s lyric is the same «weave of accidental moods» in which Andersen finds himself as person (SKS 1a, pp. 25–26).

We can emphasize two aspects of life view in this context: First, the relation of a novelist to his work needs to be authentic; his novels can only depict the life view he holds himself. Referring to Gyllembourg as author of the *Everyday Stories* (and respecting her anonymity by addressing her as a male author),
Kierkegaard describes the author’s creative process as «with the fidelity of inwardness reproducing his own original character». As a consequence, «the life view that can be found in the novel, is to be found in its production, too» (SKS 8, p. 17). Nevertheless, the relation between author and work is not immediate, not a direct expression of the individual life view, but a reflected one. Thus, the novel’s unity is only corresponding to the author’s personal unity (SKS 1a, p. 21). The reflective approach towards the own life view prevents the author from two mistakes that destroy the aesthetic value of a work, a purely theoretical approach and a subjective approach where the author identifies too much himself with his protagonists: «If [...] such a life view is lacking, the novel seeks at the expense of poetry to insinuate some theory or another (dogmatic, doctrinaire novels) or else stands in a finite and accidental relation to the author’s flesh and blood» – which results in «subjective novels» (SKS 1a, pp. 36-37).

In Kierkegaard’s view, Andersen’s novels are the prototype of a subjective novel. Andersen expresses such a strong empathy with the novel’s protagonists, that Kierkegaard characterizes his novels as «an amputation of himself [Andersen] rather than a literary product» (SKS 1a, p. 39). Interestingly, to give an example for a «doctrinaire novel», Kierkegaard refers to Schlegel’s Lucinde (SKS 1b, p. 324). Thus, although he praises Schleiermacher’s Letters for being a model review, he does not agree with him on the reviewed work itself: Whereas Schleiermacher finds a view (Anschauung) about life in Schlegel’s Lucinde, Kierkegaard criticizes it for promoting an aesthetical theory, i.e., an inadequate life view.

Second, due to the authentic, albeit reflected relation between author and work, the work can be judged according to the author’s relation to reality. According to Kierkegaard, a point of view that flees reality is an illusionary life view, thus no life view at all. Kierkegaard criticizes Andersen for escaping reality by indulging in his moods and self-pity. Andersen is driven by his negative attitude towards life, a deterministic belief that a genius cannot thrive under bad conditions. In Only a Fiddler, Andersen illustrates this belief: a talented violinist fails since he does not live in a supportive environment. Since the plot does neither teach how to change one’s life nor to arrange oneself with it, Kierkegaard wants to «fight this negative point of view and its putative right to pass itself as a life view» (SKS 1a, p. 35).

Indulging in subjective moods, Andersen is an example how an author evades reality, fails in his existential task, and in his works even teaches this
escapism from existential responsibility. Thus, his failure is not only aesthetical, but also ethical.

Referring to Schlegel’s *Lucinde*, Kierkegaard gives another example for the failure of an author.

Schlegel demonstrates a sophisticated way of missing one’s existential task: instead of confronting oneself with the painful existential responsibility, he suggests to approach reality with more fantasy and rewrite it like a poem – an idea Kierkegaard strictly rejects:

> Who would be such a brute that he could not enjoy fantasy’s light play, but out of this does not follow that life shall be resolved in the view of fantasy [Phantasi-Anskuelse]. If fantasy in such a way is empowered, it will weaken and stun the soul, bereave it of all moral strength and turn life into a dream. (SKS 1b, p. 326)

Both Andersen and Schlegel miss two ethical tasks: they fail to leave the false, aesthetic stage of life behind themselves, and they do not awake the reader. Not expressing an adequate life view in their works and not forcing the readers to create their own «ultimatum» (SKS 19, p. 99), they fail as persons and as authors.

In order to give a thoroughly positive example, Kierkegaard praises Gyllembourg. She has a true life view that is grounded in the reflection of her life’s experience, and has been proven by the strokes of fate (SKS 1a, p. 24). In *From the Papers of One still Living*, Kierkegaard refers to Gyllembourg occasionally, but concentrates on Andersen. Eight years later, in *A Literary Review*, he describes Gyllembourg’s merits as an author more detailed. Still, life view is the core criterion of his judgment. Here it becomes clear that a “true” life view can be attributed not only to the last stage of life, the religious one, but to the ethical stage, too. According to Kierkegaard, Gyllembourg does not reach the religious existence, but stays at the ethical level. Although not totally fulfilling the existential task, she still succeeds with regard to her task as author. First, she expresses a life view that does not flee reality, but persuades the reader «to stay where he is» (SKS 8, p. 23). This does not help the reader making the leap into a religious existence, but it prevents her/him from drifting into the realms of an aesthetic existence. Furthermore, since the ethical existence is a first step towards becoming an individual in front of God, it can also be regarded as to

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6 On Kierkegaard’s general appreciation of Gyllembourg’s work see Nun, 2009.
prepare the reader for the religious existence. Second, Gyllembourg demonstrates what it means to be an authentic personality. She has found herself and therefore, she can be a role model: «He can be a leader, because he is not a writer who seeks himself, but someone, who has found himself, before he became an author» (SKS 8, p. 19). The author of the Everyday Stories does not adjust herself to what Kierkegaard calls the «demands of the age» (Tidens Fordring; SKS 8, p. 13), but stays true to herself (SKS 8, p. 17).

2.3. The author and the demands of the age

The demands of the age repeatedly occur in Kierkegaard’s works. They can be interpreted as the Hegelian Zeitgeist as much as shorter living fashions, or as the Heideggerian Man. Whatever interpretation one chooses, it always includes the same crucial component: the demands of the age make the individuals forget about their existential task of taking charge of themselves.

According to Kierkegaard, evading the existential task of developing a life view is characteristic for his epoch. He criticizes especially that the individual responsibility has been neglected: the existential demand has been degraded to a collective demand — to the demands of the age.

A true life view is the antidote against these demands, and a novel that communicates such a life view has an awakening effect on its readers. Furthermore, the author can be a role model. In order to judge whether the author has a life view, it has to be evaluated, «whether the author stayed faithful to himself despite the demands of the age, or whether he deceived himself and the duties he gave himself» (SKS 8, p. 12).

The connection of “life view” with an author’s authenticity that opposes the “demands of the age” returns in Kierkegaard’s Book on Adler. In the introduction, Kierkegaard describes his age as fickle, «in which the individual in many different ways (in the judgment of the social environment, in the public opinion, in the city’s gossip) tries to find what essentially can only be found in the individual itself» (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 22; Pap. VII 2 B235). As in the Literary Review, Kierkegaard accuses his age as being hyper-reflective, and unable to act. People are struck in a web of reflection, they consider too much — in Kierkegaard’s words: they only discuss premises — so they never reach a conclusion and make a decision leading to action. This «weakness of the age» is used by «individuals, who’s life similarly only has premises, to become writers, and their works will be exactly what their time demands» (Kierkegaard,
1968, p. 7). Such a “premise-author” suggests a lot, refers to many projects and distracts instead of motivating the reader to come to a conclusion. As in Kierkegaard’s earlier mentioned works, the failure of the author as author has its roots in the failure of the author as person.

Instead of agreeing with oneself – everyone separately – about what one wants in concreto, before one starts to express oneself, they have a superstitious belief about the use of initiating a discussion. [...] They have a superstitious notion that, while the individuals, every one for itself, do not know, what they want, the Zeitgeist [Tidsaand] [...] is able to reveal, what one really wants. (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 9)

Thus, the “premise-author” is “needy”, he is dependent on the judgment of the reading public (Kierkegaard, 1968, pp. 12–13). He adjusts to the demands of the age, thereby enforces these demands and makes it even harder for his contemporaries to develop a life view. In this respect, he is responsible for his readers evading their existential task.

So far it has been shown that life view is an existential rather than an epistemological category in Kierkegaard’s work. Having a true life view is a necessary condition for becoming a true, self-responsible individual. Since it is the author’s task to demonstrate a life view not only due to aesthetical reasons, but also due to a responsibility towards the reader, the paper suggests that “life view” is neither solely an existential nor an aesthetical category. It is an ethical concept, too, addressing interpersonal relations like the author-reader-relation. However, can we even think of a wider ethical dimension, maybe with regard to a socio-political context? I would like to finish by suggesting a link between Kierkegaard’s concept of “life view” and “idea”: “idea” translates “life view” into a socio-political term.

3. Life View: a Social Context?

3.1. Individual responsibility and determinism

It seems that failure and success in developing an adequate life view is totally the individual’s own responsibility. When explaining “life view”, Kierkegaard concentrates on the individual:

When we ask how such a life view develops, we answer that for him who does not allow his life to fizzle out, but as far as possible seeks to turn its individual expressions inward again, there must necessarily come a moment in which a
special illumination spreads over life; and one does not, even in the remotest manner, need to understand all possible particulars, for the subsequent understanding of which one now has the key; there must, I say, come that moment when, as Daub observes, life is understood backwards through the idea. (SKS 1a, p. 33)

In addition, Kierkegaard’s rejection of Andersen’s “negative view” about a genius’ dependence on external circumstances underlines the individual’s total responsibility. This attitude has been enforced by the classic concept of Bildung (cultivation). Joakim Garff shows that Kierkegaard’s judgment of Only a Fiddler is based on the concept of Bildungsroman, which has been prominent in 19th century, also in Copenhagen’s intellectual circles (Garff, 2006). In three stages (home – homeless – home), the Bildungsroman «sketches the process that takes place as an individual realizes his own rudimentary layout in a series of coordinated moves, and thus brings himself into a continually more proportioned relationship with the world that surrounds him: society, nature, cosmos, God» (Garff, 2006, p. 87). For the concept of Bildung, the interaction with the social environment is crucial. As Schleiermacher stresses, education helps to get a Weltanschauung; it is its task to «develop the receptive chaos into a world view» (Schleiermacher, 1849, p. 622). Bildung has passive as much as active elements: The individual finds its place in the world by being educated, but also by actively reflecting her/his experiences and integrating them to the unity of a personality. Thus, it is «apparent that even though the Bildungsroman neither disputes the reality of existential contingency, nor is regulated by a strict determinism, it nonetheless reveals a fundamental confidence that life unfolds according to laws and structures that are deeply embedded in the individual human person» (Garff, 2006, p. 87). Thus, for the Bildungsroman it is characteristic to end well and to restore harmony. This does not happen in Andersen’s Only a Fiddler. Therefore, Kierkegaard condemns it with regard to aesthetics (for deconstructing the genre Bildungsroman), but also with regard to ethics: for propagating a negative attitude towards life. However, Kierkegaard is not as consequent as it seems. In the beginning of From the Papers of One Still Living, he makes several adjustments that weaken not only the strong supposition of the individual’s total responsibility for fulfilling his existential task. Even the moderate thesis of the interaction of a reflecting individual with its environment cannot be found in the description. For a person like Andersen, the circumstances are simply not providing the necessary base for such interaction: «Such an aid of the epoch’s cir-
circumstances was not Andersen’s destiny; because his own life-development happened in the so-called political period» (SKS 1a, p. 27). Kierkegaard’s negative statements about the «political period» should not only be understood as political concern and «crusade against liberalism» (de Mylius, 2006, p. 35). Kierkegaard does not have in mind the different interests of opposing parties and social classes, but the effect the «political period» has on the individual. To describe the characteristic features of that period, Kierkegaard uses psychological instead of social categories: His age is too reflective, it is «not a period of deeds» [ingen Gjernings-periode] (SKS 1a, p. 27) and thus, it prevents the individual from acting. Locked up in the “prison of reflection”, the individual is unable to make existential decisions that concern exclusively his own life:

Reflection’s envy keeps will and power in prison. First, the individual has to break out of that prison, where his reflection keeps him, and then, when he succeeded, he is not yet standing free, but in the big prison-building that is constructed by the environment’s reflection. (SKS 8, p. 78)

Considering Kierkegaard’s view on his epoch, one can resume that his position is not so much different from Andersen’s: Although Kierkegaard contrarily to Andersen finds the genius to thrive under each condition, he still admits that the normal individual depends on his environment to fulfil his existential task. Therefore, writers have a task. Especially in “political periods”, “true authors” are needed to activate the readers as single individuals and to help them develop an adequate life view.

3.2. Life view and idea

This final section claims that Kierkegaard’s concept of life view also includes sociality: By elaborating on the hidden link of “life view” and “idea”, I show how individuals socially connect without mutually hampering each other’s existential development.

In the Papers of One Still Living, Kierkegaard anticipates possible defences of Andersen. One could for instance state that an idea is the centre of Andersen’s novel, and thus, one could conclude, he has a life view. Kierkegaard strictly rejects this argument:

To this I have to answer that I never claimed that an idea as such (least of all an idée fixe) is to be regarded as life view, and further do I have to know a bit more about the idea’s content. Now, if it is based on the assumption that life is no process of development, but a process of decline of everything great and
special that wants to sprout, I rightfully dare to protest against attributing “life view” to that idea. (SKS 1a, pp. 34–35)

Some scholars have interpreted this as evidence that an idea cannot substitute a life view (see for instance McCarthy, 1978, p. 142). However, I think that “idea” and “life view” do not necessarily exclude each other. As Kierkegaard emphasizes, the kind of idea is relevant. In Andersen’s case, the idea contradicts life. It does not help to lead a life in reality. This is the only reason why Kierkegaard wants to «fight this negative point of view and its putative right to pass itself as a life view» (SKS 1a, p. 35). But other ideas can be thought of that fulfil exactly the function of a life view. In Summer 1835, only a few months before Kierkegaard praises Schleiermacher’s Letters, he notes that he is looking for «an idea that I want to live and die for» (SKS 17, p. 24). In becoming an individual in a true sense [den Enkelte], Kierkegaard finds the idea that guides his life and also structures his work. Again, there are striking similarities to Schleiermacher, who defines his Monologues as demonstrating no «dead thoughts» [todte Gedanken], but «ideas that truly live in me and in which I live, too» (Schleiermacher, 1858, pp. 415–416; Czakó, 2006, p. 650).

Although having an idea about life is not automatically a life view, its relevance for life comes similar to it, if it expresses and initiates a right relation towards reality. Furthermore, as an idea, life view does not only link the individual with its concrete existence, i.e., with her/himself, but also with others. In A Literary Review, Kierkegaard describes three relations of the individual to an idea and to others. He judges the relations differently; interestingly, what is best for the individual is best for society, too:

If the individuals (everyone for himself) essentially relate to an idea in passion, and thereby essentially relate to the same idea in union: then it is the best and normal relation. The relation is individually separating (everyone possesses himself) and ideally uniting. In the essential inwardness there is decent shame among men that prevents rude obtrusiveness; in the harmonious relation to the idea rests a sublimity that forgets the individual’s contingency above the whole. [...] In contrast, shall individuals simply relate en masse (that is, without the separation of inwardness) to an idea: so do we get violence, lack of steerability and lack of restraint; but if there is no idea for individuals en masse; and also no individually separating essential inwardness, so do we get brutality. The spherical harmony is the unity of the planets relating to themselves and to the whole. If we eliminate one of the relations, we will get chaos. (SKS 8, p. 61)
Passion, the necessary condition for relating to an idea individually and en masse at the same time, has been lost in Kierkegaard’s epoch. Thus, the «best and normal relation» is difficult to achieve.

Since Kierkegaard concentrates on criticizing his age instead of developing future scenarios of a society, sketching a Kierkegaardian socio-political theory is extremely difficult and would be misplaced in this context. However, the quote allows us at least to highlight two elements. First, Kierkegaard admits that the social environment has an influence on the success and failure of developing a life view. Second, by stressing the identity of specific “ideas” and “life view”, Kierkegaard suggests a social function of life view: as an idea to which people relate as individuals, but together with others, it helps to construct a society that prevents mass delusion and supports the individuals in their existential task of leading an authentic life. In other words, according to Kierkegaard life view is not only an individual, but also a social issue: it helps to construct a well-functioning society that is build upon individual responsibility and authenticity.

REFERENCES


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