

On Negativity and Subjectivity: Kierkegaard

Sobre negatividad y subjetividad: Kierkegaard

María Juliana Silva Arango¹

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Abstract

Kierkegaard's Irony was an operation by which commonly accepted customs and historical practices could be criticized, by promoting wisdom through delivering no positive philosophical doctrine or theory to others who claimed to know something. This was his 'Socratic task.' Similar to Socrates, Kierkegaard focused his intellectual efforts on understanding what it meant to be a human and how to pursue a life worth of living. To his view, truly existing individuals, who obeyed the natural human desire to know, would embrace the negativity of uncertainty and take responsibility for their personal views. His Christian understanding of God, as related to subjectivity, was what he meant to defend by applying Irony. When confronting the Clergy of the Copenhagen of his time, Kierkegaard learnt the political consequences to the commitment to Socrates' method in the way he applied it to his modern setting.

Keywords Authors: Irony, Socrates, Maieutics, Objective Uncertainty, Objective Truth.

Keywords Plus: Philosophy, Ethics, Psychoanalysis.

Resumen

La Ironía de Kierkegaard consistía en una operación por medio de la cual las costumbres y prácticas históricas podían ser criticadas, al promoverse con ella la sabiduría, mediante la entrega de una falta de una doctrina o teoría filosófica positiva a quienes afirmaran saber algo. Esta fue su 'tarea socrática'. Al igual que Sócrates, Kierkegaard concentró sus esfuerzos intelectuales en entender lo que significaba ser humano y cómo vivir una vida que valiera la pena. Para él, los individuos realmente vivos, que obedecieran el deseo natural humano de saber, acogerían el negativismo de la incertidumbre y, de esta forma, se responsabilizarían por sus visiones personales. Su entendimiento cristiano de Dios, que estaba relacionado con la subjetividad, fue lo que quiso defender al aplicar la Ironía. Al confrontar al clero del Copenhague de su época, Kierkegaard descubrió las consecuencias políticas de su compromiso con el método de Sócrates en la forma en que lo aplicó en su época moderna.

Palabras claves autores: Ironía, Sócrates, Mayéutica, Incertidumbre Objetiva, Verdad Objetiva.

Palabras claves descriptores: Filosofía, Ética, Psicoanálisis.

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1. Psicóloga egresada de la Universidad de Antioquia. Correo electrónico: mjsaph@hotmail.com

Introduction

Kierkegaard committed to a personal task by which his Christian practice could be defined, just as his understanding of God. He used an ancient method and restructured it to create an ethical path and an attitude of his own. This was his Irony, as restructuring of Socrates' Maieutics, set in his geographical, but specially, his chronological context, as the very beginning of Modern times. It would embody the same operation of leading individuals, and oneself, to a loss of certainty and truth. Socrates had performed the same operation, back in an ancient historical setting. In the second edition of *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Audi (1999) documented that Socrates' "daily occupation was adversarial public conversation with anyone willing to argue with him [...], challenged the moral complacency of his fellow citizens, and embarrassed them with their inability to answer such questions as 'What is virtue?'" (p. 892).

By committing to such a task, commonly accepted customs and historical practices could be criticized, one by one, and true wisdom could be promoted: a negative philosophic point of view. Also, like Socrates, Kierkegaard focused his intellectual efforts on understanding what it meant to be a human, and how to pursue a life worth living through the valuable practice - and art - of midwifery; that is, Socrates' service as delivered by Irony. Socrates also believed that 'the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being' (Plato, 399 BC). This would be Kierkegaard's Socratic task, as described in the first part of this paper.

First, this article focuses on Kierkegaard reaching the historical person behind the mythological figure of Socrates and his ethical perspective. A parallel perspective and method for achieving it would bring Kierkegaard unwanted political consequences with the Clergy of his time, which were included in the Socratic legacy. Socrates had experienced the inescapable destiny linked to the commitment to his method before Kierkegaard. Both Socrates' and Kierkegaard's understanding and midwifery methods would represent an extraordinary legacy for humanity, as relevant in the 21st century as before. There is a Genealogy² of midwifery in this transition, from Maieutics to Irony, as implemented by Kierkegaard, in a different historical context each time.

In Kierkegaard's case, his own and personal belief in God was linked to inwardness. He believed that both subjectivity and the acceptance of uncertainty were what made a person a truly existing individual, taking responsibility for their personal views while obeying a rather natural human tendency: the desire to know. But Kierkegaard's perspective could be pointing at a relevant remark on human existence as a paradox: a fulfilling one is also cruel and painful because it is politically incorrect.

In present times, guidance and social connection of the individual have become very inconsistent while they remain necessary when pursuing psychological survival, particularly in the field of religious or spiritual belief. Ogilvie (2014) links believing in God and the afterlife, for instance, to social survival, by saying that

2. The term may be fairly understood as a historical phenomenon by which philosophical ideas, embodied in words, are named differently each time, while referring to similar ideas with different political implications each time. It is not relevant in this paper to conceive the concept of Genealogy in terms of a technique applied to the study of History, for questioning commonly understood emergent philosophical and social beliefs or concepts within a given moment of history, as done by Nietzsche or Foucault.

it “can become as critical to our survival now and especially forever” (p.3), referring to its comforting effect, as opposed to the natural terrors of disappearing forever. So, today, there is not a consistent point of reference to ‘know’ something according to a rather mainstream truth to obey or follow, as it is the case with religious belief. There is not a widely shared perspective of reality among people of the same country, and not even in the same religion, as there used to be in Kierkegaard’s time.

It is possible to conceive that there is an absence of a strongly shared truth from which take a distance in the first place, and one could think that this absence is similar to Kierkegaard’s negativity regarding the lack of something in the application of Irony, but this is not the case. Kierkegaard’s negativity consists of taking distance from specific ideas that belong to the outwardness of knowledge, which is in the outside of the individual: in their social context. Even if this idea seems to contradict this human tendency to pursue psychological well-being using obedience and a sense of truth to adhere, in Kierkegaard’s view, inwardness, which prevents individuals from returning to innocence, superstition, or from living under a state of non-chosen political subjection is also natural and, apparently, more meaningful. Kierkegaard had this intuition in which subjectivity is essential for bringing special meaning to human life. Not only does this ethical exercise of inwardness bring sense to life, but also a less fragile understanding of it, despite the anxiety it creates.

When Kierkegaard (1992b) develops on his concept of irony, he states that it is defined by negativity and establishes the degree of subjectivity, and that “it is infinite, because it

does not negate this or that phenomenon [...] [what] it negates is a higher something that still is not. The irony established nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it”. He continues to say that “In irony, the subject is negatively free, since the actuality that is supposed to give the subject content is not there [and it] gives the ironist a certain enthusiasm, because he becomes intoxicated [...] in the infinity of possibilities.” (p. 262)

Kierkegaard’s view is relevant in the 21st Century because there is an excess of types, sources, and channels of information today. An ethical perspective of inwardness without the mediation of any existent idea of truth about important subjects might contribute to create a method to help individuals learn a way to elucidate their political views, by which they could be responsible.

1. Kierkegaard’s Socratic Task

Kierkegaard was interested in an operation or art that he would call Irony, which allows accepted customs and historical practices to be criticized. Kierkegaard said that his task was a ‘Socratic task.’ He took Socrates as a personal analogy or as a model for his own life. In *The Concept of Irony* (Kierkegaard, 1992b), he was explicit to compare this operation with what Socrates had already done when he questioned people who he would go to, to get them to come to the truth about anything by themselves. They implicitly ‘had’ it within. In both cases, the point was to use a critical reflection to call into question traditional beliefs and ways of thinking. Kierkegaard conceived modern Irony as a useful method for his time, as well as ancient

Socratic Method Maieutics had been for its creator. In this case, the idea was to reduce another person's approach to some question regarding Christianity. Thus, that person would go into a state of what is called Aporia, or being at a loss: the person would be inwardly questioned about his or her own conceptions, which would not survive such close examination.

Socrates' lack of any positive philosophical doctrine or theory to offer to anybody had a further and deeper purpose. Using a rather destructive, nonetheless loving, attitude of refuting what others said, a gift of negativity was offered. By refusing to present a positive thesis, that is, a doctrine with positive content about a given issue and, by saying that he pretended to 'learn' from others, he ended up offering something: an open free path to inward and subjective knowledge. His method, Irony, would help understand that ultimate positive theories were meant to become insufficient. Those positive theories, of the outward, could be scientific or religious: all agreed, practiced, official, controlled and even, imposed by others. In Kierkegaard's words, "Out of love of humankind, out of despair over my awkward predicament of having achieved nothing and of being unable to make anything easier than it had already been made, out of genuine interest in those who make everything easy, I comprehended that this was my task: to make difficulties everywhere." (Kierkegaard, 1992a).

Irony consisted in talking to people who claimed to know something about some particular area and begging them to teach on the topic or to give a definition of something. Kierkegaard would go on and insist on being ignorant on the subject. Eventually, people would grow tired of the continuous refuting to every answer, and their unsustainable perspectives. Such was

Søren Kierkegaard's adoption of the Socratic Method and Socrates' negative task of bringing people to their actual ethical existence, by allowing them to see their ignorance with regards to common sense knowledge. The fascinated Kierkegaard saw in his Danish society of 19th century a context in which this method could be operational.

For Kierkegaard, his Irony had a world-historical validity as it was valid for Socrates back in his time, just as it would be valid in any given historical context. Socrates' 'Irony' -Maieutics- aimed at the unreflective proponents of traditional Athenian life and the Sophists, who would make continuous unfounded positive claims or shallow relative assertions. Similarly, many people in the 19th century Copenhagen were modern versions of the Sophists: the members of the Clergy, who claimed to know something about Christianity and taught their ideas in exchange of material benefit for the church. Any of their argumentations was typically in the interest of the speakers, and not in that of a higher truth, even less, in that of the listener and their inwardness. Such modern 'sophists' would undertake both, a positive action and an apparent negative one. They would go on and say that there was no absolute truth - truths of traditional custom, morality, and ethics- and, at the same time, they would leave space for an arbitrary or contingent bias dictated by their interests.

In this way, Kierkegaard learned about further possibilities of inwardness, separated from the historical outwardness, which would organize reality in a new, different manner each time. He found ways to develop a personal goal about the understanding of his days, of himself, and of his rapports with 'actuality,' as he would call

it. He opposed to the way in which mainstream society and its ‘sophists’ supported different versions of reality, to the possibility of living a reality of one’s own (I=I or ‘first person in singular equals first person in singular’). And, living a reality of one’s own does not mean living in delusion, but rather, according to a reflective, ethical perspective.

In his words, ‘Subjectivity is truth; truth is subjectivity’ (Kierkegaard, 1992a). By this, he meant that subjectivity, which is belief, is truth, and that truth is by default subjective. He also intended to say that truth is to the individual what comes from his or her own experience of reality. So, if we assume that we, humans, are in a state of constant development and not yet truly whole in our existence, then we must assume as well that truly-existing is possible only through a consistent and ethical attempt of completing one’s life. Thus, one would get closer to the truth. For Christian Kierkegaard, an individual can have a fulfilling existence, only if they are reflective believers.

1.1 A Full Legacy

Besides the pretensions of undertaking a Socratic Task, Kierkegaard was trying to reach the historical person behind the mythological figure of Socrates and his ethical perspective. He had to learn about the political consequences of such ethical practice: an inescapable and transcendental destiny. Kierkegaard also discovered that Socrates had been eventually compared to Jesus Christ: he had also been considered to be an ethically righteous figure who happened to have been prosecuted in legal proceedings and, ultimately, executed. People around them had despised, attacked or, simply, not accepted their pretensions (Stewart, 2015). Socrates’ myth had

to do with the mainstream’s perspective on the character, his nature, his message, his intention, both before and after death. The myth undermined the actual message to the public. The ‘god-man’ and the philosopher would be treated as objects of the caprices of the sophists of the moment, who would make of them a fiction tale. Kierkegaard pointed out the fact that the Sophists of antiquity were comparable to the Pharisees in the historical context of Jesus (Stewart, 2015).

It is important to bear in mind that Kierkegaard was a Christian, who claimed to believe in God as he believed in inwardness, just as Socrates did before the Christian era. To Kierkegaard, they had something else in common: the sensation of being driven by some invisible divine governance. To Kierkegaard, God had a plan for his life, by guiding him in his writings in the same way that Socrates had been guided by the Daimon, back in ancient times. In fact, Kierkegaard would refer to Socrates as a Christian man (Stewart, 2015). In Kierkegaard’s view, there was a connection between free inwardness of the individual and the soul.

Kierkegaard’s perspective on Christianity led him to believe that a person’s subjectivity and openness to the negativity of uncertainty prepare him or her to be responsible individuals, who are ready for the external world. As for the present times, the task of breaking people’s complacency should be a major goal because modernity has generated a plural society that should be ready for growing diversity and acknowledge larger amounts of information. In a plural society, every single individual, with subjectivity, should be given the power to understand their world, which anyway implies an ethical exercise based on efforts, reflection,

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sacrifices, and choices. Midwifery methods should be available to help.

The Danish philosopher studied Socrates as a model for his own life and, consequently, he learned about the 'bitterness of the hemlock' by himself: its harshness for the soul. He would have to experience it by himself in his own time, although in a less physical manner. He was not put to death as Socrates was, but he understood how it was to be rejected, on the grounds of provocation of the Clergy. Clergymen were considered to be wise by most people bearing a mainstream perspective of Christianity, and there was a price to pay when turning away from their view. There was also a price to pay when questioning the modern world of objective truth in science. So there were two sources of admired and accepted wisdom for most people in his time: mainstream religion and science. Kierkegaard understood that separating from the rest of society, from the Clergy's views and from scientific methodologies to deal with nature, was a necessary step to inwardness, or to the source of ultimate knowledge.

To Kierkegaard, an individual who was ready for uncertainty would not maintain traditional values and customs and, thus, would turn into a social threat, who would no longer accept official ex-

planations to Christian subjects. With the help of their inwardness, everything would be called into question. To the philosopher, this came naturally to everyone, and proof of this was to be found in uncountable versions of ancient myths dealing with human nature. He believed that if they were given a chance, people would prove their ability to reason and to examine their beliefs critically.

Critical thinking can help humans reshape their entire lives. It can contribute to improving individuals' lives through inwardness, and through negativity because not attaching to specific ideas, concepts, or definitions makes it possible for them to rediscover reality, and to understand it from a personal and responsible -active- point of view.

2. Human Existence: A Paradox

Like Socrates, Kierkegaard established an unpopular hypothesis according to which life is a paradox because, to be truly existing, one must be a subjective thinker following one's inwardness while making a 'leap of faith' (Stewart, 2015): faith in oneself. In other words, a fulfilling life must be guided by a permanent attitude of objective uncertainty, which is a movement from the inertia of facts, to the recognition of the existence of subjectivity or inwardness, and its role in the pursuit of personal truth. Only through uncertainty does a truth-seeker make a final decision on how certain they are of their beliefs because they have accepted it as the ultimate objective fact. According to Kierkegaard, one should desire uncertainty, for it is what truth is defined as (Kierkegaard, 1992a); in Socrates words, '[...] all I know is that I know nothing' (Plato, 380 BC).

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It is important to notice that the objectivity of uncertainty, or its existence as the only truth in human experience regarding knowledge, does not correspond to the objectivity of science or outwardness of knowledge. In the first case, it is the individual who can corroborate the truth regarding his or her place in the world, through inwardness. Science or outwardness, on the other hand, deals with certainty, with the visible, the audible, with the measurable, and equally by all.

None of this was ever suggested by Kierkegaard's contemporaries or those of Socrates. They had become complacent; they were halted in their reflection by attempts of quantification and facts. It was the hope for certainty that counted for them. In Kierkegaard's modernity, such complacent people representing knowledge had been part of a battle against belief; they represented science. According to the Danish philosopher, science belonged to the outward, the truth that created objective knowledge for the benefit of the universal, and people's everyday lives. Religion, on the other hand, should be of the inward, appealing to the individual, to the acceptance of uncertainty, as means to find an inner truth (Kierkegaard, 1845).

As previously mentioned, it was his personal view of the Christian religion, rather than the

description of the Clergy of the Copenhagen of his time, what he was thus trying to defend. There were still other views of Christianity that did not belong to the inward aspect of human experience. What he pretended was to examine hypotheses about what truth is and how to reach it, with the use of uncertainty, or through a permanent state of active doubt. At the same time, he tried to explain the role of the emissaries of the objective knowledge, or science, in the context of the collective experience of reality. In summary, two movements belong to two entirely different aspects of the human experience, and it is possible to see in Kierkegaard's separation of inwardness and outwardness that the two experiences are indeed able to coexist.

3. From Socratic Maieutics to Ironic Midwifery: A Timeless Genealogy

Socrates, unlike his predecessors, did not focus his intellectual efforts on understanding nature; instead, he centered his studies on a completely new topic: what it meant to be a human. He thus started a history of a body of concepts, or a Genealogy to be continued by Kierkegaard. In Socrates' Ancient Greece, religion was much more rooted in everyday life than ever in history, so, for example, every situation of daily life had a religious explanation, and there was little reason to put things into question. But then came Socrates. He would challenge an individual with multiple naive questions until his or her lack of knowledge became evident. The Greek philosopher would then refuse to tell these people what they should know instead: they would find out for themselves. He applied

his Maieutic method in this way. He thus proved that knowledge is not something that can be given to an individual because it comes from the inside. In the philosopher's words, '...wisdom is not of man, but of God alone' (Plato, 399 BC).

In XIX Century Copenhagen, Kierkegaard found himself confronted with the same issue. This time, Christianity had been the official religion of the Kingdom of Denmark for hundreds of years, and people were used to being Christian, and consequently, according to Kierkegaard, unreflective of their faith (Kierkegaard, 1992a). His point was that a real Christian would not have such attitude. He would say: 'If anyone thinks he is a Christian and yet is indifferent toward being that, he is not one at all' (Kierkegaard, 1995). It was Socrates' questioning that unveiled to Kierkegaard that the visible faith, or an outward declaration of one's believing in God, was not enough, and that, in fact, it was a sign of complacency. After all, it was easy to declare a belief, but hard to reflect on it. He argued that, instead, the inward invisible faith was real. What follows is that '...subjectivity is truth' (Kierkegaard, 1992a). So, inwardness or subjectivity would be the key to access truth, other than the objective or scientific truth, but equally important and fundamental for a true Christian. He focused on the idea of the negative method to have a wise person to accept his or her lack of knowledge, and embrace the inevitable uncertainty, that is, what it means to be a human, and a Christian.

The role of midwifery in legitimate Christianity, as well as the rest of Kierkegaard's understanding of Modernity, would still be among the central problems of philosophy, within modern movements such as Existentialism, Post-structuralism, and Post-modernism, after Kierkegaard's days. But the Danish philosopher had already examined in advance the implications of modern life, and he discovered that there was a problem associated with these relativistic philosophies, with subjectivism and with the crisis of religious faith: the loss of meaning. However, things were not as complicated back in his century as they are today, and massive consequences of the loss of meaning were not as evident while Kierkegaard was alive: he predicted them.

In the 21st century, many people feel insecure and lonely, traditions often seem obsolete, and ideas and technologies suffer transformations very quickly. There is a disconnection among individuals and between them and their social context. The current century is a rather disoriented era where there is not a unique, and lasting mainstream belief to hold on to, and then refute. But Relativism and Subjectivism, like Kierkegaard's, had emerged precisely to refute existing beliefs and ideas. The problem today is their excessiveness and weak psychological effect of well-being for many individuals. Then, if relevant to the present day, these modern relativistic perspectives of great actuality must play a different role. It is still important to

continue to understand reality by other than just outwardness and science. It surely is still important to be reflective, and there are more recent developments of midwifery methods, like psychoanalysis, through which one can use inwardness to understand one's relation to reality.

Guidance is necessary for pursuing psychological well-being, security, and comfort because it helps people feel they belong to something, but it is also important in new ways today. Guidance used to be provided by predominant religions, and social institutions, but the places where it comes from nowadays are too many, and it is often delivered inefficiently. Many people are seen voluntarily joining all sorts of groups, churches, armies, associations, communities, and identity labels, oftentimes as desperate adults feeling lost and depressed. And still, after holding on to their groups' premises, symbols and rules, they seem to be lacking a consistent or satisfying source of feedback regarding themselves and their surroundings, as though they were left behind, abandoned to their innocent, superstitious, and continuous search for more directions. Perhaps, a better degree of self-understanding could guide individuals in the first place, and help them know where to go, what to hear, who to ask, and what to do about the new ideas they get. Kierkegaard pointed at the individuals' needs to be guided by their inwardness to pursue a fulfilling existence, and maybe today that means acquiring the ability to discern.

When one begins to have a closer contact with an inward life, then, it is impossible to return to innocence or superstition. One will no longer be led by the surveillance of higher authorities or representatives of diverse sorts of power, nor by confusion or lack of the "right" piece of

information. Kierkegaard must have meant that there must be some alternative, and it is to be found in the progressive history of inwardness, in this genealogy of midwifery methods while in contact with other subjectivities and with the objective of exploring oneself. There is room, and a big need, for methodologies capable of giving people that inner power.

Psychoanalysis is therefore related to Maieutics and Irony, but all three address particular subjects of their historical interest. While Socrates applied his method to discuss nature and common sense because that matter the most in his days, Kierkegaard used his to explore typically Christian topics like belief, morals, the church, or evil and, particularly, what it meant to be a Christian. Freud, this time, as well as other psychoanalysts after him, was interested in the subjective experience regarding other things that typically take their time to come to the surface and that have a different relation to language and spoken communication. He was interested in repressed contents of the subjective experience -the psyche- that are shown in various ways. Nonetheless, the three stressed the difference between the outwardness of knowledge, as shared and used collectively, and the inwardness of the human experience, which lacks pre-established truths and theories that explain what needs to be explained in each case.

Socrates and Kierkegaard are still relevant today because it would be completely absurd to deny history's awareness regarding human's intellectual possibilities. To this day, knowledge is power, be it subjective or objective and, however, it needs to find a way to empower individuals more efficiently, in a moment of history when scientific knowledge cannot be used to benefit most people anyway. Something must

have gone wrong along the path of knowledge, and probably, it was something that created new types of superstition, social morals, and complacency in recent times, and it seems to be the case because very often, people are not being capable of taking advantage of the power of subjectivity. So, how is it that we, as humans, should be careful of not giving in to the contemporary fears of solitude and confusion if not through some guided inwardness, as negative as Kierkegaard's Irony or Socrates' Maieutics?

4. Final Considerations

A political position may be understood as an ethical path and a political view and attitude that is sometimes opposite to the mainstream, but that needs to be followed because it exists and because it has emerged from inwardness, regardless of the undesirable consequences of being or acting in a politically incorrect way. This position was what Kierkegaard and Socrates put into practice, and this was the methodological legacy of Socrates to Kierkegaard and others after him, like Freud. In their case, a political position without any commandments or rules to strictly give other so they could follow -a negative one-, or the task of bringing people to their actual ethical existence became possible. Now, the individuals they encountered, as it was the case for Freud's patients, could reach a political position of their own, different from the mainstream. Ever since Socrates, the methodological idea has been to practice a way of living that had little to do with a state of subjection to common ways of life and external modes of understanding life. This way of living was, as based on inwardness or subjectivity, meant for Kierkegaard, a Christian, a legitimate way of believing in God. Both Socrates and Kierkegaard

Both Socrates and Kierkegaard knew that a negative attitude and awareness that enabled individuals to understand themselves better, by embracing the lack of certainty or negativity, implied separating from the rest of the society in a certain way

knew that a negative attitude and awareness that enabled individuals to understand themselves better, by embracing the lack of certainty or negativity, implied separating from the rest of the society in a certain way.

Nevertheless, despite the historical learnings and the development of those midwifery methods along the history of humankind, dealing with the importance of inwardness or subjectivity, the question for many people today is often the need to find a solid reality to hold on to, somewhere outside themselves. Unlike what happened in the past, the outwardness of objective thinking and scientific theory is not as consistent and uniform today because there is a lot to be said about so many topics and because society is as heterogeneous as it never has been. So, perhaps, the role of subjectivity and its negativity or lack of an external idea or concept to guide individuals, is to enable them to find their way among the "excess" of objective knowledge coming from the outward, as rich and psychologically inconsistent as it is today.

Søren Kierkegaard had already examined the implications of modern life and objective

knowledge of science when he discovered that there was a problem associated with a lack of meaning. But if inwardness and outwardness are seen as two inescapable human experiences in history, it might be possible to see that they must find a way to coexist, even if they lead to different ethical paths. One cannot exist without the other because it is important to know about the historical surroundings to discover one's relationship with them. Midwifery methods would be the way to explore the personal relation with history.

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