



Philosophical Anthropology

Understanding Human Nature: Examples from Philosophy and the Arts

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ABSTRACT: Ours is not the first time philosophers have looked to art for examples to illustrate their arguments. One example would be Kierkegaard, who turned to Mozart's operas in an attempt to expose what he called the *aesthetic realm of existence*. I hold that if Kierkegaard lived today, he would consider the main character of Nikita Mikhalkov's *Dark Eyes* (1987) as a prototype of the aesthetic way of existence. In order to support my thesis, I first discuss Kierkegaard's theory of the three spheres of existence. I look especially at what he considers to be the main feature of the *aesthetic stage*, as well as the figure of Don Giovanni in Mozart's opera. Second, I will look at the character of Romano Podroni in *Dark Eyes*. Finally, I will point out what makes these two characters prototypes of the aesthetic existence: the inhuman way in which they live the temporal dimension of human existence.

1. Kierkegaard's theory of the spheres of existence

The question of human existence is the focal point of all Kierkegaard's thought. For Kierkegaard, existing meant becoming more and more individual, but this is not given to all human beings in the same measure, because we may be living in an inauthentic way. The fact that someone belongs to the species *homo sapiens* does not guarantee that that person leads a *human* existence. In fact, Kierkegaard seems to think that few people — or at least, a minority of people — genuinely live as human beings.

So, what does Kierkegaard mean by living in a fully human way? In his view, existence is above all something that has to be shaped. People must *make* themselves if they want to *be* themselves. "A man cannot evade this self-realisation; that would be as impossible as evading one's very self — which is really the same thing, as the self is the same as self-realisation". (1) The self cannot be itself unless it is creating itself. So, the fact that people have to form themselves means that human existence is a *task*. (2)

Kierkegaard writes of three basic stages in this process of self-realisation: the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage and the religious stage. (3) All human beings are currently at one of these stages, depending on the extent to which they have achieved their life-project. Each stage is a way of seeing life, a way of understanding the world. They are different ways of living out one's existence, independent spheres of life, situations which embody a certain stability. Living fully in the aesthetic sphere will never lead to the ethical one, and the upholding of ethics will never open the door to religion. The stages of existence relate to

each other like the rungs of a ladder leading to a more perfect existence: and it is impossible to move from one to another without a leap. The transition from one stage to the next means that one has to break with the lower one, and this is an all-or-nothing decision, which is not a natural follow-on from the preceding stage, but a complete negation of it.

2. The features of the *aesthetic stage*

As we might expect, Kierkegaard does not describe the features of the aesthetic existence in systematic treatise form, but rather sketches them out in the course of his pseudonymous works by describing characters who embody this way of life. (4) Of all of them it is the figure of Don Juan — as he is depicted in the European literary tradition and above all as he is brought alive in Da Ponte's libretto for Mozart's *Don Giovanni* — who is the paradigmatic incarnation of this stage of existence.

Kierkegaard maintains that Don Giovanni has all the exuberance and primitive impulse of man before self-awareness has dawned: he lives for the immediate satisfaction of his senses, and is the embodiment of the kind of person who can only see him/herself in terms of the senses. Living for the moment entails a negation of the ability to reflect, which is characteristic of the spirit. This means that Don Giovanni lacks inner life: he simply enjoys himself, flits from one pleasure to another, one conquest to another, as Leporello tells us in his *Aria*. His life is a flow, but without a flowing subject. It is like the bubbles in the wine which gives its name to another of the best-known pieces of the Opera. The aesthetic existence is thus an inconsistent kind of phenomenon which wafts here and there in an evanescent world. This is why Kierkegaard says that the best way of expressing the levity of the aesthetic existence is through music: pure experience which only exists in the present.

On the basis of Kierkegaard's descriptions of characters who live in the aesthetic stage, we can attempt a more systematic formulation of the features which he attributes to this sphere of existence. The first point concerning this initial stage is its universality: everyone has at some time been in it, but not everyone has managed to get beyond it. The aesthete prolongs his stay in the ignorance or unconsciousness — which is the state that all human beings are born to —, letting himself be carried along by events without taking any decisions about the kind of life he wants for himself. During the aesthetic stage, human actions are not based on reason: indeed, the person involved launches himself into action without reflecting.

This means that one of the characteristics of the aesthetic stage is vacuity, the senselessness of living on the very surface of things without internalising one's actions or awareness of one's own subjectivity. Aestheticism is not a superficial manifestation: it is manifest superficiality. It consists of living for the moment, frivolously and randomly, as there is no deep reason prompting one's actions even though at root the driving force behind this way of existing is the lust for pleasure. Hedonism and enjoyment are the features most properly associated with the aesthetic stage. In it, the individual does not allow any kind of restraint to limit him, and he only heeds the fleeting imperatives of his lust for pleasure, which send him in perpetual pursuit of fresh sensations.

This means that the aesthete is someone who needs to keep changing activity, and he can only derive pleasure from things which still hold the glamour of the new. But the time comes when his capacity for enjoyment is blunted by the emotional whirlpool that always surrounds him, and as he seeks ever more intense sensations to quench his thirst for enjoyment, he becomes inured to the simple joys of everyday life. (5)

Kierkegaard describes the vertigo which aesthetes experience in the following words: "Let us look at how they fling themselves from one pleasure to another: their password is variation. Do they desire something that is always the same? On the contrary, they want

something that is never the same. In other words, they desire many different things, and he who wants in these circumstances is not only innerly dispersed, but also divided. He desires one thing, and then yearns for the opposite, since the unity of pleasure is a chimera and an illusion: his aim is diversity of delights. When someone has pleasure at his service, he goes calling for something new: change, movement, variation". (6)

As a result, the aesthetic life is linked to the present, to the moment. If pleasure is felt, it is in the here and now. "The best expression of the aesthetic existence comes down to saying that it lies in the moment", (7) Kierkegaard concludes. So, when pleasure is what someone wants, delay makes no sense.

In this situation there is always *anxiety*. This can turn into the force which produces the impulse needed to trigger the formation of the self; but it can also produce fear, in which case the aesthete may prefer to remain as he is. Among the different ways the aesthete has of fleeing or ignoring this anxiety, Kierkegaard mentions the following: submerging oneself in the activities of everyday life, chasing after entertainment and distractions, reducing all events to the level of imagination and memory, pursuing whims, trying to relive happy experiences, and irony. However, none of these stratagems can fend off the underlying anxiety, which undermines the aesthetic approach to human existence and its values. The aesthetic stage meets with defeat in the form of *despair*: the person who lives at this level is desperate, whether he/she knows it or not, and regardless of any attempt to conceal it.

We can conclude by saying that Kierkegaard's view of aesthetics as a way of life is that it consists of a kind of scattering of the self through a lack of interior life and self-awareness. This dispersal is also reflected in the way that Kierkegaard does not formulate a single human archetype who is the embodiment of it, but presents an array of characters: the sensuality of Don Juan, the fantasy of John the Seductor, and the despair of Ahasverus are the steps in a process which starts in sensuality and culminates in despair.

3. Nikita Mikhalkov's *Black Eyes* (1987)

Black Eyes is a Russo-Italian co-production based on four short stories by Anton Chekhov: *The lady with the little dog*, *The birthday party*, *Anna around my neck*, and *My wife*. The title is taken from the well-known Russian song which hints at the eye-colour and nationality of the heroine. The script, by Alexander Adabachian and Nikita Mikhalkov with the collaboration of Suso Cecchi D'Amico, is a fine example of how to remain true to the spirit of an author without having to adapt any of his works literally. The leading roles are superbly cast: Marcello Mastroianni (Romano), Silvana Mangano (Elisa), Elena Sofonova (Ana), and Vsevolod Larionov (Pavel) bring great strength and credibility to their parts.

The film begins and ends on board a ship crossing the Mediterranean in 1911. Romano is alone in the dinning room, drinking and looking at a photograph of his family. Pavel comes in for a drink, and a waiter tells him that the bar does not open for another hour. Romano recognises Pavel's accent and invites him to join him. This brief sequence is enough to introduce the two characters: Romano must be someone with enough influence on the ship to be able to drink even when the bar is not open to the public; Pavel is a cheerful middle-aged Russian tradesman who is on his honeymoon. His appearance tells us that he is comfortably off.

After the introductions, Romano begins to tell his tale. This launches us into a lengthy flashback, interrupted on a few occasions by short but expressive close-ups of the two men talking. Their faces betray the effects that the story has on their consciences: interest, surprise, joy, guilt, nostalgia, reproach. The film ends when the time comes to prepare the tables for dinner. It is then that we learn with surprise that Romano works as a waiter. And our surprise turns to amazement when Pavel goes to fetch his wife — who is resting in a

deckchair on the deck — and what we have been suspecting for the last few minutes is confirmed. (8)

The painstaking cinematographic production is all at the service of the *story* that is being told. It is the story itself that is the true hero of the film, and Romano's narrative is the thread which holds the film together. Although the story is improbable it is believable, which accounts for a large amount of its dramatic potency; Mikhalkov conveys this in a masterly fashion and manages the emotional angles of the story with sobriety.

4. The character or Romano Padroni, hero of *Black Eyes*

As I mentioned at the beginning, my thesis is that the character of Romano Padroni is a clear instance of someone living in the aesthetic sphere of existence; from this point of view, he can be compared to Mozart's Don Giovanni. The film *Black Eyes* obviously admits many different readings, and deals with other issues of great anthropological significance which I have no time to discuss here. I shall focus only on this particular aspect, which also helps us to understand how art can aid our understanding of philosophy and life.

Who is Romano? To answer this question we must look at what we are told as well as what we are shown. In 1911, Romano must have been in his fifties, because the story he tells Pavel happened in 1903, and by that time he had been married to Elisa for over 25 years. If we compare his physical appearance now and 8 years before, we can see that he has not improved with time: he has grown fatter, lost some hair, and his puffy, reddened face shows the ravages of time, neglect and alcohol.

He is a talkative man who is happy to go on for hours, and we can see that he seeks to impress, or at least entertain his audience, even if he has to invent fabulous tales which he does not really believe himself. But when he tells Pavel his life story he is being sincere. We learn that he is Italian, from a poor background, and studied architecture to little avail before marrying the only daughter of a wealthy Roman banker for love. He got used to the good life, to being waited on, to leisure. He was fond of wine and women and grew bored with married life, so he decided to spend a while at a spa, on the pretext that he needed to be cured of an imaginary disease. There he met Anna, a Russian lady with a little dog, with whom he had a passionate affair. Anna had married a rich man whom she did not love in order to help her family, and had been faithful to him until she met Romano. After spending a night together, Anna fled to Russia to rejoin her husband, leaving Romano a dramatic farewell letter.

For his part, Romano took it as just another conquest, a brief affair like so many others. But some months later he realised that he still loved her and could not live without her, and decided to go to Russia to look for her. Overcoming countless obstacles placed in his way by the Tsarist bureaucracy, he managed to reach Sisojev, and proposed Anna that they should leave their families to live together.

"Everything will be easy now -Romano tells her-. Love me as I love you, and we shall be very happy, Anna. I shall leave everything. We shall not lie or deceive anyone. You tell everything to your husband, frankly and openly, and I shall talk to my wife. She will understand. I shall go, explain all to her, and then I shall come back. This is what you want, isn't it? Love without deceit. Anna, will you wait for me? Tell me, answer me, will you wait for me?"

Anna agrees. But when he gets back to Italy, Romano says nothing to Elisa. In fact, he lies when she asks about what he has been doing, because she suspects that he went to Russia in search of a woman he loved.

At that moment, Pavel interrupts the story to ask Romano what had happened to Anna, because she "loved him, had waited for him, and might still be waiting for him". Then one of the most dramatic pieces of dialogue in the whole film takes place. Romano, who has made no effort to get in touch with Anna again, declares: "But eight years have gone past! Even the dog must be dead! Anyway, you tell me, what was there between us, after all? And if there was something, what was it? For heaven's sake, when all's said and done, no one remembers anybody. You've only got to think of that, and your life becomes peaceful and serene again".

- "You are free to think what you like about yourself, that's your right, -says Pavel- but the same doesn't hold for everybody".

- "Look, open your eyes. Open them and look around. We're living in the twentieth century", replays Romano.

At this point, Pavel grows indignant and tells Romano his own story. He finishes by saying: "Everything counts, day by day, all our actions. Everything goes with us to the grave, and more probably beyond it. This ship will rot and the sea will dry up, but the good we have done and the evil we have caused will always remain somewhere".

Romano seems to react and take stock of his life. He answers with tears in his eyes: "I have lived every day as if it were a parody, a poor imitation. I have had everything and nothing, not a real home or a real family. I don't remember anything. If I were to die at this very moment and my Eternal Father said to me 'Romano, what do you remember about your life?' I will answer: 'The lullaby my mother sang, Elisa's face on the first night, and the clouds in Russia'".

5. Living for the moment

I said before that one of the main features of Kierkegaard's aesthetic life is that the person passing through this stage lives for the *moment*, entirely in the *present*. After thinking about Romano's story and listening to his last words, we can see that his way of living in time is just the same as what Kierkegaard says about the aesthete.

Romano has hardly any memories, and the one he does have are intangible like Elisa's face on the first night, light and diaphanous like the clouds, fluid like the music of a lullaby. Nor does he have any plans for the future. He identifies with gypsies, nomadic people who are always moving on to new places, who are rootless, who live for the day, enjoying whatever fate tosses to them at any particular time.

However, there is an exclusively human way of living in time. Even though, like all other beings we cannot, as a matter of fact, escape from the present because it is the only time that really exists — the past is no longer, and the future is not yet — we have the ability to stand above its passing, and even to overrule it.

Not only can we retain the past in our memory, recalling it as often as we wish, saving it from the annihilation of oblivion; but we also accumulate time, and each of us is now the product of all the things he has been. On the other hand, we can intentionally anticipate the future, (including the fact of our own future death). And not just this: we are also able to committing it in the present with a free act of the will, and remaining faithful to this commitment. Nietzsche said that one of the specific traits which distinguish the human being is that it is the only animal that can promise. I think that he was right.

The ability to take in our own past in the present, and to keep to what we promise is one of the greatest proofs of man's mastery. It amounts to being able to overcome the passing of

time, to escape from this fourth dimension of earthly life and, in some way, place oneself in the sphere of eternity.

Notes

(1) KIERKEGAARD, S., *La maladie a la mort*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, Editions de L'Orante, Paris, 1984, vol. 16, p. 175.

(2) I have discussed at length the subject of the self-constitution of human existence in my work *El yo como síntesis según Kierkegaard*, University of Navarra, 1988, to which I refer those interested in pursuing this question further.

(3) Cfr. KIERKEGAARD, S., *Postscriptum*, vol. 11, p. 448.

(4) Cfr. KIERKEGAARD, *L'Alternative*, part I: specially *Diapsalmata*, *Les stades immédiats de l'Eros ou l'Eros et la musique* and *Le journal du séducteur*, and part II: *L'équilibre de l'esthétique et de l'éthique dans la formation de la personnalité*, vols. 3 - 4; *Les stades sur le chemin de la vie*, part I: *In vino veritas*, vol. 9; and *La répétition*, vol. 5.

(5) Kierkegaard does not reduce the aesthetic attitude to pure sensuality. The aesthetic existence encompasses all attitudes which are directed exclusively towards pleasure, even if this is noble and purely intellectual. Enjoying ideas or delighting in intelligible landscapes is not very different from the pursuit of sensual pleasures, as it amounts to considering that satisfaction is the ultimate objective of one's actions. From the moment when they coincide on a major point -the conception of life- what distinguishes them is secondary. Cfr. *L'Equilibre de l'esthétique et de l'éthique dans la formation de la personnalité*, vol. 3, p. 164.

(6) KIERKEGAARD, S., *Un discours de circonstance*, vol. 13, p. 30

(7) KIERKEGAARD, S., *L'Equilibre ...*, p. 207.

(8) Out of consideration for those who have not yet seen this film, and because of the peculiar nature of this paper, I shall refrain from revealing the contents of the story, and focus only on the possibility of taking Romano as a prototype of the aesthetic existence.