

# KIERKEGAARD'S EXISTENTIAL THERAPY AND THE PROBLEM OF THE SUBJECT

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## Abstract

Paper focuses on two, essentially connected, things: the very way of Kierkegaard's intellectual work on the one hand and his vision of the subject on the other hand. The author argues that Kierkegaard practiced a kind of therapy by his writings to be defined as *existential rehabilitation of the Present*. Trying to clarify then the concept of the subject underlying such a therapy the author shows to what extent Kierkegaard's vision of the subject breaks with the concept of the subject characteristic to the classical modernity/the Enlightenment.

**Keywords:** existential rehabilitation of the Present, indirect communication, existential reduction, author, antinomic subject, the a-hermeneutic.

“Gewiß, Kierkegaard spricht zum  
Verzweifelten wie ein Arzt zu seinem  
Patienten”.

*M. Theunissen*

## Introduction

In 1962 Niels Thulstrup (one of the Kierkegaard leading researchers of the previous century) suggested considering Kierkegaard not as a thinker or an author of some teaching but as a complex of problems – *the Complex of problems called Kierkegaard*<sup>2</sup>. With such a smart definition Thulstrup tried to overcome a number of interpretative deadlocks which had emerged by that time due to the fact that Kierkegaard could not be unambiguously ascribed to any intellectual direction, philosophical or theological tradition or school. Although the situation with reception and interpretation of Kierkegaard's works in the European intellectual milieu has changed since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I find the definition of Thulstrup topical insofar as it im-

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<sup>2</sup> N. Thulstrup: *The Complex of problems called Kierkegaard*, in: Johnson H.A., Thulstrup N. (eds): *A Kierkegaard Critique. An international selection of essays interpreting Kierkegaard*, New York: Harper 1962, 286–296.

plicitly keeps the *unrest* which Kierkegaard's thinking for many years has evoked and which certainly needs a further careful reflection on our part since we, intellectuals of the 21 century, are affected by this unrest.

In my presentation, I would like to touch upon the mentioned above peculiar disturbing impact of Kierkegaard's works by considering two, essentially connected, questions. The first concerns the very way of intellectual work of the great Dane; the second one – his vision of the subject. The idea that Kierkegaard spoke/acted as a kind of therapist, goes back to Kierkegaard himself. I would like to support so to say this idea and to show (in the first part of the paper) that a kind of therapy he practiced can be defined as *existential rehabilitation of the Present*. In the second part, I will try then to clarify the concept of the subject which underlies such a therapeutic authorship and to ascertain to what extent Kierkegaard's vision of the subject breaks with the concept of the subject characteristic to the classical modernity/Enlightenment.

### 1. Existential rehabilitation of the Present

The principal relevance of Kierkegaard's certain ideas for the post-traditional world was in different ways thematized and stressed by a whole number of western thinkers including e. g. Calvin O. Schrag, Merold Westphal, Helmuth Fahrenbach und Jürgen Habermas.<sup>3</sup> Many of them highlight in this regard Kierkegaard's interpretation of Self in terms of the possibility of becoming a self.

At the same time, the reception of Kierkegaard's works has always contained critical reflections regarding the (so called) isolation of a single individual in Kierkegaard. So Habermas pointed out pretty rigorously that there are certain conceptual assumptions in Kierkegaard (like ethical decisionism or religious isolation of the individual) which make up principal obstacles for a *communicative* interpretation of becoming a self. Although such a criticism is undoubtedly not groundless, the whole question is not as unambiguous as it might seem. I share rather the interpretative efforts which, instead of opposing isolation and communication, seek to explicate their tricky compatibility in Kierkegaard. I argue in this regard, that it is the very way of Kierkegaard's intellectual work, which provides a challenging argument and the reason for an original viewing of the being (existence) of a single individual from a communicative perspective. In this connection it must be clarified below, why and in what sense Kierkegaard's intellectual activity in all its multifacetedness can be characterized as existential therapy.

<sup>3</sup> See: M.J. Matustik, M. Westphal (eds): Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity, Indiana University Press 1995; H. Fahrenbach: Philosophische Anthropologie – Ethik – Gesellschaftstheorie. Grundzüge einer anthropologisch-praktisch zentrierten Philosophie, in: R. Brunner, P. Kelbel (Hg.): *Anthropologie, Ethik und Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt and New York 2000, 210 f.; J. Habermas: Geschichtsbewusstsein und posttraditionale Identität. Die Westorientierung der Bundesrepublik, in: *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung: Kleine politische Schriften VI*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1987, 172.

While talking about the new way of philosophizing and authorship in Kierkegaard, one thinks first of all of his famous strategy of the indirect communication, which brought him the title “Danish Socrates”. The word *maieutics*, although it in no way loses its relevance for Kierkegaard’s thought, cannot nonetheless completely determine the practical sense of his intellectual activity. I am going to show that it would be more applicable to define the fundamental practical effect of his writings as an *existential rehabilitation of the present*. By this term I understand transformation of the age *through* an existential conversion of individuals. The essence of such conversion consists in an awakening of the individual capability to become an ethical self and, correspondingly, to act in a respective socio-historical situation on the basis of ethical self-determination.

Kierkegaard’s existential therapy, like any other kind of therapy, is founded on an appropriate diagnosis. Kierkegaard finds his contemporaries in a state of distracted self-forgetfulness. The pathetic idea of the universal objective truth, which is flourishing on the ground of the Hegelian philosophy and is taken up by the press, leads, after the Kierkegaard’s critical diagnosis of the present age, to the dissolution of all human beings *en masse*. In this context, he states: “The age and the people ... become increasingly unreal”.<sup>4</sup> With such insight into his epoch Kierkegaard shows himself as a “private thinker” which initiates a *private practice* of a particular kind, namely the practice of an ethical (or ethical-religious) addressing, which aims at helping an existing individual (a potential recipient) to clearly understand himself/herself in his/her own time. Accordingly, the main objective of Kierkegaard’s entire criticism (which has at least four general aspects: (1) philosophical criticism contra Hegel, (2) social criticism of the ethical indolence, anonymity, the leveling effect of the emerging mass-media, (3) clerical-theological criticism regarding falsification and concealment of the existential truth (and the existential challenge) of Christianity, of being-a-Christian, (4) psychological criticism of the internal psychological mechanisms of self-deception) is the exposure of those forces of the age which prevent the desired awakening of self and lead to progressive forgetting of the subjective dimension of the truth.

Kierkegaard’s programmatic thesis “Subjectivity is truth”<sup>5</sup>, means that the truth has to be understood as a passionate *fulfillment* of the subjective appropriation. It is this incomprehensible and non-objectifiable *fulfillment*, with which the therapeutic endeavor of the private thinker has to do. In this connection Kierkegaard (Climacus) suggests such additional “nomination” as a *subjective thinker*, who is supposed to be characterized by the ability to maintain, to touch, to evoke the subjective dimension of the truth.

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<sup>4</sup> S. Kierkegaard: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. and transl. by A. Hannay, Cambridge University Press 2009, 267.

<sup>5</sup> S. Kierkegaard: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 174.

It is worth noting that in methodological sense, Kierkegaard's existential therapy *as* a certain communicative strategy is comparable with the phenomenological reduction. The indirect communication in the same way as the phenomenological reduction involves such a decisive moment as taking the individual out of a state that does not allow to discern *the things themselves* (*die Sachen selbst*). Phenomenology comprehends this state as dwelling in the so called natural attitude (*die natürliche Einstellung*). Since the thing itself about which an existential therapist is concerned, is the individual's capability to become a self, it implies that the corresponding attitude which has to be deactivated (so to say) must be of an existential sort. Indeed, one finds in Kierkegaard various descriptions and designations of that state which not without reasons can be defined as the *existential* natural attitude. What the natural attitude in the existential sense means was e. g., pretty clearly explained by Kierkegaard in his famous outline of the lectures *The Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication*. It means namely uncritical (unreflexive) self-identification of the individual with the pre-given tradition and customs, with the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. The word reduction designates thus in both cases a certain *qualitative* change in the state of the subject. The change consists in transition from the natural attitude (whether of a cognitive or existential type) to another one which is supposed to be *original and primary* in this or that sense.

As for the *terminus ad quem* (destination) of the existential reduction, it is characterized by Kierkegaard with two complementary concepts – *primitivity* and *naïveté*<sup>6</sup>. These concepts mean the existential state, in which the individual engaged in the ethical communication becomes thoroughly preoccupied with the only, very simple, truth that in his existence he per se is a capacity to become himself. In addition, Kierkegaard indicates that according to its very essence this capacity is an ongoing *challenge* for the existing individual. It is so due to the fact that human existence is characterized by such inherent feature as a *reexamination* of the universally human<sup>7</sup>, interpreted by Kierkegaard as a repeatedly renewed revising of two fundamental, and quite primitive, questions – namely: What does it mean to be a human? and Whether you and me are human beings? It is not difficult to see that the famous Kierkegaardian theme of the ethical choice as a responsible self-determination of the individual can be considered to be grounded in the primitivity gained (opened) by means of the existential reduction and distinguished by the vital element of existential revising described above.

What is important to emphasize in this regard, is a remarkable fact that the existential reduction – or, as Kierkegaard puts it, a *return to the primitivity*<sup>8</sup> – is seen by him as a practice which comes about in a respective communicative context. Indirect communication, which Kier-

<sup>6</sup> Søren Kierkegaards Papirer. Gyldendal 1968–1978. S. Bd. VIII-2. København 1968. B 82,2 – 82,4; B 89. (Farther – Pap.)

<sup>7</sup> Pap. VIII-2, B 82, 6; B 89.

<sup>8</sup> Pap. Bd. VIII-2, København 1968. B 82,2 – 82,4; B 89.

kegaard not only thematizes but also strives to practice, is an intersubjective experience which is considered to allow for the existential reduction so that the reduction must be thought in an essential interplay with intersubjectivity. What Kierkegaard's existential therapy counts upon, is thus a reduction which takes place due/in/through the communicative act. A kind of practical, intersubjectively grounded reduction, which is incompatible either with solipsism or with decisionism is at issue.

Kierkegaard's maieutics shows itself as a *fundamental* undertaking (venture) in a very specific, namely *evocative* sense. The foundations, with which it deals, can not be put, but only pro-voked. Maieutist cannot postulate anything in this practical field. He can only try to indirectly induce the addressee to fulfill the existential reduction that is to (re-)actualize and to keep awake the revising moment of existence. Insofar as such a masterful provocation succeeds, a respective therapeutic effect can be interpreted as an existential *rehabilitation* of a single individual. This existential rehabilitation is understood as a renewal and reactualization of the individual's capability to determine himself/herself in a respective socio-historical situation, to take responsibility for his/her being. Let me remind, that this evocative, yes, existentially disturbing practice was defined at the very beginning of my presentation as the existential rehabilitation of the Present. The definition seems to be completely accurate, as according to Kierkegaard the revising moment in human existence acts as a fundamental principle (condition of possibility) of the renewal of a respective, social-historical situation. It means that Kierkegaard's existential practice, while focusing on a single individual, is enforced in the interests of historical life as well. Thus, the Kierkegaardian battle for the individual shows itself at the same time as a battle for a new historical era, namely for such a one which will contrapose to the "the cunning of the reason" ("der List der Vernunft") the irreducible and inabolishable *risk* of the ethical existing.

Well, it is this essential linkage of the historical moment, on the one hand and a single individual on the other hand, which the existential therapy treats. As such it differs substantially from many other types of therapy (incl. Existential psychoanalysis of Sartre or classical psychoanalysis of Freud). Despite certain similarities between Kierkegaard's existential praxis and every of the above mentioned types of (psycho) therapy respectively, neither Sartrian nor Freudian approaches address to a *mutual foundation* of the individual and the epoch in such a way that the effect of the therapeutic communication (if any) should be theirs (the individual's and the epoch's) *equaloriginal transformation*.

## 2. The subject as a response and a disposition

We have now come to the point to pay our attention to the problem of the subject announced in the title. The latter implies that Kierkegaard's existential therapy makes the concept of the subject problematic, *questionable*. In the following I want to substantiate this claim which cannot of course ignore the fact that many ideas and motives of Kierke-

aard's thought (regarding e. g., responsibility and self-determination and transformation of the epoch by virtue of critical reflection, etc.) sound typical in the spirit of Enlightenment. The fact makes the whole situation with the subject in Kierkegaard very ambiguous. In this regard in the second part of my paper I am going to examine to what extent the very way of Kierkegaard's authorship *undermines* the concept of the subject considered to be representative for classical modernity. The corresponding analysis will be carried out in two steps according to two essentially interconnected aspects of the indirect communication in Kierkegaard: the first one concerns the self-positioning of Kierkegaard as an author, the second one – the very character of the therapeutic process supposed to take place between an existential maieutist and his addressee. Let us start with the first one.

### 2.1. Author

Kierkegaard's own self-positioning as an author, which has intrigued both usual readers and scholars, since the very first publications of the Dane is, undoubtedly, one of the most decisive indications of his masterful declination from the understanding of the subject suggested by the Enlightenment. If Kierkegaard like Kant – or much later Habermas – had addressed his call to his contemporaries in a direct form (I mean the call to think and to act independently and, doing so, to shape sociality on the basis of critical reflection), – yes, if he had communicated in this way so that his word would have *directly* (re)presented his own personal position, he should have been regarded as a thinker purely representative of the Enlightenment. However Kierkegaard's existential addressing presupposes an ultimately different vision of positioning of an author as an agent of history. Let me recall in this regard one important assertion from Kierkegaard's *Papers*:

“An understanding of the totality of my work as an author, its maieutic purpose, etc. requires also an understanding of my personal existence [*Existieren*] as an author, what I *qua* author have done with my personal existence to support it, illuminate it, conceal it, give it direction, etc., something which is more complicated than and just as interesting as the whole literary activity. Ideally the whole thing goes back to ‘the single individual’ [*den Enkelte*], who is not I in an empirical sense but is the author”<sup>9</sup>.

It is worthwhile at this point to briefly recall the general strategy of his therapeutically oriented authorship. Its therapeutic effect was interpreted by Kierkegaard himself as a kind of existential awakening<sup>10</sup>. By means of remarkable polyphony, Kierkegaard's authorial strategy had “to pose the riddle of awakening”. This riddle, as we remember, consisted in “a balanced esthetic and religious productivity, simultaneously”. Such a strategic task, according to Kierkegaard's account, had been fulfilled by Feb. 1846 which was indicated by the publication of *Concluding Post-*

<sup>9</sup> Pap. X-1, A 145.

<sup>10</sup> Pap. X-1, A 118.

*script* seen as “the midpoint” (i.e. the midpoint in the balance achieved) and therefore also as “the turning point” of his authorship. Thus *Post-script* transcended so to say the difference between the two sides of Kierkegaard’s authorship by subordinating them to the same strategic task – the task of existential awakening. Due such transcending, *Post-script* takes an exclusive position among all other (previously written) texts. It gets a point from which all previous Kierkegaard’s literary productivity is accessed *as a whole*.

What is important here is not to perceive this essentially philosophical gesture as that of totalization in the sense of a rational “summing up” or systematization. It is rather the gesture which indicates and refers to the existential problem formulated by Kierkegaard personally. As it follows from the quotation given earlier, at issue is the way of being of the single individual *as an author* i.e. as a kind of actor who is supposed to address the others in a respective social-historical situation. It implicates that the transcending moment mentioned above is *valid* in/for Kierkegaard not as the principle enabling to reach the ultimate objective position, but as the principle indicating a *participatory* position of subjectivity since it shows itself concerned about how certain individuals should be addressed, resp. how the authorial strategy should look like. In other words, the transcending moment must be considered not from the perspective of building a system but from the communicative perspective. To be sure, subjectivity (of “the subjective thinker”) cannot be reduced to any author of the polyphonic authorship. Neither can it be reduced to the whole polyphony of them. Nevertheless it is interpreted in and through all of them having to do with the very strategy of their dispersion, display, disposition. I use the last word in the military sense of a structured group of “voices” which, metaphorically speaking, has to take its “goal” (that is an addressee) into encirclement. Thus it seems inappropriate to speak of some authorial *position* of Kierkegaard. His authorship indeed is rather the disposition, the mobile and flexible disposition constantly open to renewal and artistic re-configurations.

What I have been trying to do is to clarify the essential connection of such a masterful communicative strategy and Kierkegaard’s principle of subjectivity. One of the most revealing formulations of the principle was given by Kierkegaard in his *Papers*:

“Objectivity is believed to be superior to subjectivity, but it is just the opposite; that is to say, an objectivity which is within a corresponding subjectivity is the *finale*. The system was an inhuman something to which no human being could correspond as auctor and executer<sup>11</sup>”

Thus, Kierkegaard develops a concept of the single individual who proves his own entanglement in the historical context as well as his ability to transcend it. Kierkegaard’s single individual manages to do it by creating an *imaginary disposition* which being rooted in his subjectivity performs an existential addressing to the contemporaries. The

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<sup>11</sup> Pap. X-1, A 145.

complexity and depth of this approach goes beyond the scope of the Enlightenment philosophical paradigm for many reasons, but first of all because the subjectivity gets such a feature as performativity. That is why it must be stressed that the phrase “a corresponding subjectivity” (in the quotation above) already implies “a *responding* subjectivity”. All said above allows to claim that the existential maieutics is an independent dimension of communicative experience, which is irreducible either to the hermeneutic-ontological dimension represented by Gadamer or to the pragmatic one represented by Habermas.

## 2.2. *An antinomic therapy for an antinomic subject*

As it was outlined earlier, the problem of the subject has to be approached not only from the point of view of the Kierkegaard's self-positioning as an author but also from the point of view of the very character of the therapeutic process supposed to take place between an existential maieutist and his addressee. Kierkegaard's existential therapy turns out to be quite an antinomic undertaking if one tries to understand it according to the classical logic of identification and representation. In this regard I would like to point out here two basic antinomies that characterize the therapeutic relationship between the existential maieutist and his addressee in Kierkegaard. The first antinomy reads like this: Therapy has the character of manipulating and at the same time has nothing to do with the domination. Let me remind a famous phrase of Kierkegaard which, pretty laconically describing the intention of the therapeutic process, conceives this first antinomy no less provocative: “To deceive into the truth” (“At bedrage ind i Sandheden”<sup>12</sup>). Because the truth is interpreted by Kierkegaard as subjectivity, it implies that at issue in the indirect (ethical) communication is by no means any kind of indoctrination by the communicator, but a certain existential capability of the receiver. Therefore, Kierkegaard speaks so much about the masterful tactics of self-eliminating, self-restrain which indicates that it is deactivating of the subject as a domination instance that is at issue in the communicative field of the existential maieutics.

The second antinomy can be formulated as follows: although the roles “therapist-patient” are supposed to be assigned in the existential therapy quite clear, the goal of therapy (i.e. a therapeutic effect which is expected to happen to an addressee of the therapeutic communication) applies to the therapist to the same extent as to the patient for the whole period of the therapeutic procedure. It is worth noting that the principal goal of the indirect communication is defined by Kierkegaard as *education* (Opdragelse)<sup>13</sup>, namely an education to oneself, to a true self-relationship.

<sup>12</sup> Pap. Bd. VIII-2, København 1968. B 85, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., B 82, 12. It is worth noting that Freud uses the equivalent German notion – *Erziehung* – in order to define the principal goal of the therapeutic communication. See: S. Freud: Vorlesungen zu Einführung in die Psychoanalyse, in: S. Freud: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. XI, Frankfurt/M., 451.



That the designated goal may not lose its relevance – its validity and topicality – for any person, says that the maieutist, insofar as he is engaged in the existential therapy, has to practice his own true self-relationship in and through the indirect communication. Kierkegaard points out in this regard various acts and communicative modes providing realization of such a practice, among them – double reflection, reduplication, irony, and already mentioned self-restrain as a constitutive principle of a therapeutic being-with the other. Let me stress: it is by restraining himself from any authoritarian influence in communication that the existential maieutist *both* practices his true self-relation *and* (potentially) has to reach his addressee.

Both antinomies point out thus an insecure, unstable, *unfounded* character of the existential therapy. Nevertheless they should not be regarded as a sign of its failure or inconsistency. Rather, they indicate that the concept of the subject the therapeutic process proceeds from is not the classical one given the classical modernity understands the subject in terms of representation and self-representation. In opposition to the classical vision, Kierkegaard's existential analysis shows that the self is characterized by the multiple forms of self-concealment, self-hiding or suppression (Freud would call it *Verdrängung*). All of them are conceived by Kierkegaard ultimately as the different forms of existential self-deception described as a complex *unobjectifiable* process which remains unconscious for the existing individual. The analogy with Freud is indeed striking here. Both thinkers thematized certain unconscious transformations as they manifest themselves in different psychological and behavioral symptoms. One can recall the judgment of Kierkegaard given by Jaspers in this regard in his famous work *Psychology of World-views* (in the so called "Referat Kierkegaards"). While recognizing the remarkable analogy between Kierkegaard and Freud, Jaspers stresses at the same time that "with all the analogies ... the repressed forces in Freud are the lowest (sexual) ones whereas in Kierkegaard the highest ones (the wish of the person to become transparent for herself)"<sup>14</sup>. However it is worth highlighting that from the point of view of the problem of the subject Kierkegaard and Freud are to be seen as principally like-minded thinkers who congenially contribute to destruction and radical rethinking of the classical image of the subject in contemporary thought. "Congenially" implies here a very particular *practical* way of their respective rethinking of the subject since both of them – independently from each other – outlined their new vision of the subject in frame of an ultimately unobjectifiable therapeutic process (that is as a questionable and requested part of this process).

In Kierkegaard's version, the existential therapy has to do with the confrontation between the two forces in the existing individual: his will to become transparent for himself on the one hand and his escaping a

<sup>14</sup> In German: "bei aller Analogie [sind] die verdrängten Kräfte bei Freud gleichsam die untersten (sexuellen) bei Kierkegaard die höchsten (das Sich-durchsichtigwerdenwollen der Persönlichkeit)". See: K. Jaspers: *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Berlin 1919, 373.

disclosure on the other. Due to its dynamics and dialectics, the confrontation is never fully comprehensible and as such it constitutes a genuine intrigue of the being of the self. Being constituted in this way the self cannot be ever identical with self-consciousness. From the point of view of such a deeply controversial image of the subject the classical interpretation of the subject in terms of consciousness and representation is unmasked as an existential *fiction*. At the same time, the new image has an *antinomic* character in Kierkegaard in the sense that the becoming-apparent or becoming-conscious is viewed by him (and by Freud as well) as an indispensable imperative for the existing individual. The existential therapy has then apparently to follow the imperative and to connect the therapeutic effect with the clear self-consciousness whereas the being of the subject is exposed to an inevitable existential dramatism just because this being cannot be reduced to the self-givenness of the subject of representation.

The very fact that Kierkegaard holds to the ideal of becoming-transparent-for-oneself can be interpreted in different ways, for instance in two opposite ways: as a sign of his adherence to the Enlightenment philosophy on the one hand and as a trace of a certain religious experience on the other hand. In the context of my paper, I see it yet as justified and promising to outline another interpretation of Kierkegaard's approach. To my mind, the designated antinomic image of the subject points out that the existential therapy has to do with the *relationship* between representation and the un-representable. Being more specific, what is supposed to be concerned in/by the existential therapy is the relationship between the subject's capability of representation and the Unrepresentability of the subject's being. Such interpretation allows us not only to reckon Kierkegaard among the pioneers of the hermeneutic approach in psychotherapy, but also to ascribe to him a certain critical vision of this approach. Traditionally, the hermeneutic approach in psychotherapy is understood as an approach, according to which the psychic discomfort or suffering has a meaning which develops beyond the natural determinism since it is rooted in the actual history of person's life and therefore requires an interpretation that is a hermeneutic approach. After the critical vision of Kierkegaard which is implied in his antinomic understanding both of the therapeutic process and of the subject, the mastery of the existential therapy consists not in the interpretation as such, but in the use of Hermeneutics as a *negative* method – "negative" in the sense that the process of interpretation must always refer to the *a-hermeneutic* that is to the self which in its being cannot be comprehended by any linguistic representation (or by any phenomenizing).

P. S. My presentation started with the recognition of the unrest caused by Kierkegaard's writings. In a sense, what was said was an attempt to share this feeling.