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Common people: Kierkegaard and the dialectics of populism

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I propose to use Søren Kierkegaard's existential critique of the establishment — intellectual, social, and religious — in the name of common people to bring out the dialectic character of populism often overlooked or ignored in the present-day use of the concept. Although populism is generally viewed as negative, Kierkegaard can help us to see that notwithstanding the very real and dangerous threat that populism poses to liberal societies, it is not, from a liberal perspective, unequivocally negative. Populism is endemic to liberalism, and we should not — and cannot — simply try to suppress or eradicate populism from our agendas. Instead, we have to see how populism dialectically reveals serious problems at the heart of contemporary liberalism. A Kierkegaardian approach to populism will allow me to bring out one of the most fundamental of these problems, namely the persistent inequality that permeates liberal democracies undermining the admittedly vague Enlightenment ideal of equality.

KEYWORDS

liberalism; existential philosophy; elitism; equality; faith; reason; enlightenment; humanism

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THE DIALECTICS OF POPULISM

Populism plays a pivotal role in contemporary societies. It pops up in political debates, sociological and economic discussions, philosophical investigations, and debates concerning education, social media, and digitalisation. It is not always clear what the notion of populism precisely alludes to, but it is generally used pejoratively referring to a political agenda that speaks more to the emotions than to reason, and which is aimed at establishing the sovereignty of the people by overturning elitist agendas concerning politics, social structures, education, and the good life. As two leading scholars have cogently put it: "it is not overly contentious to state that populism always involves a critique of the establishment and an adulation of the common people" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017: 5–6; see also Kaltwasser *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, populism has been characterised as a twenty-first century concept in the way fascism, socialism, and totalitarianism were twentieth century concepts (Mudde, 2018). Its global presence surged with the financial crisis in 2008 and exploded with the yellow vests movement in France, Brexit, the Five Star Movement in Italy, and the presidential elections of Donald Trump in the US and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

In this article, I will outline how we can use Søren Kierkegaard's existential critique of the establishment in the name of common people — be it the single individual (*hiin Enkelte*), the common man (*den menige Mand*) or simple folk (*den Eenfoldige*) — to bring out the dialectic character of populism that is often overlooked in present-day debates. Populism comes in both left and right wing versions, but common to both is a deep-seated suspicion of liberalism. As with populism, there exist many approaches to and definitions of liberalism, and indeed, "liberalism suffers from conceptual indistinctiveness" (Traub, 2019: 5). The ongoing debate about various types of liberalism is not relevant to my argument. I will argue that it is not the basic idea of liberalism or the different developments of this idea that populists fight against. Many populists from both ends of the political spectrum would agree with the fundamental idea of liberalism that holds "liberty as the grounding political value" (Gaus, Courtland, & Schmidtz, 2020). The actual, if not always explicit, target of the populist critique of the establishment is the Enlightenment ideology of progressive, secular humanism common to most contemporary versions of liberalism. This ideology can be defined preliminarily as the conviction that secularisation, democracy, education, and scientific progress will produce and secure a better world. It leads to the widespread liberal conviction that the future of human well-being is in the hands of an elite consisting of scientists, economists, political scientists, business people, technocratic administrators, and (in a decreasing number) intellectuals whose concerted work will result in a progressive improvement of society. What populists of all colours seem to react to is the fact that over the past thirty years — since the fall of the

Berlin Wall — this ideology has developed into an almost hegemonic political centrism in Western liberal democracies. This political convergence towards centrism has the consequence that political alternatives, at both ends of the political spectrum, are viewed as radical, naïve, and ultimately politically illegitimate attempts to transform society (D'Eramo, 2013: 21–23).

It can therefore seem that liberalism and populism are mutually exclusive political positions. My argument is, however, that Kierkegaard can help us see that notwithstanding the very real and dangerous threat that populism poses to liberal democracies, populism is not, from a liberal perspective, unequivocally negative. In fact, liberalism has populist elements. It is established by and for the people, and builds upon the ideal of the rule of the people to be realised through individual freedom, equality, education, and progressive improvement of the economic and health conditions of human life. Populism is endemic to liberalism, and we cannot — and should not — try to suppress or eradicate populism from our agendas. Instead, with Kierkegaard we can learn to approach populism dialectically, seeing that liberalism is impossible without greater attention to and more political respect for people who do not belong to the establishment, and who do not possess the physical and intellectual capacities that are today rewarded socially and financially in liberal democracies. While we must be very attentive to dangerous aspects of populism such as antidemocratic tendencies, suspicion of scientific facts, oversimplification, cultural parochialism, and racism, the populist critique of the establishment can help us to become aware of serious problems, inconsistencies or paradoxes inherent in contemporary liberalism, especially one of the most fundamental and pernicious of the problems that haunt contemporary liberal democracies, namely, the paradox of equality. This paradox can be briefly described as an ideal of equality that as a consequence of its own ideal results in the persistent and seemingly ineradicable inequality plaguing liberal democracies.

Speaking of the dialectics of populismis of course meant to draw attention to the famous book by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The dialetics of enlightenment*. This article shares the intention to examine the complexity of the Enlightenment heritage at the heart of liberalism. The dialectics that Horkheimer and Adorno examine concerns the peculiar way in which the Enlightenment critique of myth, superstition, and oppression is in itself part of a self-oblivious mythology, and "just as myths complete the Enlightenment, so Enlightenment with every step entangles itself deeper in mythology" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1969: 18).[1] For Horkheimer and Adorno, this Enlightenment mythology concerns a superstitious belief in the liberating power of instrumental reason, which masks a pernicious inclination to domination — theoretical as well as practical — that effectively oppresses people in the name

[1] The translations from non-English sources are my own.

of freedom. As with the critique of the Enlightenment, my critique of liberalism is not a rejection of liberalism or an argument for a return to a non-liberal organization of human societies. What I want to argue is that Kierkegaard can help us to become aware of a persistent humanist myth about human nature that afflicts liberalism. This myth is the humanist ideology that given the right conditions — primarily freedom and education — all human beings are able to have, and therefore also responsible for, a meaningful life. On closer scrutiny this myth reveals a serious paradox of equality that is not merely superficial or the product of contingent factors. Rather, it lies at the very ideological heart of the liberal agenda, and if ignored or left unexamined it risks undermining the very progressive improvements of human existence that liberalism has made possible over the past century.

ENLIGHTENMENT HUMANISM AND REASONABLE FAITH

It is no exaggeration to say that there are populist aspects to Kierkegaard's thought. In fact, it could be argued that he is one of the most populist thinkers of the Western intellectual tradition. Throughout the authorship he excels in harsh polemics, makes heavy use of rhetoric devices to propound his arguments, is not afraid to use deception to obtain his goal, speaks to our emotions as much as to our rational capacities, and concludes his work with a tabloid attack against the state church.

Kierkegaard's critique of the intellectual, religious, and social establishment becomes more radical as the authorship progresses. Nonetheless, his impatience with the establishment is constant throughout his work. He is constantly harping on "assistant professors and speculative thinkers", criticizing them for lacking the primitivity, honesty, seriousness, and passion that characterise "shoemakers and tailors or other simple folk" (CUP1: 211 / SKS 7: 193; cf. Bukdahl, 1961: 73–81). One of the primary aims of his critique is the inflation of reason inaugurated by the Enlightenment and which, despite the romantic reappraisal of the emotions, continued to play a dominant role in Golden Age Copenhagen (Kirmmse, 1990: 245–247). Contrary to the persistent myth about the age of reason propagated first but not exclusively by the romantic critics of the Enlightenment, emotions were not simply discarded by the Enlightenment thinkers (Pagden, 2013: 12; Moravia, 1982: 9–11; Bristow, 2017), although it cannot be denied that Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Denis Diderot, Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, and Immanuel Kant were all deeply suspicious of the disturbance of rationality provoked by the emotions. What characterises the Enlightenment's insistence on reason is not so much a rejection of emotions as a return to and development of the classical philosophical ideal of reason before our cognitive abilities were tainted by Christian faith (Gay, 1969:

167–215; Israel, 2006: 94–114). This endeavour to strip reason of its religious encumbrance or at least to make faith more reasonable was a natural reaction to the havoc and terror wrecked by ferocious religious passions in the preceding centuries. The Enlightenment appeal to reason was thus more a critique of the radicality of faith and transcendent arguments than of emotions (Cassirer, 2003: 140–205; James, 1997: 159–207).

In the Enlightenment, the millennial Christian dialectics of faith and reason is transformed into a secular belief in the explanatory capacities of human reason. This belief precludes recourse to explanatory powers that transcend the reach of reason, and as Charles Taylor writes, "[i]t opened up new human potentialities, viz., to live in these modes of moral life in which the sources are radically immanentized" (Taylor, 2007: 255). Taylor describes how this immanent frame for human thought and action begins with the transformation of Christianity wrought by the anthropocentric focus of Deism at the turn of the 18th century, and is consolidated with the establishment of an atheist "impersonal order" in the second half of the 19th century (Taylor, 2007: 221–295). The anthropocentric focus turns away from the transcendent demand on human beings, the purpose of which "goes beyond human flourishing" (Taylor, 2007: 221), to an immanent preoccupation with human well-being. According to Taylor, this shift to an exclusive immanent purpose of human life naturally entails a decreasing interest in grace, a fading of the sense of mystery, and finally the eclipse of the idea common to most versions of Christianity of a complete transformation of the human being beyond the limitations of our physical and mental conditions. The new immanent perspective on human life produces an increased interest in the workings of the natural world and an intense preoccupation with finding the best possible means to secure human flourishing. Ernst Cassirer captures this development cogently in his seminal book on the Enlightenment:

> Natural science as well as history, law, state, and art withdraw more and more from the control and tutelage of traditional metaphysics and theology. No longer do they expect to find the reason and legitimation for their existence in the concept of God; rather it is now these sciences and practices with their specific forms that shape and codetermine this concept. The relation between the concept of God on the one hand and the concepts of truth, morality, and law on the other is not in any way abandoned, but the direction of the relation changes. A transformation of significance occurs: what previously was the foundation becomes that which is founded, and what before was the legitimisation is now pushed into the position of that which becomes legitimized. And eventually the theology of the eighteenth century is also seized by this movement. Theology relinquishes the absolute primacy that it had hitherto proclaimed for itself; it no longer simply makes the rules, but yield to certain basic norms that stem from another source, which "reason" as the embodiment of fundamental autonomous spiritual powers presents it with (Cassirer, 2003: 166).

This turn to immanent explanatory powers of reason and the senses is, as Cassirer and Taylor make clear, a remarkable shift in ethical orientation that has brought innumerable benefits to human life. It has paved the way to one of the most beneficial ideas of liberal democracies: that we can progressively improve human life through education, science, social engineering, and open political debate. This immanent frame can broadly be defined as humanist. Substituting divine benevolence with human reason, Enlightenment religion becomes "a religion within the bounds of humanity" (Cassirer, 2003: 114), and a fundamental aspect of this humanist turn is to replace the radical passions of faith with prudent calculations, scientific investigation, and societal progress. Stephen Gaukroger has succinctly captured this development: "Everyday life slowly becomes naturalized, and the vehicle of this naturalization is quantification" (Gaukroger, 2016: 286).

This quantification of human reason means that moral reflection increasingly become focused on finding scientific and technological means to promote societal harmony and individual happiness. New scientific insight into human physiology paves the way for the hedonist principle of utilitarian philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham and Claude Adrien Helvétius, and Enlightenment philosophers reintroduce sensuality and human desire as valid elements in their endeavour to improve human life. Passions and desires needed to be tamed and guided by reason, but once our passions become moderate and our desires reasonable, they will no longer work against our well-being, but rather be conducive to it. After centuries of religious suspicion of pleasure, reason, and worldly happiness, the individual is finally free to pursue a better life without the yoke of original sin (Cassirer, 2003: 148). Moreover, this unfettered freedom is not given to the individual by a transcendent deity. Nature itself is the origin and promoter of human freedom. It is a freedom that springs from the liberating necessity of physical nature, not from the wilful gifts of a capricious god. We are part of nature, and as such must understand ourselves with the same experimental tools that the emerging natural sciences use to explore the universe around us. Having turned its back on religion, "philosophical knowledge", as Jürgen Habermas argues, "was now supposed to explain what this scientifically accumulated understanding of the world meant for us as human beings in our personal and social as well as historical and actual existence" (Habermas, 2019: 225; cf. Gaukroger, 2010: 421–452).

The immanent frame allows for a new focus on what human beings actually experience and do instead of speculating on what they should experience and do according to the "the ultimate original qualities" of their nature. This produces a concrete morality aimed at effectively enhancing human well-being rather than searching for otherworldly bliss (Taylor, 1989: 321–354). With the notable exception of Kant, most Enlightenment philosophers see the immanent frame and the instrumentalisation of reason as fundamental to the progressive improvement of the human condition. Human happiness requires

a democratic orientation, universal education, medical progress, and economic structuring of the emerging commercial society (Louden, 2007: 27–68). Only by substituting our faith in a divine purpose beyond human well-being with one commensurable with human reason and focused on solving empirical challenges and concrete human needs are we able to create a better world.

KIERKEGAARD'S CONCEPT OF FAITH

Kierkegaard is deeply suspicious of this attempt to domesticate faith, making it reasonable and congenial to human cares and concerns. In fact, the rejection of instrumental reason and the immanent frame are among the central themes of the authorship. The immanent frame, he argues in *Two ages*, has "nullified the principle of contradiction":

> The existential expression of nullifying the principle of contradiction is to be in contradiction to oneself. The creative omnipotence implicit in the passion of absolute disjunction that leads the individual resolutely to make up his mind is transformed into the extensity of prudence and reflection that is, by knowing and being everything possible, to be in contradiction to oneself, that is, to be nothing at all (TA: 97 / SKS 8: 92).

For Kierkegaard, it is not only naïve, but also existentially problematic to believe that we can make sense of ourselves and other people by relying only on scientific explanations or rational reflection. Human beings are contradictory beings who are more complex than reason can fathom or prudence domesticate. Suppressing or explaining away our contradictory nature in the name of reasonable passions or embodied reason produces an abstract ideal of a rational or prudent being, a caricature of real human beings that is ill-suited to deal with the concrete problems human beings actually struggle with. Humans are indeed rational beings who try to live reasonable lives, but the fact that most of us are unable to live according to this ideal, and that most lives do not go as planned, shows that we are also passionate beings who desire lives that are not completely reasonable. The ideal of living a prudent life with reasonable desires and moderate passions may very well be the most ideal way to organize a society that aims to promote the well-being of its citizens. The problem is that it has proven extremely difficult to educate human passions and tame human desires in the name of prudence and justice. Kierkegaard would argue that this reasonable ideal cannot be realized because it is impossible to eradicate or effectively palliate the conflict between reason and passion in human behaviour.

Human beings are constituted of heterogeneous elements — reason and desire, soul and body — and, as Arne Grøn argues, "being constituted of something heterogeneous means that the coherence is fragile" (Grøn, 2008: 9).

Kierkegaard is not a dualist, though. As Grøn argues elsewhere: "We are constituted by dimensions that cannot be reduced to each other: soul and body. This does not entail a dualism, but a synthesis. We are in tension with ourselves in the very being that we are" (Grøn, 2011: 84). In *Concluding unscientific postscript*, Kierkegaard argues that "existence is a somewhat intermediate state like that, something that is suitable for an intermediate being such as a human being" (CUP1: 329 / SKS 7: 301). We are intermediate beings who struggle with the fact that at times we do something that we know is wrong and, perhaps even more existentially disturbing, sometimes we want something we know is not good for us or desire something we are repulsed by. We are, in other words, thoroughly ambivalent (CA: 42 / SKS 4: 348). Our feelings are not only at odds with our thoughts, they are also at odds with themselves. And fundamental human phenomena such as love, anger, and joy are inherently complex phenomena that cannot be explained by scientific or philosophical accounts of how to love, control anger or live a joyful life.

This does not mean that we should not try to make rational sense of human existence or educate human behaviour. And contrary to what is commonly believed, Kierkegaard's critique of reason and the immanent frame is not a simple rejection of science or scientific explanations of human beings (Rosfort, 2013; Rosfort, 2014). Rather, as Paul Ricœur has argued, the radical character of Kierkegaard's work lies not in the rejection of reason or rationality, but in the insistence on the fact that "to exist is not to know in the strong sense of the word; that is, the singular is always reborn in the margin of the discourse. There is a need for another discourse that takes the singular into account and expresses it" (Ricœur, 1992: 43). Ricœur here articulates the core of Kierkegaard's critique of reason. The immanent frame does not give a voice to or explanatory room for the concrete fragility of the individual human being who is trying to hold together the heterogeneous dimensions of her being. There is no universal recipe — however rational or prudent — for how an individual should engage with her own fragility. For Kierkegaard we are all fragile, and we all struggle with life in our own way.

In *Fear and trembling*, Kierkegaard describes the immanent frame as "the ethical":

> The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its τέλος [end, purpose] but is itself the τέλος for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has absorbed this into itself, it goes no further (FT: 54 / SKS 4: 148).

The ethical is the normative glue that holds society together by providing universal norms and values for human behaviour, and Kierkegaard does not in

any way dispute or reject this vital function of ethics. He does insist, however, on the fact that although this immanent ethics is necessary, it is not sufficient to make sense of or promote individual well-being. He deliberately destabilizes this immanent ethical frame, arguing that "faith is exactly this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal" (FT: 55 / SKS 4: 149). This is not, as mentioned, a rejection of the frame per se, but rather an acknowledgment that the ethical guidelines ratified by it are not sufficient to articulate or deal with the existential struggles of the individual.

Kierkegaard therefore argues that we cannot discard faith or make faith commensurable with reason in our enlightened attempt to make sense of and improve human life. Faith, for Kierkegaard, is not exclusively a matter of believing in the fundamental goodness of life, in a transcendent god, in forgiveness or in spiritual redemption. It is indeed those things, but it is primarily an existential response to the painful — and wonderful — limits of human understanding. Faith is an existential concept that Kierkegaard argues for phenomenologically rather than conceptually or dogmatically.[2] Although his work rests upon an unwavering Christian foundation, he never uses the concept of faith uncritically. He argues for the necessity of faith not from a doctrinal position, but by engaging with concrete existential challenges we struggle with as human beings. We find the most cogent philosophical definition of faith in *The sickness unto death*:

> The crucial thing is: for God everything is possible. This is eternally true and consequently true at every moment. This is indeed a generally recognized truth, which is commonly expressed in this way, but the critical decision does not come until a person is brought to his extremity, when, humanly speaking, there is no possibility. Then the question is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, that is, whether he will believe [*troe*]. But this is the very formula for losing the understanding [*Forstanden*]; to believe is indeed to lose the understanding in order to gain God (SUD: 38 / SKS 11: 153–154).

Faith does not substitute reason or make understanding superfluous. Faith and reason are complementary concepts. Playing on Kant, we can say that, faith without reason is blind and reason without faith is empty. We can only come to understand faith through our experience of the limits of reason, that is, by using reason to the best of our abilities. When we despair because everything loses significance or anxiety paralyses us, faith becomes existentially decisive. It functions a resource the individual can use to make sense of her existence: "it is in the theory of subjectivity, where the authentic religious categories belong" (CUP1: 45 / SKS 7: 50). Faith is subjective, which means that we cannot use

[2] I am here indebted to Arne Grøn's seminal work on Kierkegaard, especially Grøn, 1997: 287–383.

the transcendent arguments of faith or other religious concepts objectively. In fact, Kierkegaard never uses the word transcendence nor does he point to a transcendent region beyond this world. Instead, he uses transcendent arguments in his criticism of the limits of immanence. The transcendence of faith is phenomenological, which means that it is necessarily tied to our subjectivity and to how we experience the world, other people, and ourselves. This transcendence does not invoke a world beyond this world, but rather expresses an epistemic humility in our encounter with reality. Reality transcends our understanding and is infinite in the sense that it transcends our finite epistemic capacities. In this sense, Kierkegaard's concept of transcendence is similar to Emmenuel Levinas' famous use of the concept in his argument for the infinite ethical primacy of the other person. For both thinkers, transcendence only makes sense in its experiential relation to the finite character of human thought and experience:

> The infinite is the proper character of a transcendent being as transcendent, that is, the infinite is absolute other. The transcendent is the only *Ideatum* of which we can have nothing but an idea in us. It is infinitely distant from its idea, that is, its exteriority, because it is infinite (Levinas, 1965: 20).

This phenomenological use of transcendence does not find meaning elsewhere by "fleeing from this world" (Levinas, 1965: 43), but is rather a "radical empiricism" (Levinas, 1965: 170) that allows the individual to find new meanings in this world by letting the world destabilise her ideas, preconceptions and biases.

This entails that for Kierkegaard, faith and transcendent arguments cannot and should not be used as a panacea for the reality of suffering, as an excuse for not engaging with global injustice, human rights or other political problems or as an attempt to circumvent physical reality and scientific facts. On the contrary, Kierkegaard insists that the ethics of faith, what he calls the "ethical-religious" or "second ethics" (CA: 21 / SKS 4: 329; cf. Grøn, 1998; Grøn, 2002; Rosfort, 2018) has "its ideality in the penetrating consciousness of reality" (CA: 20 / SKS 4: 328; translation slightly modified). Faith does not make us blind to reality or the challenges of reality. In fact, faith gives us the strength to see, understand, and confront "the suffering of reality or the reality of suffering" (PC: 188 / SKS 12: 188; translation modified) by making engagement with suffering possible despite seeming humanly impossible. Christian faith is not blank cheque that allows us to believe, hope or do whatever we want. Faith does not work alone. It is both nourished and held in check by two other key Christian concepts, namely hope and love. Faith makes hope and love possible beyond human reason, hope guards faith and love from despair, and love protects faith and hope from selfishness. Kierkegaard spent a significant part of his

authorship exploring the relation between these three core concepts, showing how they together can help the individual see human existence as meaningful despite and actually through the absurdity of suffering (Pattison, 2002). The existential character of faith means that we cannot use faith to make sense of or justify other people's suffering, nor to condemn the behaviour of others. This is not the same as to say that we cannot use faith to engage with other people's suffering. To do so, however, we have to understand that faith is an existential concept that is only meaningful for the individual who believes.

Faith is a way to cope with the experiential fact that the meaning of life is not rational or pragmatic. Life becomes absurd when we believe that we can and are supposed to make rational sense of or provide empirically ratified solutions to the existential challenges that human beings struggle with. Why am I born? What is the meaning of my life? Why am I anxious? Why do I love him? How can a child die of a brain tumour? Why are some people smarter than others? Why are some better looking? Why are some people vulnerable to depression and others more resilient? It is impossible to provide reasonable answers — ones that are meaningful for everyone — or experimentally warranted solutions to such existential questions. This does not mean, however, that human life is not amendable to understanding or that we should stop trying to understand why we do what we do. On the contrary, Kierkegaard constantly argues that faith is not an excuse for accepting nonsense, rejecting the wisdom of common sense or simply resigning to the absurd character of human life. Faith is not ignorance. Rather, faith is a way for the individual to find a meaning in the absurdity of life, reconsidering the norms and values that structure our existence. Here it is important to specify that the absurdity of life is not in any way connected with the absurd fact that we have structured our global society in such a way the millions of people die of hunger every year while at the same time even more millions struggle with trying to eat less. This is an ethical and political problem that we could actually solve if we wanted to. The absurdity that Kierkegaard points to is existential. It concerns the aspects of human life that we cannot explain scientifically or make rational sense of. In this sense, faith for Kierkegaard is a broadening rather than a rejection of reason. Faith allows us to appropriate the incomprehensible and make sense of the absurd while accepting the general legitimacy of the immanent frame:

> Consequently the believing Christian both has and uses his understanding, respects the universally human, does not explain someone's not becoming a Christian as a lack of understanding, but believes Christianity against the understanding and here uses the understanding in order to see to it that he believes against the understanding. Therefore he cannot believe nonsense against the understanding, which one might fear, because the understanding will penetratingly perceive that it is nonsense and

> hinder him in believing it, but he uses the understanding so much that through it he becomes aware of the incomprehensible, and now, believing, he relates himself to it against the understanding (CUP1: 568 / SKS 7: 516).

Kierkegaard's critique of reason is thus a sober reconsideration of the limits of reason. Kierkegaard is not criticizing Enlightenment ideals such as empirical science, instrumental rationality, and quantitative explorations of human well-being. He is, however, highly suspicious of the enthusiastic appropriation of those ideals by the religious, political, and scientific establishment of his day and the ensuing attempt to organize society with an immanent explanatory frame aimed at a progressive improvement of human life. The problem with this frame is not its goal, but that it is constructed upon an abstract notion of what it means to be human that does not take seriously the individual differences that, on Kierkegaard's account, are what make us human in the first place.

THE INDIVIDUALITY OF EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENA

Kierkegaard spends a significant amount of his intellectual energy ridiculing scientific or philosophical endeavours to organize and make sense of human beings with an intellectualist life-view, or what he disparagingly calls a "system of existence [*Tilværelsens System*]" (CUP1: 333 / SKS 7: 304). The problem with the endeavour to erect a system of existence or a philosophy of existence capable of providing general guidelines for how to live is that human beings are not beings in general. They are individuals, and as such live their life in their own particular way. This is what Kierkegaard calls the paradox of faith, namely the belief that the individual is higher than the universal, although an individual life is only possible through coexistence with others. The paradox is that human beings are similar in and through their individual differences. Our differences from each other are what make us human. This paradox constitutes the very foundation of Kierkegaard's existential philosophy, and he provides the most cogent formulation in *The concept of anxiety*: "the human being is *individuum* and as such simultaneously himself and the whole species, and in such a way that the whole species participates in the individual and the individual in the whole species" (CA: 28 / SKS 4: 335; translation modified). This paradox functions on both an ontological and an ethical level. Ontologically, human beings are both profoundly similar to and profoundly distinct from each other. We share similar genes, organs, and cognitive structures, and yet we differ radically from each other when it comes to how we feel, think, and live our lives. From an ethical perspective, we must become the individual human being that we are, and yet we have to love all human beings irrespective

of this individuality. The first aspect of the ethical perspective is captured by Kierkegaard's argument that to be human is to become the self that we are (SUD: 29 / SKS 11: 146), while the second is manifested in his elaborate reformulation of the Christian commandment of neighbour love, namely that you shall love the other person (WL: 17–90 / SKS 9: 24–95). Kierkegaard's concept of love is an ethical demand to love everyone that seems to run counter to our ontological understanding of love as a complex emotion that singles out particular individuals. This very conflict of emotion (ontology) and demand (ethics) is at the heart of Kierkegaard's attempt to show the complexity of existential phenomena.

This interweavement of ontological and ethical perspectives on human nature reveals the dialectical character of Kierkegaard's thought. It is not possible to separate "is" and "ought". We are who we should become, and we should become who we already are. This is not a fatalistic or a deterministic perspective on human nature. Rather, it is an attempt to protect the individual human being from potentially oppressive normative structures. Ethical norms and values are universal. They are meant to secure the coexistence of human beings by providing general guidelines for how to live an individual life together with other people. However, the problem with general guidelines is that in order to secure a social order they must disregard the individual's needs and concerns, or at least the differences between the needs and concerns of individuals. Kierkegaard is deeply suspicious of such ethical systems because of his ontological insistence on individuality. On the other hand, he does not argue for a rampant and socially blind individualism. Kierkegaard avoids the perils of individualism by insisting that a human being can only become herself through the demand of a radical and, humanly speaking, impossible love for other people, that is, "to love the neighbour, to love the whole human race, all people, even the enemy, and not to make exceptions, neither of preference nor of disgust" (WL: 19 / SKS 9, 27; translation modified). This means that Kierkegaard's ethics can only be realised as an existential task. Each and every one of us has to find a way to become who we are, to live a good life through this radical love of the other person. While Kierkegaard is suspicious of ethical systems or general accounts of how to live a human life, he wants to find an ethics that secures individuality without eroding the stability of the social order. This is not an ethics that tries to conform the individual to general norms and values, but an ethics that starts "from below and [moves] upwards" (CA: 20 / SKS 4: 328) with the subjective experience of each individual. Kierkegaard argues for the ineradicable ethical value of subjectivity, that is, for the necessity to take seriously the fact that we each experience basic existential phenomena in our own way.

Basic existential phenomena are the fundamental phenomena that constitute a human life such as love, anxiety, desire, grief, vulnerability, gender, joy, sexuality, pain, fear, anger, hope, and death. What makes existential phenomena

differ from other phenomena is that they depend on the individuality of the person who experiences it. Whereas gravity, the chemical composition of a rock, the length of a car or my height exist independent of my experience of these aspects of the world, my experience of love or gender is constitutive of the phenomena themselves. This is not the same as to say that these phenomena are purely subjective or can exist independent of objective features. Rather, they are ambiguous phenomena constituted by the ambiguity of subjective and objective features. They are fundamental concepts that identify objective and empirically accessible features of human life. All persons love and feel anxiety, are vulnerable and can feel anger, hope or fear, and all of us are going to die. And yet these phenomena are also marked by the individuality of the person who experiences them. Both questions about and answers to these phenomena depend upon how the person experiences the world, other people, and herself. This means that the phenomena are conceptually unstable and existentially challenging. In fact, that they are existential phenomena means that they single out the individual. We often struggle with these phenomena. It can be both difficult and exhausting to communicate them, put them into words, or explain them to other people. There are not unequivocal — rational, empirical or pragmatic — solutions to the challenges that lived experience presents us with. Every single individual experience and live with love, hope, vulnerability, joy, and death in her own way.

It is the ambiguity of existential phenomena that makes Kierkegaard critical of scientific explanations of human existence, prudent advice for how to improve human well-being, and other kinds of general accounts of human behaviour. These endeavours disregard the individual character of the very phenomena that constitute a human life, and as such they risk erecting ideals of how to live a human life that are thought to be universal, but in fact only represent one group of people that has grown influential and powerful in most Western societies over the past two centuries.

THE LIBERAL PARADOX OF EQUALITY

At the heart of populism lies a critique of the elitist establishment in the name of the common people. The establishment is as vague a category as the common people, but we can define the two categories by the very dichotomy that creates the tension between them (Wodak, 2017: 555–557; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008: 6–7). The establishment is the class of people with a higher education who work with the political organisation, systemic structuring, and day-to-day socio-economic management of liberal democracies, while the common people are those who do not belong to the establishment. This conceptual dichotomy is of course a distorted and reductive representation of a much more complex

reality. But instead of speculating about who falls under which category, it is perhaps more accurate — and useful — to simply state that populism shows that many people apparently feel that they are not represented by the ideas and values of the establishment. And what is perhaps worse, they do not experience the economic and social equality that is one of the key promises of liberalism (Therbon, 2013: 72–78; Schiavone, 2020: 76–229; Kok-Chor, 2017: 21–34).

From a Kierkegaardian perspective, the discontent and inequality that haunt contemporary liberal democracies is not as surprising as it is saddening. They are the result of a paradox at the core of liberalism. It is the paradox that the equality that liberalism works towards establishing presupposes and is guided by an idea of human nature that is partly responsible for the inequality that it wants to eradicate. This is the humanist idea that human beings are essentially rational beings who will flourish if given the necessary freedom and educated properly. While this view of human nature readily concedes that human beings exhibit a natural tendency towards selfishness and often harbour religious sentiments and other irrational feelings and ideas, the argument is that these unfortunate deficiencies can be managed, controlled, and perhaps eventually eradicated through education, science, and reasonable socioeconomic incitements. Daniel Haybron has called this foundational humanist idea of liberalism "liberal optimism", arguing that it rests upon what he defines as a problematic "Aptitude assumption":

> Roughly, Aptitude maintains that human psychology is well-adapted to environments offering individuals a high degree of freedom to shape their lives as they wish. We have the psychological endowments needed to do well, indeed best, in such environments by choosing lives for ourselves that meet our needs (Haybron, 2008: 226).

Haybron criticises this assumption maintaining that human beings are "systematically imprudent" beings. He provides various empirically informed arguments for his thesis that all point to the possibility that "our civilization is founded on a fundamentally mistaken view of human nature" (Haybron, 2008: 251).

The Enlightenment ideal of human nature hypostasises certain human character features, physical abilities, and cognitive skills as essentially — or socially — more desirable than others and thus implements a teleological system that educates and rewards, financially as well as socially, those who excel in this system. I am here thinking about virtues such as rationality in all its shapes and forms, creative imagination, prudence, common sense, ambition, stamina, innovation, and initiative. The problem is that this system is not representative of all human beings, and not even of the majority of human beings. It is the product of a certain class of academics, business people, and politicians who are successful according to the standards of a system designed to promote individuals with specific features, skills, and abilities. This vicious circle promotes and

secures the social and economic well-fare of people who match the established criteria. The systemic circle is not understood as vicious because it is ratified by the humanist ideology that has been consolidated over the past two hundred years, and that does not allow for radical perspectives that transcend or destabilise the established criteria. It is, in this sense, a self-justifying system that strives for an equality that is not representative of the great diversity of being human.

Kierkegaard's critique of the universalist tendencies of all systems stems from his conviction that human beings differ from each other in fundamental respects, and that we cannot — and should not — strive towards an ideal of equality that does not acknowledge the physical, emotional, and cognitive diversity of human beings. What populism shows us, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, is that the ideal of equality constitutive of liberalism is ontologically flawed, individually oppressing, and socially disruptive.

It is flawed from an ontological perspective because it rests upon a view of human nature that does not take seriously the differences — cultural as well as biological — that make us the individual human beings that we are. It attempts to explain human beings in general terms, whereas — from a Kierkegaardian perspective — a human being can only be approached as an individual self. Human beings are individuals who feel, think, and behave in markedly different ways from each other, and it is this very individuality that makes us human. Moreover, this ideal of equality is oppressive because it makes certain character features, abilities, and skills more conducive to social recognition and economic success than others. Basic existential phenomena show us that every human being struggles with making sense of her life, and it is not possible to provide general accounts of how to succeed as a human being, that is, how to understand and live with love, anger, desire, joy, suffering, hope, and other existential phenomena. On the contrary, promoting a universal ideal for human existence through societal norms, education, and political engineering risks oppressing people rather than allowing them to flourish. Finally, it is an ideal of equality that is socially disruptive because it promotes one group of people, the so-called elite, at the cost of the majority, the so-called common people. Structuring societies around intellectual and physical parameters that only some human beings can satisfy creates a social and economic hierarchy that inevitably leads to social unrest. Social unrest caused by a perceived sense of inequality was at the origin of liberalism, and the fight against oppressive hierarchical structures has been part and parcel of the liberal agenda for more than two centuries. It is therefore a paradox that liberalism has developed into a form that produces the same sense of inequality and social unrest that it is meant to eradicate.

Populism discloses this paradox by showing us how the humanist ideal of equality, which functions as the ideological heart of liberalism, is creating oppressive social and economic hierarchies of high and low culture, rich and poor,

smart and dumb, educated and uneducated, success and failure by presupposing an equality that does not respect the individual character of the basic existential phenomena that inform and shape a human life. These existential phenomena reveal that human nature cannot be defined through an amorphous notion of equality that assumes that given the same conditions and possibilities human beings will develop into becoming similar to each other (*e.g.* secular, rational, educated, prudent, disciplined, ambitious).

The freedom that liberalism wants to secure and develop cannot be domesticated rationally or educated towards common human goals. Kierkegaard teaches us that human beings are indeed free beings, insofar as we self-determine — or at least we want to feel that we self-determine — ourselves by following our own laws. This is not an argument for anarchism. As is well known, Kierkegaard's political sentiment was unapologetically inclined towards the conservative end of the political spectrum. He was firmly convinced that human beings need solid societal structures to live a good life (Nordentoft, 1973; Kirmmse, 1990). His argument is rather that those structures have to respect the presupposition that the individual is higher than the universal. It is difficult to make ethical or social sense of this presupposition from within an immanent frame built upon rationality, empirical facts, and common sense. In fact, there is no room for this paradox in the immanent frame of liberalism where the common good — in one form or another — is the goal of the structure and functioning of a liberal democracy. And it seems difficult — and probably not desirable — to find a way to implement this paradox in a liberal agenda. I would argue, however, that there is another way in which this paradox of faith can be useful in the liberal debate about populism. Instead of perpetuating the dichotomous tendency of populism by either simply rejecting or supporting populism, the liberal response can use Kierkegaard's paradox of faith and the individuality of basic existential phenomena to acknowledge the dialectics of populism. Acknowledging this dialectics will allow us to see why liberalism needs to appropriate its populist foundation, while at the same time recognising the need for a liberal critique of the dangerous tendencies of populism.

The critique of the liberal ideal of equality coined on the aptitude assumption paves the way to yet another and more primordial equality that consists not in establishing objective cognitive, physical, and social measures aimed at making us similar to each other, but in recognising the existential fragility that makes every one of us the individual that we are. It is the recognition that to be human is to become a self, and this is a task that no human being is better equipped for or knows more about solving than the single individual who is struggling to become herself. As a species, human beings obviously share basic biological and cognitive features that make them similar to each other. But in their biological and cognitive similarity, "people are", as the neuroscientist

Todd Preuss dryly puts it in a review of the biological strangeness of humans, "most peculiar beasts" (Preuss, 2004: 5). Preuss argues that while anthropologists and ethnologists acknowledged this strangeness of humans a long time ago, "it is not an idea that neuroscientists typically find easy to wrap their minds around" (Preuss, 2004: 5). My argument is that this is an idea that also many philosophers, political scientists, and intellectuals have a difficulty accepting. While they may accept the fact that people are "peculiar" in that they are irrational and subject to beliefs, sentiments, and convictions, they still examine and attempt to normatively correct human behaviour as if this individual strangeness were a social, economic, and political illness that we have to cure.

The liberal ideal of equality supresses or at least aims at unifying the existential diversity of human beings. This may sound paradoxical since promoting diversity is one of the principle ideas common to most types of liberalism. Liberalism is without doubt the political position that has worked hardest for the promotion of diversity, and I do not contest the liberal argument for diversity. What I am arguing is that the liberalist idea of diversity builds upon a problematic ideal of equality, namely that human beings are rational beings who will come to learn to want the same things if endowed with the necessary freedom and enlightened with the right education. However, basic existential phenomena disclose that, paradoxically, our equality does not consist in our being similar to each other, but rather in the differences that make us human. We are human beings because of our unique ways of being human; our existential differences are a fact that entails as a normative consequence that we need a notion of human equality that takes them seriously. It does not require acute analytical skills to become aware of the differences that make us the individuals that we are: one person may be more skilled at mathematics than another person; some people like to read and talk about books, others have never read a book; some are obsessed with football, others find it a waste of time; some are lucky, others are not; one person is disciplined, while another prefers spontaneity; some like order, and others thrive with chaos; some need five hours of sleep while others need nine.

While some of these differences may be more personally, socially, and economically significant than others, they are all fundamental for how individual human beings try to make sense of and live their lives. Kierkegaard's point is that each and every one of us is faced with the same ethical task of becoming herself. The recognition of this task shows the way for an equality that does not discriminate between the elite (who knows what is important and how to behave) and the common person (who needs to be enlightened):

> The simple person [*Den Eenfoldige*] understands the simple [*det Eenfoldige*] immediately, but when the wise person is to understand it, it becomes infinitely difficult. Is it an insult to the wise person to attach such importance to him that the simplest

> becomes the most difficult just because he is the one who is supposed to deal with it? Not at all […] The more the wise person thinks about the simple (that there can be any question of a longer engagement with it already shows that it is not so easy after all), the more difficult it becomes for him. Yet he feels gripped by a deep humanity [*en dyb Humanitet*] that reconciles him with all of life: that the difference between the wise person and the simplest person is this little evanescent difference that the simple person knows the essential and the wise person little by little comes to know that he knows it or comes to know that he does not know it, but what they know is the same (CUP1: 160 / SKS 7: 148–149; translation modified).

We are different, and we know and can do different things, but there is "a deep humanity" in the acknowledgement that we are faced with the same ethical task. In fact, Kierkegaard encourages us to abandon our human — perhaps all too human — tendency to approach human beings hierarchically seeing "simple", "common", or "weak" as somehow less admirable or desirable traits than "sophisticated", "extraordinary", or "strong". This does not mean that we should not strive towards becoming better than we are or that we cannot not fail at becoming ourselves. We all certainly seem to struggle with our identity (Grøn, 1997: 13–50; Rosfort, 2015). It is exactly this existential fragility that reveals our "deep humanity". Kierkegaard plays on the semantic density of the Danish word for humanity, *Menneskelighed*, which refers to human (*menneske*) equality (*lighed*) both in terms of our ontological similarity and the ethical demand for equality (CD: 117 / SKS 10: 128; PV 103–104 / SKS 16: 83–84; Grøn, 2008: 117–128). Our equality lies in our fragile identity, that is, in the fact that we all struggle to become ourselves realizing the humanly impossible task of unconditional love. This equality is radical in the sense of going to the root (*radix*) of our humanity, our "deep humanity", in order to show that our equality is not to be found in our abilities, skills or physical traits, but in our shared fragility, that is, in what we are not able to do. For Kierkegaard, it is our shared fragility that makes faith existentially relevant. Without faith, the task of becoming ourselves through the unconditional love of all other people seems impossible. With faith the task not only becomes possible, but reveals itself as a demand that is existentially fundamental in the sense that I can only become myself by fulfilling it.

While this radical notion of equality can be used to acknowledge and appreciate the legitimacy of a populist critique of the liberalist establishment, it is not meant as a rejection of the liberal agenda. On the contrary, it is an argument for a more humane liberalism that takes into account the individuality of the basic existential phenomena that inform and orient a human life. Neither is it an argument against scientific, rational or socioeconomic endeavours to improve human life. We can certainly all benefit from scientific advancements, rational theories, prudent reflection, and socioeconomic work. In this sense, our shared Enlightenment heritage has proven to be one of the greatest achievements of the Western intellectual tradition. The argument is simply

that in order to arrive at a more humane liberalism we need to acknowledge the limits of these Enlightenment tools. The most fundamental of these limits is the inability to account for and make sense of the existential phenomena that make us the irreplaceable individuals that we are. In this sense, populism makes us aware of "a deep humanity" that we need to take seriously and protect if we want to realize the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality. At the same time, we need those very same Enlightenment tools to work against the obvious dangers of contemporary populism such as xenophobia, parochialism, resistance to scientific fact, and enticement to violence. The dialectics of populism consists in acknowledging this ineradicable ambiguity.

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