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KIERKEGAARD AND METAPHYSICS

At times, intending to emphasize the dynamic character of the human person and the Kierkegaardian concept of the self as a task to be accomplished, we deny the possibility of a constitutive self that is prior to or independent of its own action. In this article, I aim to show in two steps that Kierkegaard's vision does not exclude a metaphysical approach anchored in being. First, I point out that Kierkegaard himself moves on the plane of being, in addition to that of action; and second, I propose the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas as a way to combine both aspects of the person, the constitutive and the dynamic, and thus show the compatibility of Aquinas' and Kierkegaard's thought.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Aquinas, Person, Being, Acting

«The self is κατὰ δύναμιν [potentially] just as possible as it is necessary, for it is indeed itself, but it has the task of becoming itself. Insofar as it is itself, it is the necessary, and insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is a possibility»¹. Texts like this one from the *Papirer*, and others in which Kierkegaard tries to define the human person, have already been studied and discussed at great length.

Specifically, the text above can serve as an additional support for all those who have said that Kierkegaard views the 'self [*Selvet*]', the individual, not as a static substance, something already given, but as a process, a task to be accomplished, something that 'has to be done'. Of course, the idea that the human person is someone who has to make himself does not mean that this can be done in an absolute way: a person's *possibility* of constituting his own self is not infinite, since there is also an element of *necessity* involved, as Kierkegaard points out. This element of necessity can be interpreted in various ways.

It can refer to the fact that we are historical beings, that we come to this world without having been asked, with social, family, or personal circumstances that we did not choose, and with a genetic endowment that was assigned to us without our having any say in it. As Hubbard notes, «Kierkegaard pulls the rug under our feet, and shows through the character of Socrates that a human beginning is never absolute, never unconditional: when we start, it is already "too late", insofar as there already is being – "it" has already begun without me; and this ante-cession is forever unreachable, and unknowable»².

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¹ SKS 11, 148 / S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness unto Death*, edited and translated by H.V. Hong - E.H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1980, p. 35. Hereafter, *SUD*, followed by the page number.

² C. HABBARD, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Irony and the Philosophical Issue of the Beginning*, «Kierkegaard

Thus, the romantic attempt to create oneself from nothing is absurd and in vain, since the elements on which we have to begin building do not depend on us³.

The element of necessity can refer not only to the collection of factors that make up our origin, but also to accepting that what must guide us in this task of becoming who we are – the purpose to which we must direct ourselves – is not a creation of our own will either. In other words, things are what they are; the good and the bad do not depend on each individual's desires, but have their own objective reality that is the same (or similar) for everyone. Rudd argues that

to realize the Kierkegaardian ideal – to be (or to be fully) a self, is to balance the polarities of immanence and transcendence, or self-acceptance and self-shaping. But one needs to do this self-consciously; it is not just something that happens, as a natural development process. And this requirement seems to tip Kierkegaard's account in the direction of self-shaping. However, it also needs to be done through relating to one's *telos*, to the Good that is (for Kierkegaard) emphatically real, and there whether you like it or not⁴.

And he continues further on: being a person «gives me the capacity to shape myself; to become, if not the author, at least the editor, of my own life. But such evaluation requires the evaluator to make the judgments she does with (at least implicit) reference to values that she takes as constituting a genuine standard (one that does not depend for its validity on either her desires or her willpower)»⁵.

In any case, there does appear to be a practically unanimous consensus that Kierkegaard gives primacy to or emphasizes the ethical aspect of the human person, the individual's capacity – and obligation – to make himself. The selfhood «never *is* but is only ever *coming to be*»⁶, Stokes says; Kierkegaard «suggests a way out of an image of ourselves as unchanging, metaphysical substances»⁷, writes Craig; «for Kierkegaard, the self is not a – Cartesian or other – substance that is simply given; it is something that must be achieved»⁸, Rudd corroborates; «the self must always be understood in terms of dynamic, purposive activity»⁹, Taylor affirms; «selfhood is the goal rather than the presupposition of my existence»¹⁰, adds Westphal.

Studies Yearbook», 2009, pp. 274-275. Rudd refers to this when he writes: «in choosing myself, I am choosing to self-consciously recognize myself as the person who has these traits and dispositions, this history, and these social relationships» (A. RUDD, *Self, Value and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, p. 168).

³ «He claims the romantics are too quick to move from the mode of creating art to the mode of interpreting reality, and in doing so, they have failed to see that an actual self will always be limited in a way that fictional selves are not» (K.B. SÖDERQUIST, *Authoring a Self*, «Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook», 2009, p. 155).

⁴ RUDD, *Self, Value and Narrative*, p. 48.

⁵ *Ibi*, pp. 91-92. And the recognition of this is a major difference between the thought of Kierkegaard and some of the existentialists who followed him and, for the most part, misinterpreted him. See C. FABRO, *Dall'essere all'esistente*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1965, p. 524.

⁶ P. STOKES, *Anti-Climacus and Neo-Lockeanism: Towards a Kierkegaardian Personal Identity Theory*, in «Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook», 2009, p. 532.

⁷ A. CRAIG, *The Possibilities for Personhood in a Context of (Hitherto Unknown) Possibilities*, in G. PATTISON - S. SHAKESPEARE (eds.), *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*, MacMillan Press, London 1998, p. 66.

⁸ RUDD, *Self, Value and Narrative*, p. 75.

⁹ M.C. TAYLOR, *Kierkegaard on the Structure of Selfhood*, «Kierkegaardiana», 9 (1974), p. 103.

¹⁰ M. WESTPHAL, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette (IN) 1996, p. ix.

In light of the text that opens this article¹¹, these opinions appear well founded, and I largely agree with them. But the same text makes it very clear that before making itself, the self already is itself. We can then ask: is it enough to define the person as a task, as a process for which he or she is responsible? Certainly, the self is not an immutable substance in which a series of accidents inheres. But does this mean we have to reject any vision that sets the person's foundation in being rather than in doing?

I believe that none of the scholars quoted above, nor the many others who follow in the same line, would reduce the individual to a mere collection of actions or a process. Nor would they deny that a person is such always – at least in a certain mode or up to a certain point, regardless of how they act. Nevertheless, this type of discussion almost always ends up on a phenomenological¹², psychological¹³, ethical, or religious level. As a result, they focus above all and almost exclusively on *doing*. It may be that this is correct when studying Kierkegaard, since it is what he himself did. Indeed, his primary – and only? – purpose was always to move people to act for the good. More specifically, he wanted to bring Christianity back into Christendom¹⁴. But regardless of whether this is the case or not, I cannot help but notice in today's thought a certain 'allergy' or prejudice against metaphysics, perhaps because it is construed as a purely theoretical, abstract form of knowledge that is completely detached from our real life. But as I understand it, this is not and need not be the case. It is precisely metaphysics – or at least what I understand to be metaphysics, following the Aristotelian school – that has to be concrete, as concrete as reality, because it studies all that is, and the being of all that is real¹⁵.

Be that as it may, I noticed a trend when I began reading the extensive secondary bibliography on this topic: most researchers, aiming to emphasize precisely that dynamic character of man and woman, downplay or even deny the possibility of a constitutive self that is prior to or independent of our acting. Their understanding is

¹¹ ...and of many others that it would be impossible for me to summarize here. But perhaps it would be enough to list the number of times Kierkegaard uses the expression 'come to be [*at blive*]', referring to the single individual.

¹² «We receive from Kierkegaard not a metaphysics of self-identity but a practical phenomenology», writes Davenport (J. DAVENPORT, *Selfhood and Spirit*, in J. LIPPITT - G. PATTISON [eds.], *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 233).

¹³ Stokes says that Anti-Climacus «can be read as belonging to a tradition, originating with Locke, that sees psychological continuity as conferring selfhood or personhood» (STOKES, *Anti-Climacus and Neo-Lockeanism*, p. 529). And Rudd follows along the same lines in most of his writings. See, for example, A. RUDD, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993; Id., *Self, Value and Narrative*.

¹⁴ There is no clear agreement on the point that Kierkegaard's guiding purpose and the objective of all of his work was always religious. We can find just as many defenders of this idea as of its opposite. Although this position would require some precisions which are beyond the scope of this article, I do believe it is so, since Kierkegaard himself, in his own handwriting, signing with his own name and not under a pseudonym, who affirms that he is constitutively a religious writer, and that he has not reached this point after some process of evolution, but that he has been such from the beginning, since he began writing and publishing his works. See S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, edited and translated by H.V. Hong - E.H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1998, p. 29f. Hereafter, *PV*, followed by the page number.

¹⁵ It is not surprising that such prejudices arise in our times, taking into account how such a metaphysics has evolved and changed from its beginnings. Thus, for example, Kierkegaard's attacks on Hegelian metaphysics seem quite justified and accurate in most cases. Perhaps the problem has to do with what we understand by 'metaphysics'.

that such a substantial element is incompatible with the conception of man as a process and a task – a conception that is vital in Kierkegaard’s thought.

Thus, they use terms such as entity, substance, being, or soul and set them in opposition to those that speak of actions, freedom, making oneself. It seems that they must necessarily be in conflict, and that in order to affirm one, we have to deny the other¹⁶. But does this have to be the case? In my opinion, the two positions are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, I believe that it is not even possible to gain a complete and deep understanding of what the human person means for Kierkegaard if we do not also move on the plane of being, along with that of acting. There are several points that lead me to think that Kierkegaard himself appreciated and distinguished between both planes, although he did not explicitly say so. Making that clear will be one of the main objectives of this text.

The next will show that these two foci are not only compatible but actually complementary and mutually enriching. I do not attempt to refute any of the opinions expressed up till now, since many of them seem accurate and very fruitful to me. My goal is simply to try a new perspective, proposing a metaphysics that joins both aspects: the constitutive and the dynamic. I believe that such a focus can lead us to a richer and more accurate understanding of the reality of the human person. In the end, as Pattison says, «we have to evaluate what we see in those perspectives in the light of our own understanding of the matter in question. In other words, we not only ask, “What did Kierkegaard have to say?” but also “Does what Kierkegaard said help us to a better understanding?”»¹⁷ of the relationship between being and acting in the human person, between ‘being’ and ‘coming to be’? How would it be worthwhile to focus on theoretical discussions about the possible interpretations of Kierkegaard’s complex thought and on his use of certain terms or the guidelines behind his written works if all of that does not lead us to a better understanding of reality, of the reality of the world, and above all, of our own self¹⁸? In my opinion, that would indeed go against the spirit of Kierkegaard¹⁹.

¹⁶ Both Rudd and Stokes state that Kierkegaard’s conception of selfhood is «thoroughly non-substantialist». See RUDD, *Self, Value and Narrative*, p. 75; STOKES, *Anti-Climacus and Neo-Lockeanism*, p. 535. See also Turnbull’s criticism of the position of these two authors: J. TURNBULL, *Saving Kierkegaard’s Soul: From Philosophical Psychology to Golden Age Soteriology*, «Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook», 2011, pp. 279-302. Taylor also makes his position clear: «the eternal element of the self does not refer to an unchanging substratum or to a static substance but designates the unchanging capacity of the self to act, to strive to actualize possibilities» (TAYLOR, *Kierkegaard on the Structure of Selfhood*, p. 99).

¹⁷ The question Pattison asks about is «the relation of poetic to Christian existence in this world» (G. PATTISON, *Representing Love: From Poetry to Martyrdom or Language and Transcendence in Kierkegaard’s Works of Love*, «Kierkegaardiana», 22 [2002], p. 140).

¹⁸ Some may not agree with me on this, since the academic research carried out today is largely directed precisely toward a linguistic or historical exegesis that puts a clear emphasis on the way of interpreting an author or the intention of his writings. While all of this is essential in order to carry out a rigorous and serious study, I also think that sticking only to that dimension would lead us to fall short. Turnbull asks: «Can the views of the historical Kierkegaard be made consistent and continuous with the contribution that he, allegedly, has to make to our own concerns and problems? Or is even the attempt to apply Kierkegaard within the horizons of our own intellectual dilemmas and agendas to inevitably misrepresent him?» (TURNBULL, *Saving Kierkegaard’s Soul*, p. 280). My answer is that I am willing to run the risk of misinterpreting Kierkegaard if doing so might help us gain a more truthful knowledge of the human person. Besides, how else could knowledge progress?

¹⁹ See *Pap. I A 75*.

I. Kierkegaard: the plane of being and of acting

I have no problem at all with admitting that for Kierkegaard, the self is no longer something already given or static, but rather a task to be completed: «and a man's salvation lies precisely in becoming a person»²⁰ he states in his *Papirer*. But in these other words, which he puts in the mouth of Climacus²¹, he adds an important nuance: «to will to be an individual existing human being (*which one unquestionably is*) in the same sense as everyone else is capable of being – that is the ethical victory over life and over every mirage, the victory that is perhaps the most difficult of all in the theocentric nineteenth century»²². Hence, the question arises: is it not inconsistent to say that we have to want to be a human individual, that our task is to become one, and at the same time to say that we already are? In this sentence, Kierkegaard is not only saying that there are genetic, historical, family-related, or personal aspects of our lives over which we have no control, and that we must therefore accept them as necessary. No, what he says is that we are already, indisputably, a human individual. We are already that which we have to achieve. Rudd notices this tension, writing, «in one sense, ethical choice brings into being a self which did not exist before. But that self is still “himself”, the same self as before»²³.

Stokes also describes a similar paradox in Anti-Climacus' statements: «perhaps Anti-Climacus' most innovative contribution to the philosophical discussion of selves is his claim that selfhood is something to be achieved rather than always already given, and moreover, something that can be *lost*»²⁴. But he alleges further on that there is an important ambiguity in the way Anti-Climacus speaks of the loss of the self, because at the same time he affirms that the subject cannot completely get rid of its own self²⁵.

On the other hand, Kierkegaard often emphasizes the difference between the various animal species and the human 'species', which is that «there are only specimens and no individuals in every other animal species»²⁶, while «the human race, human-kind, is different from an “animalkind” not only by the advantages of race but by this humanness, that every individual in the human race (not just an outstanding individ-

²⁰ *Pap.* XI-2 A 107, my italics.

²¹ The relationship between Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms is a topic of vital importance for the exegesis of the texts, but is a question that I cannot stop to answer at length. I will limit myself to saying that, although I agree with those who distinguish between what Kierkegaard thinks and what he puts in the mouth of his alter-egos, in this concrete case it seems to me that Kierkegaard would be in agreement with Climacus. As for Anti-Climacus, the other pseudonym that I will cite in this text, I would like to use Davenport's words to explain that he «is meant to be an “extraordinarily high” or advanced Christian author whom Kierkegaard distinguishes from himself, not to indicate disagreement with him but from humility» (DAVENPORT, *Selfhood and Spirit*, p. 234).

²² S. KIERKEGAARD, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1, edited and translated by H.V. Hong - E.H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1992, p. 356, my italics.

²³ RUDD, *Self, Value and Narrative*, pp. 168-169. See also C.S. EVANS, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self. Collected Essays*, Baylor University Press, Waco (TX) 2006, pp. 267-268.

²⁴ STOKES, *Anti-Climacus and Neo-Lockeanism*, p. 541.

²⁵ Davenport also mentions that «while Kierkegaard and his major pseudonyms often refer to people as lacking a “self” (*selv*), they also frequently refer to an inauthentic “self”, or to more deficient versus more adequate forms of “self”». Later on, however, he reaffirms his conviction that «still, in their strictest formulations, Kierkegaard and his more authoritative pseudonyms refer to “self” narrowly as the authentic ideal of personhood, and I largely follow that usage below» (DAVENPORT, *Selfhood and Spirit*, p. 231).

²⁶ *Pap.* XI-1 A 272 / JP 2, 2059.

ual, but every individual) is more than the race»²⁷. Thus, in general, he reserves the term *den Enkelte* for human persons, while he uses the word *Exemplaret* to refer to individuals from the other species. Yet, on other occasions he affirms that men and women frequently behave more like *Exemplarer*, like exemplars or specimens, and not like truly singular beings²⁸.

All of this can lead us to wonder whether what Kierkegaard defends is contradictory or, if not, why it should appear so. Perhaps one possible solution for dissipating those ambiguities would be to carefully examine the terms that Kierkegaard uses. Although up until now I have used many of them interchangeably (person [*Person*], self [*Selv*], human being [*Menneske*], single individual [*Enkelte*]...), in some passages Kierkegaard establishes certain distinctions between these nouns, endowing them with differentiating nuances²⁹. On one occasion, for example, Anti-Climacus writes, «Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self»³⁰. This leads many of his commentators to mark a distinction between ‘human being’ and ‘self’ or ‘individual’. Thus, for example, Westphal argues that ‘human beings’ exist before becoming ‘selves’, although we must admit that the potential to become a self is already latent in them³¹. Taylor writes that «since the person still has not become a self-determining agent, he is not yet a concrete individual»³². And responding to Climacus’ statement that children are not ‘aware’ in the proper sense of self-awareness that is characteristic of the person³³, Stokes argues that it can be said that a child is a ‘human being’ but not that he or she is a ‘self’³⁴. Davenport also joins in this line of interpretation:

Like existential thinkers who are indebted to him, Kierkegaard holds that a ‘self’ arises through the experiences that a human being undergoes and the choices he makes in response; the personal being that is already ‘there’ at the start of this process begins as a kind of ‘dreaming spirit’ not even aware of its potential and has to achieve the ‘inwardness’ or reflexive relations that constitute a self or fully personal identity. Similarly, the child begins as ‘neither good nor bad’³⁵.

I do not deny any of these statements, but I think that all of these nuances and differences rest on a deeper foundation and that they can be cleared up when we consider that Kierkegaard moved on two different planes, although most of the time he does not make any explicit distinction between them: the plane of being and that of acting.

²⁷ PV, 88n. See also *Pap.* X-2 A 489 and XI-1 A 485.

²⁸ See, for example, S. KIERKEGAARD, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, edited and translated by H.V. Hong - E.H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1993, p. 190.

²⁹ Kierkegaard is not precisely rigorous in the use of terms. For this reason, I think that a purely linguistic investigation can lead us to different and even contradictory interpretations. In my opinion, to reach an accurate understanding, we must not only take into account the meaning of the words, but also the content that Kierkegaard assigns to each noun and, above all, we must bear in mind the entire corpus of his writings.

³⁰ SUD, 13.

³¹ See WESTPHAL, *Becoming a Self*.

³² M.C. TAYLOR, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel & Kierkegaard*, Fordham University Press, Bronx (NY) 2000, p. 234.

³³ See S. KIERKEGAARD, *Johannes Climacus*, edited and translated by H.V. Hong - E.H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1985, p. 167.

³⁴ See STOKES, *Anti-Climacus and Neo-Lockeanism*, pp. 553-554. By contrast, Turnbull argues that even pre-linguistic children have a ‘soul’, a term that he equates with the concept of the ‘self’. See TURNBULL, *Saving Kierkegaard’s Soul*, p. 297.

³⁵ DAVENPORT, *Selfhood and Spirit*, p. 232.

That is, every person *is* already a human being from the start, but then throughout his life, he must *act* as such. A man or a woman can fail to *behave* like a ‘self’, like a person, but he or she can never completely stop *being* one. In the same way, although a man may *be* a single individual, differently from how a dog is singular, he can *act* more like a dog, becoming just another number in a crowd.

Even more importantly, it is not just that there are two distinct planes, but that the second depends on the first. In other words, if the human person can and must *act* in a concrete way, it is precisely because he *is* in a specific mode. As I mentioned earlier, those who study Kierkegaard tend to put the emphasis on the moral aspect, on that task that we have in our hands and that demands that we act as persons in order truly to become persons. And it is completely legitimate, since Kierkegaard himself does it this way. But we must not forget – and this is what I would like to stress – that also for Kierkegaard himself, this is possible only because our mode of being is different from that of the other realities in the world.

It is common knowledge that for Kierkegaard, conscience is a crucial element in the constitution of the person: «actually it is the conscience which constitutes a personality; personality is an individual determinateness confirmed by being known by God in the possibility of conscience», he writes in his *Papirer*. But in the next line, he qualifies it: «the conscience may sleep, but the possibility of it is constitutive»³⁶. With this allusion to the sleeping conscience and its constitutive possibility, Kierkegaard protects the dignity and personhood of those who, due to spiritual degeneration or physical incapacity, cannot exercise the act of conscience³⁷. In addition, Kierkegaard is distinguishing between two levels here: one is the actual exercise of the conscience and the other is the possibility of exercising it. And the latter, the possibility, belongs to each and every human person by virtue of being human, regardless of how we act. Therefore, if what constitutes a person is the possibility of conscience, regardless of the use that we make of it, that means that what makes us a person is not our action, but rather something in our being, in our way of being.

Rudd himself says that «to be a person (a self) is to be a self-evaluator and to have the *capacity* for directing one’s self-evaluation in the light of (at least some) genuine knowledge of the (real, objective) Good»³⁸. The *capacity*... then, just as Rudd adds, a person can possess that capacity but fail to use it, or not even want to use it. This does not lead us to the absurd conclusion that only good persons are persons. Even though a man or woman may not behave like what they are, even though they may forget that they are human beings, they can never completely stop being what they are. But it is certain that if we want to become a self in the complete sense and not a truncated or impoverished person, we need to use our conscience correctly in the ongoing work of becoming our best self³⁹.

³⁶ *Pap.* VII-1 A 10.

³⁷ On this point, Turnbull writes: «once my soul has come back into relation with God, in faith and grace, I am a Kierkegaardian self, or soul, regardless of whether I *lose all of my psychological capacities*, even if I were to spend the rest of my life in a persistent vegetative state» (TURNBULL, *Saving Kierkegaard’s Soul*, pp. 297-298).

³⁸ RUDD, *Self, Value and Narrative*, p. 94, my italics.

³⁹ Thus Kierkegaard, when moving on the moral plane, on that of action, distinguishes between ‘self’ and ‘human being’ and reserves the first term for those who act as such. See *SUD*, 13.

The human being is spirit [*Aand*]⁴⁰, a self. He is a single individual – in short, a person. And it is that simple and yet grand fact of being a human being that gives him a capacity that the animals do not have: he can make himself, improve and perfect himself, become more and more who he is. He can grow, gradually approaching that ideal to which he is called. That is, the human individual does not come into the world completely given, but has to make himself, in freedom, through the conscious use of his will, guided by reason. But if he *has* to do so, it is precisely because he *can*: there is something in his nature, in his way of being, that is not found in infra-personal realities and that allows for that self-construction.

Allows... and demands. For having that capacity obligates man to use it: it is precisely because human beings *can* that they are *required* to live according to their spirit, to put themselves before God, to grow in singularity⁴¹. «We are moral agents whether we want to be or not», argues Fremstedal. «We do not constitute ourselves as agents; our agency, or selfhood, is something that is given to each of us as a task»⁴². That is why each and every person has the duty to become *den Enkelte*, to become a true ‘self’. And no one is excluded from that task⁴³.

All men and women must first become aware of their spirit and know that their greatness is rooted in it⁴⁴. Next, through an act of their intellect and free will, they choose to live in keeping with it. For «only that person’s life was wasted who went on living so deceived by life’s joys or its sorrows that he never became decisively and eternally conscious as spirit, as self»⁴⁵. But Kierkegaard vehemently insists, on numerous occasions and in different contexts, that *every* person has that capacity of living according to their spirit. We are not talking about being a Greek hero or a modern-day genius – the privilege of a few – but of something accessible to all: it pertains to *every* man and woman, to *every* human being, to act according to the spirit⁴⁶.

This brings us to the other side of the coin: each person’s marvelous capacity to act according to the spirit comes with the possibility of *not* doing so. By letting oneself be guided by the animal law of the strongest, one can direct all of one’s attention just toward physical strength or the cares of this world, scorning the cultivation of the spirit and becoming more brutish⁴⁷, thus showing the truth of that Latin adage: *corruptio optimi pessima*.

But such a possibility also shows the greatness of man and woman: an animal is what it is; it cannot be better or worse. But the human being *does* have a choice, precisely because he or she is spirit. «The possibility of this sickness is man’s superiority

⁴⁰ See *SUD*, 13.

⁴¹ «...to have a self, to be a self, is the greatest concession, an infinite concession, give to man, but it is also eternity’s claim upon him» (*SUD*, 21).

⁴² R. FREMSTEDAL, *Anthropology in Kierkegaard and Kant. The Synthesis of Facticity and Ideality vs. Moral Character*, «Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook», 2011, p. 26.

⁴³ See *PV*, 112.

⁴⁴ See *SUD*, 43.

⁴⁵ *SUD*, 26.

⁴⁶ «Humanness consists in this: that every human being is granted the capability of being spirit» (*Pap. IX A 76*). And it is precisely the key point that distinguishes the single individual in the aesthetic sense from the single individual in the religious sense. See *PV*, 115.

⁴⁷ See *Pap. VII-1 A 168*.

over the animal, and this superiority distinguishes him in quite another way than does his erect walk, for it indicates infinite erectness or sublimity, that he is spirit»⁴⁸.

There is, therefore, a radical difference between the human being and the other beings of the universe, independently of the way in which the first behaves. This is why Kierkegaard tenaciously repeats that it is characteristic of and specific to every human being to be a unique individual, in a way superior to and different from the individuality of members of other species.

García Martín agrees when he states that

now it is worth distinguishing the constitutive or ontological plane from the operative or moral plane. [...] Constitutively, man cannot cease to be what he is nor renounce his eternal destiny. Whether he is exemplar or singular depends on him, but his nature or essence does not. If we say that the human being ceases to be such, or that he can become such, it is precisely because he *already* is ontologically, although not morally. Thus, 'becoming what one is' means 'becoming operatively what one is in a constitutive way'. Man's action and his being are related in such a way that they mutually influence each other. Action follows being, but at the same time, it either maximizes or derails it⁴⁹.

Evans seems to think something similar when he writes:

We can see that Kierkegaard's view cannot be a *simple* achievement theory. [...] even if Kierkegaard rejects the metaphysical concept of the self as a fully formed entity with a fixed identity, he nevertheless still understands the self in ontological terms: the self is rooted in being and cannot be understood solely in ethical terms. It is because selves are beings with certain qualities that they are beings who can become, whose identity is defined through their becoming⁵⁰.

If I am not mistaken, the Kierkegaardian vision of the person is not reduced to pure ethics; it does not limit the individual to his action, but admits some kind of 'being' that constitutes the person as such. Thus, I argue that although Kierkegaard does not develop that part, his conception of the person is not incompatible with a certain metaphysical vision that respects and even requires that ethical character of the self and does not eliminate the dynamic nature that is proper to every person⁵¹. In my opinion, this condition is not met, for example, in Hegelian metaphysics, a philosophy against which Kierkegaard directs most of his attacks. However, there is one of which he was

⁴⁸ *SUD*, 15.

⁴⁹ Since the translation into English is mine, I am transcribing here the original Spanish quote: «... conviene distinguir en este momento el plano constitutivo u ontológico, del operativo o moral. [...] Constitutivamente, el hombre no puede dejar de ser lo que es ni renunciar a su destino eterno. Ser ejemplar o singular depende de él, pero no su naturaleza o esencia. Si decimos que el ser humano deja de serlo, o que puede llegar a serlo, es justo porque *ya* lo es ontológicamente, aunque no moralmente. Por eso, "llegar a ser lo que se es" significa "llegar operativamente a lo que se es de forma constitutiva". El obrar, pues, y el ser del hombre, se relacionan de una manera tal que se implican mutuamente. El obrar sigue al ser, pero a la vez lo potencia o desvirtúa» (J. GARCÍA MARTÍN, *La doctrina sobre el individuo en el Diario de S.A. Kierkegaard*, unpublished manuscript, pp. 302-303). From now on, I will do the same every time I translate any quote by myself.

⁵⁰ EVANS, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*, pp. 267-268.

⁵¹ Since, as Evans writes, «Kierkegaard does not want to deny that the self is a substantial reality. However, the unique character of the self is obscured if we think of it merely as a type of "entity" or "substance". To be a self is to embark on a process in which one becomes something, and there is a sense therefore in which selfhood is something to be achieved» (C.S. EVANS, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009, p. 46).

practically unaware, and which I think could provide that complement that I am looking for: St. Thomas Aquinas' metaphysics of being⁵².

Let us see, then, if Aquinas can give a satisfactory answer to our question⁵³ about the 'being' that allows for and requires 'becoming, an answer that does not disregard the condition of the human being's task or process, which is crucial in Kierkegaard's thought.

II. *Thomas Aquinas: the act of personal being as the foundation of free action*

Thomas Aquinas pays recourse to the *act of being* as the ultimate foundation of reality, as the beginning that endows each entity with being and makes it an individual⁵⁴. Thus, if there has to be any radical difference between the human subject and the other bodily realities – as there is for Kierkegaard – this difference must come precisely from that act. In short: Thomas Aquinas affirms that persons are entities, just like the rest of the universe, but they are situated at an infinite distance due to the greatness and higher ontological density of their being. And the key of that superiority appears condensed in these words: the degree and quality, the category of each one of the existing beings, «is determined by the way they possess being and by the intensity or greatness of it: for every thing is more or less excellent according to how its being is limited to a certain greater or lesser mode of excellence»⁵⁵. *The way they possess being*: here is the explanation for that greater excellence: that each person possesses being *in himself*.

⁵² As regards Kierkegaard's knowledge of Thomas Aquinas, it is revealing to read the corresponding chapter of *Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions*, vol. 4 of the series *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, edited by Jon Stewart, Ashgate Publishing, Hampshire 2008, pp. 183-206.

⁵³ Although trying to make this connection between Kierkegaard and Thomas Aquinas is not one of the most exploited veins, neither is it something new. A good part of Fabro's production – and that of many of his followers – moves with surprising ease between these two lines (see FABRO, *Dall'essere all'esistente*; ID., *Tra Kierkegaard e Marx: Per una definizione dell'esistenza*, Logos, Roma 1978; ID., *L'io e l'esistenza e altri breve scritti*, a cura di A. Acerbi, Università della Santa Croce, Roma 2006). Collins, on the other hand, points out that perhaps the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas could be a good instrument to undertake a revision of Kierkegaardian thought, since it is capable of making a positive evaluation and at the same time, supplement it as needed (see J. COLLINS, *The Mind of Kierkegaard*, Secker and Warburg, London 1954). Stengren, to cite another example, also traces a parallel between the connatural knowledge in both authors (see G.L. STENGREN, *Connatural Knowledge in Aquinas and Kierkegaardian Subjectivity*, «Kierkegaardiana», 10 [1977], pp. 182-189).

⁵⁴ «Thomas d'Aquin lui-même a eu à cœur de distinguer l'étant – ce qui est – et l'être – le principe interne d'un étant –, selon une décision métaphysique qui va plus loin que la pensée aristotélicienne. Certes, l'être (*esse*) comme principe d'un étant n'est pas une invention de Thomas ; on lit en effet une telle affirmation dans tout le néoplatonisme et chez les Médiévaux contemporains de Thomas. En revanche, ce qui est nouveau et le sens qu'il donne à l'*esse*, qui n'est plus seulement l'essence ou nature d'une chose, essence qui selon Aristote est pour cette chose premier principe et donc son acte, ce par quoi elle est. Pour Thomas, l'essence accomplit ce rôle actualisateur, mais elle ne suffit plus, non plus que la matière, à rendre compte de la singularité ou, si l'on ose dire, du mystère d'un étant. C'est pourquoi Thomas découvre dans l'étant le principe qui est en lui le plus premier et le plus actualisateur, l'être comme source d'existence. Il l'appelle l'acte d'être (*actus essendi*), acte premier qui préside en profondeur à la forme substantielle elle-même qui pourtant, à son niveau, donne son acte à tel étant» (T.-D. HUMBRECHT, *Lire saint Thomas d'Aquin*, deuxième édition, mise à jour et augmentée, Ellipses, Paris 2009, pp. 79-80).

⁵⁵ «[...] secundum modum quo res habet esse, est sus modus in nobilitate: nam res secundum quod suum esse contrahitur ad aliquem specialem modum nobilitatis maiorem vel minorem, dicitur esse secundum hoc nobilior vel minus nobilis» (THOMAS AQUINAS, *Contra Gentiles* I, 28). Malantschuk, in his work

In a certain sense, although just implicitly, Aristotle already realized that difference in the way of possessing being when he proclaimed that entity is meant in many ways⁵⁶. To show substance's superiority to accidents, Aristotle points out that substance is *by itself*, in itself, while the accidents are in another – in the substance⁵⁷. But neither are the substances all situated on the same level. Matter depends on form – since it is potency in relation to it – not the reverse. Therefore, nothing prevents separate forms, such as the human soul, from existing independent from matter.

Assuming this, Aquinas explains⁵⁸ that corporeal entities possess the act of being through form but *in* matter: they cannot be without it and they are intrinsically affected by the material co-principle and are dependent on it⁵⁹. Spiritual beings, by contrast, receive being directly through (and in) form, in itself⁶⁰. Thus, the greatness or hierarchical superiority of the human soul, which is spiritual – its most elevated degree of being – allows it to receive in itself the act of being. And since such a being is not intrinsically affected by matter, as it is not immediately limited by what is material, it turns out to be notably superior to that of corporeal entities.

But, Thomas Aquinas continues, «since [the human soul] is that which has the most [passive] potency among the spiritual substances, it is also closer than any of them to material realities, to the point that it makes material reality participate *in its own act of being*. Thus, from this soul and this body, there emerges *one act of*

Fra Individ til den Enkelte, relates the terms of 'possibility' and 'necessity' – which opened this article – with those of 'being' and 'essence', and also alludes to the different levels of being that can be found in reality. See G. MALANTSCHUK, *Fra Individ til den Enkelte. Problemer omkring Friheden og det etiske hos Søren Kierkegaard*, C.A. Reitzels Boghandel, København 1978 (English transl. *Kierkegaard's concepts of existence*, Marquette University Press, Milwaukee 2003).

⁵⁶ See ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* E, 2, 1026a33-b5.

⁵⁷ See *ibi*, Z, 1, 1025a10-30.

⁵⁸ Regarding Thomas Aquinas' fidelity to Aristotelian metaphysics and the originality of his thought, see, among others: J.-P. TORRELL, *Initiation à saint Thomas d'Aquin : Sa personne et son œuvre*, nouvelle édition profondément remaniée et enrichie d'une bibliographie mise à jour, Les éditions du Cerf, Paris 2015, pp. 305-306; L. ELDERS, *Saint Thomas d'Aquin et Aristote*, «Revue Thomiste», 88 (1988), pp. 357-376; M.R. NARVÁEZ, *Thomas d'Aquin lecteur : Vers une nouvelle approche de la pratique herméneutique au Moyen Âge*, Peeters, Louvain-la-Neuve 2012 (Philosophes médiévaux 57).

⁵⁹ In all the entities, the act of being always belongs to the subsistent subject, although it may be given through form (see THOMAS AQUINAS, *III Sent.*, d. 6, q. 2, a. 2). But this subsistent subject, when it is composite, *needs* matter to be able to exist (see *Id.*, *De ente et essentia*, chap. 4).

⁶⁰ That is what the term 'spiritual' refers to in Thomistic terminology: it refers to those forms that in themselves, independently of matter, have the capacity to be. See J. RASSAM, *La Métaphysique de Saint Thomas*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1968, p. 92; C. CARDONA, *Metafísica del bien y del mal*, EUNSA, Pamplona 1987, p. 88. Perhaps the most famous definition of what the spirit is for Kierkegaard is from the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death*: «A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself into the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self» (*SUD*, 13). There are countless commentaries about this explanation and almost everyone who dedicates himself to studying Kierkegaard has dealt at some point with this cryptic passage. It is beyond the scope of this paper to lay out my own interpretation, but I do want to express my opinion that both definitions of spirit are not incompatible, in spite of the evident differences in form and context.

being in a single compound, although this act of being *does not depend on the body* because it belongs to the soul»⁶¹.

And the act that makes the person *be* is the same one that also allows him to *act* in the deepest sense of the word, which Kierkegaard also uses. Taylor writes, following the line of Kierkegaard's texts, «The self is freedom. To put it another way, that which does not change within the self system is the fact of the self's freedom»⁶². In a similar way, Thomas Aquinas gives crucial importance to freedom, to the point of saying about persons that «non solum aguntur, sicut alia, sed per se agunt»⁶³. That is to say, they have dominion over their acts; they act by themselves, with freedom⁶⁴. But, as Rassam argues, «*action* belongs to the person by himself, because in the first place, *being* belongs to the person by himself»⁶⁵.

In other words: Thomas Aquinas also affirms that free action is characteristic and exclusive of the person, but that action follows being⁶⁶, and not the reverse. For being is the «act of all acts and the perfection of all perfections»⁶⁷ on which all the others depend; it is the most radical act of all, as the act that constitutes being. Precisely because it is the *act*⁶⁸ of being, it is eminently active: it is not limited to making the entity be, but is also

⁶¹ «Et propter hoc quod inter alias substantias intellectuales plus habet de potentia, ideo efficitur in tantum propinqua rebus materialibus, ut res materialis trahatur ad participandum *esse suum*, ita scilicet quod ex anima et corpore resultat *unum esse* in uno composito, quamvis illud esse, prout est animae, *non sit dependens a corpore*» (THOMAS AQUINAS, *De ente et essentia*, chap. 4, my italics). Such dependence is not in its being nor in regards to its end (the knowledge and love of God that makes union with Him possible), although it is in regards to its beginning and for the realization of its operation, albeit in an extrinsic way

⁶² TAYLOR, *Kierkegaard on the Structure of Selfhood*, pp. 98-99.

⁶³ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* I^a, q. 29, a. 1 co. See R. SPAEMANN, *Personen: Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen „etwas“ und „jemand“*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1996, p. 41.

⁶⁴ And it is precisely for that reason that we can call them 'persons': because they have a different degree of individuality, a superior singularity that is based on the private possession of the act of being and is manifested precisely in that special mode of action that allows them to be masters of their own actions. See THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* I^a, q. 29, a. 1 co; S.L. BROCK, *Action and Conduct: Thomas Aquinas and the Theory of Action*, T&T Clark Ltd, Edinburgh 1998.

⁶⁵ RASSAM, *La Métaphysique de Saint Thomas*, p. 117, my italics.

⁶⁶ Although our knowledge ordinarily goes in the opposite direction: that is, it is action that appears first before our eyes and allows us to see a different way of being. But as far as *real* primacy is concerned, being is the foundation of action.

⁶⁷ «Unde patet quod hoc quod dico esse est actualitas omnium actuum, et proptet hoc est perfectio omnium perfectionum» (THOMAS AQUINAS, *De Potentia*, q. 7, a. 2 ad 9).

⁶⁸ Aristotle already established that prime matter was potency in relation to form, but Thomas Aquinas adds that form is also potency in relation to something: the act of being, which thus becomes the supreme principle, even more than form. See P. PORRO, *Tommaso d'Aquino: Un profilo storico-filosofico*, Carocci, Roma 2016³, pp. 194-195. Nevertheless, the act-potency relationship is not the same in both cases. There is a radical difference between the act of being and the other acts, because the latter actualize its potency, but they themselves do not cease to be fully – they are in potency – when they are not being exercised. Thus, for example, someone with the capacity to read does not stop having that capacity just because he is not doing it right now, in act. If this were so, then every time someone stopped reading, he would have to learn how all over again, since he would lose the proximate potency for it. But we see that this is not the case; rather, the potency remains even when it is not being used. On the contrary, the act of being not only actualizes its potency, essence, but makes it exist in such a way that without it, without being, form would not be, not even in potency. Being is not reduced to mere existing – although it provokes it in any entity – but is the foundation of every other perfection.

the base and foundation of any other activity or perfection that the being may possess, as the first and most radical of all. Thus, Cardona can state conclusively

that the *act of being* is active of itself, that it makes the essence be and prolongs its action, making the essence constitute the faculties (making them flow from it), followed at the end by the terminal act, which is also foundational to its operability. The entity acts from and by its act of being⁶⁹.

In this way, we get around the objection that Kierkegaard or the cited authors could raise: for the act of personal being, which serves as the foundation of the self of every man and woman, is not something static, but eminently active: it is action par excellence. The act of being does not simply put essence into existence. As Rudd says, it is not like a «metaphysical pincushion» that just serves as a support for the different accidents that may stick into it. Rather, it is the principle of any other act of the subject and it deploys itself in its operations⁷⁰. The unity of the act of being means that, aside from being the act of the entity, «that unique and identical act of the subject is the act of its operation: an act of the second perfection as it is of the first»⁷¹.

But, since no created entity is the Being, its capacity to act is mediated by essence.

I will explain. Potency exercises a double function with regard to the act, because it limits it while it potentiates it, or rather the reverse, although this is the order in which we usually think of it. Let's look at an example: someone who is lacking the potency to see, like a blind person, cannot do it; therefore, it is the potency that makes the act possible. But it is also true that human vision is less keen than that of the eagles, because our act of seeing is not simply a given without restrictions, but is limited by potency, which prevents us from seeing past a certain distance or in the dark.

And the same happens with the act of being: it is made possible and limited by essence⁷². That is why no entity is all of being – with the exception of God, who has no potency to limit him. Entities have being only in the form and measure that their essence allows⁷³. Thus, limited, composite entities do not simply act. Their operation and their

⁶⁹ «[...] que el *acto de ser* es activo de suyo, que hace ser a la esencia y prolonga su actuación haciendo que la esencia constituya (que fluyan de ella) las facultades, siendo por último el acto terminal y a la vez fundante de su operatividad. El ente obra desde y por su acto de ser» (CARDONA, *Metafísica del bien y del mal*, p. 30).

⁷⁰ And, although it is often misunderstood, this idea is not foreign to Aristotle either, precisely on the level of the relationship between the substance and its accidents. «El hábito es una accidente de cualidad; esto es, se trata de un modo de ser de la sustancia humana. A la sustancia no se le cuelgan atributos como quien le cuelga esferas a un arbolito de Navidad; esta visión de los accidentes es impropia de Aristóteles. La sustancia existe en sus accidentes; es una sustancia accidentada. La diferencia entre un bailarín y un pintor no es un ingrediente extra que se la añade a uno y otro. En ambos casos se ha modificado la sustancia accidentalmente: Nureyev es racional al modo de un bailarín, y Picasso es racional al modo de un pintor [...]. Los hábitos son modos de ser del alma racional o, para ser más exactos, modos de ser de las facultades racionales del alma. Cuando el agente desarrolla un hábito, la facultad del agente adquiere un nuevo modo de ser» (H. ZAGAL, *Felicidad, placer y virtud: La vida buena según Aristóteles*, Ariel, México D.F. 2013, p. 157). See also C. LLANO, *El conocimiento del singular*, Universidad Panamericana, México D.F. 1995, p. 40.

⁷¹ «[...] ese único e idéntico acto del sujeto es el acto de su operación: acto de la perfección segunda como lo es de la primera» (CARDONA, *Metafísica del bien y del mal*, p. 164).

⁷² A.L. González explains precisely and clearly that although the essence limits the *esse*, it is not thereby something purely negative. See A.L. GONZÁLEZ, *Ser y participación: Estudio sobre la cuarta vía de Tomás de Aquino*. 3^a ed. revisada y ampliada. EUNSA, Pamplona 2001, pp. 123-124.

⁷³ The essence, capable of being *per se*, is essential in order for created entities to be able to exist. And at the same time, the essence is what, *per accidens*, limits the act of being, unfettered and far beyond all

essence are not identified with each other, but they act through the faculties, habits, and operations. And through them, the entity makes itself more capable and gradually grows in active potentiality. In living entities, through the operative faculties, the act of being, limited by essence, *recovers* the perfection that corresponds to it as an act.

Since it is not limited by itself, «the *esse* always surpasses the *essential* in which it is originally received»⁷⁴. For this reason, it tends to transcendence, to develop and deploy its being until it achieves its plenitude; it tends to the perfection that corresponds to it as an act and that it is denied insofar as it is constrained by an essence. And it is through its operations that it brings about this expansion: its being is limited – just as it is potentiated – by essence. That is, it exercises its operational capacity to the degree that its essence allows, but through its operations, it establishes accidents with which the substantial essence perfects and completes itself. Increasing the category of the substantial essence – although *in its* accidents – also benefits its own act of being. It also ennobles the act of being and its operative potency, although without changing in the strict sense. Thus, through its dynamism, the composite realities of essence and act of being bring the latter to its plenitude. «And the very first thing which “to be” does», Gilson writes, «is to make its own essence to be, that is, “to be a being”. This is done at once, completely and definitively, for between to be or not be, there is no intermediate position. But the next thing which “to be” does, is to begin bringing its own essence somewhat nearer its completion»⁷⁵. Thus, no composite of matter and form can simply be, but rather its very being is meant to become: ‘being’ is ‘becoming’⁷⁶... as it is for Kierkegaard.

«It takes each of us a lifetime to achieve his own temporal individuality»⁷⁷, concludes Gilson, one of the great specialists in Thomistic philosophy from the last century. These are words that resonate in our ears, echoing Rudd’s words: «We need to think of ourselves as the subjects of temporally extended whole lives»⁷⁸. Perhaps, in the end, both visions of the person are not so removed from one another; perhaps they are not so incompatible as we might think.

But Thomas Aquinas moves in a wider universe than Kierkegaard. While Kierkegaard focuses almost exclusively on the category of ‘individual human’, Aquinas opens himself to the entirety of the real and discovers in it an analogy that allows him

determination by itself, conferring upon it a specific mode and making it be *this* and not *that*. Hence, by virtue of their essence, the being of the entities is graduated and modulated, since this allows it to be, but in a limited way; that is, it allows it to be more or less.

⁷⁴ «El *esse* rebasa siempre la *essentia* en la que originalmente es recibido» (T. MELENDO, *Metafísica de lo concreto*, EUNSA, Pamplona 2009², p. 323).

⁷⁵ É. GILSON, *Being and Some Philosophers*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto 1952, p. 184.

⁷⁶ «Always in existential potency to the absolute fullness of its own being, such a form is bound to exert manifold operations in order to fill the privation of actuality which it suffers: not a privation of essence, but that of a substance which still fails completely *to be* its own essence, and which, in order more fully to be, must achieve its own being by exerting a series of operations, each of which shall ultimately bring it a step nearer its own completion. To do so is to move, to change, to “be-come”, that is, progressively to arrive at its own being. Such is the law wherever there is matter. For, since to need matter points out a certain privation of being in the form, wherever there is matter, there also is in the form a potency to a more complete existential actualization» (*ibi*, p. 181).

⁷⁷ *Ibi*, p. 184.

⁷⁸ RUDD, *Self, Value and Narrative*, p. 193.

to mark the enormous and abysmal difference between the human person and the other entities, but still maintain a tenuous likeness. It is a likeness that, in this concrete case, resides in the fact that self-perfection through operations is common to all living beings, whether infra-personal or not. That is, in some way, plants and animals also develop and deploy their act of being through their actions. Nevertheless, as I was saying earlier, this development comes in proportion to the degree of being: the more a being is, the more active it can be. This is why the person's action, his capacity to act, is much greater and more perfect than that of the other entities in the world: his excellence in being also entails an excellence in action. Upon possessing being for himself, granted by God 'in private property', his actions – particularly those properly human operations that differentiate us from the animals – belong to him as well. In other words, he is free.

Thus, once again, both in Thomas Aquinas and in Kierkegaard, there is a great difference between the self-deployment of an animal or a plant and that of a human person. The plant or animal's 'superior' development is already established from the beginning with its genetic endowment, as we would say today. It can only achieve it when the environmental conditions are optimal and allow it, or remain more or less far from that goal, if these conditions do not allow for complete development. By contrast, the person's freedom involves a modification of the original conditions, above all in the sphere of the properly spiritual potencies, since he can increase his own capacity through habits.

Thus, only human individuals have to 'make themselves' in this radical sense. In the animals, that progression toward possible maximum perfection is predetermined. They carry it out in an instinctive way and only biological or environmental circumstances will determine the success or failure of their efforts. But the person is free, since he possesses his act of being in himself, and not in matter. He has the capacity to make himself... or not. Only if he wants to, if he does his part, will he move forward in this process that is the task of his whole life. Only then will he bring his own self toward the plenitude that pertains to him as a person or, on the contrary, reduce it to the minimum – without ever losing it, of course, since then he would cease to be. It is freedom, the person's dominion over his own actions, that makes the key difference – *non solum aguntur, sicut alia, sed per se agunt*, as Thomas Aquinas said. For this reason, Kierkegaard bases the key to singularization and the construction of the self in the will, to the point that for him, the final difference *that counts* is in love, which is what is in our hands⁷⁹.

This perspective is in no way removed from that of Thomas Aquinas, who points to love with the same vigor as Kierkegaard, although in a different conceptual universe⁸⁰. He also emphasizes the radical superiority of the person in comparison to animals and

⁷⁹ See, among others, S. KIERKEGAARD, *Works of Love*, edited and translated by H.V. Hong - E.H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1995, p. 5; ID., *The Moment and Late Writings*, edited and translated by H.V. Hong - E.H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1998, p. 294; ID., *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, edited and translated by H.V. Hong - E.H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1990, p. 71 and pp. 157-158. The secondary bibliography with regard to love in Kierkegaard is extremely abundant, so I will only cite some titles: R. D'CUNHA, *The Truth of Perfect Love: An Authentic Foundation for a Just Society in the Thought of Søren Kierkegaard*, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Roma 2013; J. LIPPITT, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2013; PATTISON - SHAKESPEARE, *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*. See also the articles on love in «Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook» and «Kierkegaardiana».

⁸⁰ See THOMAS AQUINAS, *De Veritate*, q. 22, a. 11.

plants, which leads him to the conclusion that each human person must take the reins of his own life, to become his best self⁸¹: since we are not predetermined, we can only do so by exercising our will. And this conclusion, which is entirely derived from his conception of the act of being – as I have tried to show – is at the same time the point of departure on which Kierkegaard bases a large part of his teachings.

Perhaps, then, this can be a point of encounter between both lines of thought. Starting from here, we can continue on with the explanations that Kierkegaard offers us, keeping intact the condition of personhood that is never lost and that is held independently of our action, since it is founded on what we are, on our act of being and not on how we behave. Precisely because we are persons, each one of us must consciously want to work for the fulfillment of our own self and continue building it through our actions over a lifetime.

This is a task that can only be fulfilled – both in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and in the thought of Kierkegaard – by putting ourselves before God, and whose ultimate purpose in both cases is love (for God and others). But the development of this new idea will have to be reserved for another article.

⁸¹ «[...] the actual perfecting of essences is the final cause of their existences, and it takes many operations to achieve it», Gilson writes (GILSON, *Being and Some Philosophers*, p. 184).