

**K OTÁZKAM SLOBODY, VOĽBY A AUTENTICITY  
V KONTINENTÁLNEJ A ANALYTICKEJ FILOZOFII**

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**THE CHOICE OF ONESELF: REVISITING GUARDINI'S  
CRITIQUE OF KIERKEGAARD'S CONCEPT OF SELFHOOD**

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Kierkegaard's pseudonymous work *The Sickness unto Death* is among his most popular and most commented works. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, numerous philosophers paid close attention to the theory of selfhood systematically ex-

pounded in this work. The study examines the critique of this theory formulated by Romano Guardini in a series of essays published in the 1920s. Guardini's critique is an important contribution to the German mid-war debate on the nature of Kierkegaard's philosophy and continues to provoke scholarly reactions even today. It is, therefore, relevant to study Guardini's arguments in detail in order to see whether his definition of Kierkegaard's theory as "dynamic personalism" is tenable.

**Keywords:** Philosophical anthropology – Theory of selfhood – Despair – Personalism – Philosophy of existence – Ethics – Philosophy of religion

The aim of the present study is to examine Romano Guardini's critique of Søren Kierkegaard's concept of selfhood with a special focus on Guardini's response to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous work *The Sickness unto Death* (1849). The first section describes in broad strokes the German reception of Kierkegaard's philosophical legacy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and Guardini's place in it. The second section analyzes the basic structures of the theory of selfhood as proposed by Kierkegaard's literary persona Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death*. Subsequently, the third section concentrates on a series of essays from the second half of the 1920s in which Guardini formulates his main objections to Anti-Climacus' theory. In the final part Guardini's objections are critically assessed and certain inconsistencies in his interpretation of Anti-Climacus' doctrine are pointed out. As a concluding remark, a brief suggestion is made concerning the underlying motive for Guardini's critique.

### **1. Guardini and the Reception of Kierkegaard's Philosophy in Germany.**

Romano Guardini (1885 – 1965) represents an intriguing figure in the German intellectual life of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A prolific author and an active academician during the time of the Weimar Republic, Guardini rose in post-war Germany to a position of a widely respected intellectual authority. For his rich contribution to the German and European cultural life, as well as for his humanist stances, he was awarded several prestigious honors, including the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade (1952) and the Erasmus Prize (1962).

To the German academic public Guardini was known through his thematically diverse courses at the universities of Berlin, Tübingen and Munich; his leadership role in the academic youth movement; and, above all, through his manifold literary and editorial projects. As a *littérateur* with an extensive knowledge of the Western cultural heritage, Guardini wrote on a broad variety of philosophical, theological and literary subjects.

From the point of view of the present study, it is of particular importance that Guardini played a significant role in the German reception of Kierkegaard's thought in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As is well known, in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the German debate on Kierkegaard intensified in an unprecedented way. This was largely due to the publication of the first comprehensive German translation of Kierkegaard's *oeuvre* – the 12-volume edition of *Gesammelte Werke* (1909 – 1922) [1]—which introduced the world of Kierkegaard's thought to a wide readership. Kierkegaard's importance for German intellectual discourse was in the mid-war period further enhanced by the reception of his philosophy in two increasingly popular traditions of thought: existential

philosophy (e.g. K. Jaspers [2] and M. Heidegger [3]) and dialectical theology (e.g. K. Barth [4] and E. Brunner [5]). However, Kierkegaard soon became a vital topic in other intellectual traditions, as well: in the *milieu* of German Neo-Marxism and the Frankfurt School (e.g. T. W. Adorno [6] and S. Kracauer [7]) and in the international group of Catholic thinkers known as the *Hochland Circle*. The latter centered around the journal *Hochland*—founded by Carl Muth and Paul Huber-Kempton in 1903<sup>1</sup>—and comprised several scholars who shared a genuine interest in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. One of the key promoters of Kierkegaard within the *Circle* was Theodor Haecker, who converted to Catholicism in 1921. Eight years earlier Haecker had published his well-known monograph *Kierkegaard und die Philosophie der Innerlichkeit* [8], and in 1914 he instigated a discussion on Kierkegaard in the trendsetting Austrian journal *Der Brenner*.<sup>2</sup> He continued to write on Kierkegaard after his conversion, authoring, among other things, the monographs *Christentum und Kultur* [10] and *Der Begriff der Wahrheit bei Søren Kierkegaard* [11]. Apart from Haecker, at least three other thinkers associated with the Hochland Circle joined the debate on Kierkegaard in the 1920s and 1930s: Alois Dempf [12], Peter Wust ([13]; [14]) and Romano Guardini ([15]; [16]).

Guardini’s literary confrontation with Kierkegaard stretches continuously from the mid-1920s to mid-1960s, with Kierkegaard’s name appearing most frequently in Guardini’s works from the late 1920s and the 1930s. Already Guardini’s early texts show a rather broad and thorough knowledge of Kierkegaard’s *oeuvre*. Based on his written reflections on Kierkegaard, Guardini can be said to have had a personal “hierarchy” of Kierkegaard’s works, with the following three works at its top: *The Sickness unto Death*, *The Concept of Anxiety* and *Philosophical Fragments* ([15], 14, 23; [17], 207). It was especially *The Sickness unto Death* that exerted a long-term influence on Guardini and provided him with a number of vital impeti. *The Sickness unto Death* had such a significant impact on Guardini because it contained an extensive account of the nature of selfhood. This was a theme that was of utmost importance to Guardini’s own project of philosophical anthropology.

**2. The Model of Selfhood in *The Sickness unto Death*.** *The Sickness unto Death*, whose official author is Kierkegaard’s literary alter ego Anti-Climacus, is part of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authorship and was published in 1849. It is indubitably one of Kierkegaard’s most influential works, famous for its depiction of the structure of the human self, as well as for its analyses of the notion of despair.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail on the history of the *Hochland* journal, see Gilbert Merlio’s article *Carl Muth et la revue Hochland. Entre catholicisme culturel et catholicisme politique* ([9], 191 – 208).

<sup>2</sup> The 1914 issues of *Der Brenner* contained several essays by Haecker that treated Kierkegaard. They also contained an extensive response to Haecker’s interpretation of Kierkegaard by Carl Dallago. See especially issues nos. 10 – 14, 16 – 17, 19 – 20.

<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard’s theory of selfhood in *The Sickness unto Death* has been continuously discussed in Kierkegaard scholarship. For a better overview of recent debates see, for example, the 1996 and 1997 issues of *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* and volume 19 of the *International Kierkegaard Commentary*.

The leading theme of the work is *despair*—a sickness of the self—which Anti-Climacus examines from a variety of perspectives. Before he proceeds to an in-depth analysis of this multi-faceted phenomenon, he provides a succinct description of what the self actually is and how it comes about.

Anti-Climacus identifies three fundamental levels at which the constitution of selfhood takes place. His essential finding is that at all these levels the constitution of selfhood happens in the form of a relation. Thus Anti-Climacus presents a complex relational model by which he attempts to demonstrate that the self is constituted as the interplay of three parallel and interdependent relations, whose successful realization enables the full unfolding of human selfhood.

Firstly, Anti-Climacus points out the fact that the human is a synthesis, a relation between two ([22], 129; [23], 13). He claims that at the most basic level the human is not a static substance but a dynamic relational entity: a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, the physical and the psychical, necessity and freedom ([22], 129, 141, 158; [23], 13, 25, 43). This synthesis is the most fundamental relational structure of the human, but it is not the self yet. It is merely the first condition, presupposition, possibility of selfhood.

The human self emerges when a second relation takes place: when the synthesis relates itself to itself. The self is thus defined as a reflexive relation. In Anti-Climacus' own words, the process of the constitution of the self has the following dynamic: "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself" ([22], 129; [23], 13).

Drawing on more traditional philosophical terminology, Anti-Climacus suggests that the self can be adequately described with the term *spirit*: "A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self" ([22], 129; [23], 13).

Alongside the two already mentioned relations that characterize the constitution of selfhood, Anti-Climacus points to a third relation that is equally essential. The human self is not just a synthesis that relates itself to itself; it is also a relation that has not established itself. It is a derived, dependent relation constituted by a power distinct from the human. Anti-Climacus identifies this power as God ([22], 129 – 130, 132; [23], 13 – 14, 16) and sums up the third relation in the following way: "The human self is a relation that ... in relating itself to itself relates itself to another" ([22], 130; [23], 13 – 14).

Thus, the successful realization of human selfhood consists in a conscious relation to oneself, in which the complex synthesis structure is respected and one's connectedness to God is taken into account. In this way, when Anti-Climacus speaks of the process of becoming a self—demanding that the self become itself—what he has in mind is actually an ethical-religious project: the choice of oneself as a God-related being.

However, Anti-Climacus is aware of the complexity of such a choice, and throughout the book he reiterates the fact that a fully developed self is a rarity ([22], 139; [23],

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See especially the chapters written by Hermann Deuser [18], C. Stephen Evans [19], John D. Glenn, Jr. [20] and Alastair Hannay [21].

23). In fact, his whole work is dedicated to outlining a broad variety of possible failures at becoming a full-fledged self. The overarching term applied by Anti-Climacus to the different modes of failing at a full actualization of selfhood is *despair*. Although despair has many forms, its universal characteristic is that either the relation to one's own underlying synthesis structure or to the power that created that structure (or both of these relations) has in some way gone wrong. Any misrelation of such kind leads to a limited actualization of one's self, or as Anti-Climacus puts it sometimes: to a loss of one's self or to a lack of spirit ([22], 136, 155 – 156, 161; [23], 40 – 41, 45 – 46).

Anti-Climacus provides numerous examples of how despair manifests itself, ranking the manifestations according to the frequency of their occurrence in real life. Among the most common cases he mentions those when, in relating to oneself, the human succumbs to one-sidedness and through an overemphasis or disregard fails to become him- or herself to a full extent. For example, when ignoring the body and overemphasizing the mind, the human fails to actualize him- or herself as a balanced psychical-physical synthesis ([22], 129, 141, 158; [23], 13, 25, 43; [24], 75 – 76). In a similar way, when infinitude is embraced without sufficient regard for finitude the self can choose to lead “a fantasized existence in abstract infinitizing” ([22], 148; [23], 32), thus becoming just “a half of itself” ([22], 152; [23], 37). Also, disregard for the fact that the self becomes itself *before God* leads to a misrelation which inhibits a truly holistic and balanced unfolding of one's self.

In short, Anti-Climacus' analyses of despair are to show that although the self is a permanently unfinished dynamic entity, the task of choosing oneself in a meaningful way consists in accepting two basic ontological givens: the underlying synthesis structure of the human self and the self's connectedness to God.

**3. Guardini's Critique of Anti-Climacus' Theory of Selfhood.** Romano Guardini paid close attention to what Anti-Climacus had to say about selfhood. It is obvious from several of Guardini's works that the reflections found in *The Sickness unto Death* intrigued him and provided him with vital inspiration for his own analyses of selfhood.<sup>4</sup> Although Guardini tacitly appropriated a number of impulses from Anti-Climacus, his explicit comments on Anti-Climacus' doctrine of selfhood are almost exclusively critical. His critique is best articulated in four essays from the second half of the 1920s, in which he confronts Anti-Climacus on some of the key aspects of his theory. He elaborates this critique in the following essays: “Über Sozialwissenschaft und Ordnung der Personen” [27], “Gedanken über das Verhältnis von Christentum und Kultur” [28], “Der Ausgangspunkt der Denkbewegung Sören Kierkegaards” [15] and “Lebendiger Geist” [29].

Before examining more closely the theses outlined in these essays, two controversial

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<sup>4</sup> For a more comprehensive account of Guardini's relation to Kierkegaard, see Stephan Pauly's monograph *Subjekt und Selbstwerdung. Das Subjektdenken Romano Guardinis, seine Rückbezüge auf Sören Kierkegaard und seine Einlösbarkeit in der Postmoderne* [25] and my article *Romano Guardini: Between Actualistic Personalism, Qualitative Dialectic and Kinetic Logic* [26].

aspects of Guardini's critique of Kierkegaard need to be mentioned.

First, Guardini ascribes no relevance to the fact that the official author of *The Sickness unto Death* is Kierkegaard's literary persona Anti-Climacus and not Kierkegaard himself. This means, however, that Kierkegaard is identified with one of his pseudonyms, which can be problematic, as it implies a reductionist approach to Kierkegaard's multi-perspectivist *oeuvre*.

Second, in Guardini's essays one often encounters the term *person*, which—although occasionally found in *The Sickness unto Death*—plays no major role in Anti-Climacus' analyses. The usage of this term in Guardini's texts is rather tricky, since in some cases it corresponds to Anti-Climacus' notion of the self in its broadest sense and in other cases to the form of self that Anti-Climacus posits as the to-be-attained ideal.

On the whole, Guardini's critique of Kierkegaard's anthropology can be said to begin with the proposition that Kierkegaard's notion of selfhood is overly dynamic and lacks a necessary static moment. Guardini argues that if one goes along with Kierkegaard's expositions in *The Sickness unto Death* and accepts the definition of the self as a relation, an act, or a choice, one implicitly agrees to the self losing its continuity in time. It is Guardini's conviction that selfhood or more precisely, personhood, is in Kierkegaard made dependent upon the realization of a certain choice and thus runs the risk of discontinuity if the choice is not made.

This is made explicit in the work "Über Sozialwissenschaft und Ordnung der Personen", where Guardini identifies Kierkegaard as a leading protagonist of the philosophical paradigm of *dynamic personalism* ([27], 25). According to Guardini, in this paradigm action is seen as the foundation upon which personhood rests, which completely obliterates the static aspect of personhood. Guardini sketches out the doctrine of dynamic personalism in the following way: "[P]erson appears as something that becomes; as something that only is as an act and in an act; something that flashes through in certain, namely, personal acts. ... Person appears to exist only in such acts; only in performance, and therefore only in passing" ([27], 25).

In a later essay, "Lebendiger Geist", Guardini advances a similar critique against Kierkegaard's notion of selfhood, this time explicitly targeting Kierkegaard's concept of spirit. He describes this concept as purely *actualistic* and thus entirely devoid of a static moment. Guardini summarizes the actualistic view of spirit as follows: "Spirit is not something that is, rather always something that is performed; more precisely, something that performs itself. Even more sharply: spirit is a 'relation'; it is a manner in which one stands to him- or herself. Spirit means that moment, in which the human assumes responsibility for him- or herself" ([29], 154).

Guardini insists that any attempt to define personhood on the basis of the content of an act necessarily deprives *person* of a stable foundation and turns it into a discontinuous and ephemeral entity ([27], 25). He claims that such an attempt equals abolition of the ontic status of *person* since *person* is not understood as an ontic given, but rather as a task, a requirement ([15], 25; [27], 30). Although Guardini does not discard the dynamic view of personhood altogether, he is convinced that a necessary static moment is missing

from Kierkegaard's model of human selfhood.

Guardini's critique becomes even more interesting when he proceeds to examine the role ethics and religion play in the constitution of selfhood. Although Guardini himself views the human as a God-related being with an ethical responsibility, he rejects what he considers to be Kierkegaard's attempt to make selfhood dependent on religious and ethical action. He accuses Kierkegaard of an axiological definition of personhood, according to which personhood is attained through an "ethical-religious stance and disposition" ([27], 30).

According to Guardini's interpretation, Kierkegaard demands that the individual, in order to become him- or herself, needs to choose him- or herself truthfully, which means that personhood is attained through a normative act that can easily go wrong. The standard for personhood is thus set very high, and the most basic ontic given is transformed into a *borderline concept* ([27], 25). Interpreting personhood as the successful outcome of an ethical choice is for Guardini a truly discouraging and elitist idea. In his essay "Der Ausgangspunkt der Denkbewegung Sören Kierkegaards" he comments on it in the following way: "There is something extremely strained about this concept of the spiritual and the personal, something deeply imperiled. Spiritual personality stands as it were on the cutting edge of an act; an act that ... is highly demanding" ([15], 15).

After criticizing the prominent place of ethics in Kierkegaard's description of the constitution of the self, Guardini turns his focus to the role God plays in this process. He is well aware of the fact that in *The Sickness unto Death* Anti-Climacus affirmed God's presence in the basic relational structure of the self, claiming that "[t]he human self is a relation that ... in relating itself to itself relates itself to another" ([22], 130; [23], 13 – 14).

Along the lines of the aforementioned critique of actualistic personalism, Guardini objects to the idea that personhood be made dependent upon a conscious realization of the relationship with God. From this perspective he criticizes Kierkegaard's maxim that the human self becomes itself *before God* and sees this maxim as a further step towards a restrictive and overly spiritual concept of selfhood. He claims that the *before God*-clause, which he considers to be one of the pillars of Kierkegaard's concept of selfhood, ultimately has fatal consequences for Kierkegaard's whole anthropology. It implies, namely, that *person* is "a religious fact ... [it] either is religious or is not at all" ([15], 16). Or, as Guardini puts it elsewhere: Kierkegaard defines *person* as "a Christian, believing, reborn self" ([28], 193).

Kierkegaard's linking of the notion of person with a conscious religious choice represents, according to Guardini, a major theological *faux pas*. This is evident from the fact that it turns upside-down the old principle of Thomas Aquinas, which stipulates that grace presupposes nature and perfects it ([28], 192 – 193, 195 – 196). In Kierkegaard's anthropology, however, grace has become the condition of nature, since only a religiously existing self can aspire to the title of *person*. For Guardini this is an unacceptable conclusion that further strengthens his conviction that personhood needs to be defined without recourse to ethical and religious qualifications.

**4. Guardini's Critique Revisited.** It is evident from Guardini's philosophical response to Kierkegaard's theory of selfhood that the issue at stake was of fundamental importance to Guardini's own thought. This is, as a matter of fact, true for Guardini's entire authorship: from the early work *Der Gegensatz*—in which the critique of Kierkegaard appears for the first time ([30], 41 – 42, 48, 53)—to the works published in the 1940s and 1950s ([31], 50, 54, 99 – 101; [32], 5 – 30). Although Guardini's position on Kierkegaard's doctrine of the self experienced certain shifts over time, he never explicitly withdrew the critique formulated in his essays from 1926 and 1927.

As the previous analyses suggest, the critique of Kierkegaard contained in these essays is very serious. Guardini is certainly no generous reader, and the picture of Kierkegaard he paints is that of a philosophical extremist. As for the theory of selfhood, we have seen that Guardini's central finding was that Kierkegaard succeeded in transforming *person*—a basic ontic given—into a *borderline concept*. This critique is in line with Guardini's analyses in other works, where he consistently depicts Kierkegaard as a thinker who lays a great emphasis on the notions of discontinuity and separation. Guardini interprets this inclination as Kierkegaard's genuine but misplaced protest against the cult of continuity and unity common in German idealism. The strictness with which Guardini approaches Kierkegaard's theory of selfhood, however, seems to lead to a rather problematic interpretation of some of Kierkegaard's, or more precisely, Anti-Climacus' positions.

First, there indeed seems to be a static moment in Anti-Climacus' description of the self in *The Sickness unto Death*. Although Anti-Climacus defines selfhood as the interplay of three interdependent relations, he presents these relations as invariants. In other words, the relations take place regardless of whether one is aware of them or not; the only thing that is dynamic and subject to change is *the way* in which the relations are actualized. This means, however, that a choice of oneself always takes place: there is no way around it—even not choosing is a choice. Depending on how conscious the human is of his or her choices and on the way the choices are realized, Anti-Climacus determines the extent of despair the self experiences.

Secondly, the invariant character of these fundamental relations ensures the continuity of the self in time. This is where the problematic character of Guardini's term *person* becomes apparent. As we have seen, Guardini claimed that for Kierkegaard *person* is “something that only is as an act and in an act; something that flashes through in certain, namely, personal acts. ... Person appears to be existing only in such acts” ([27], 25). Elsewhere Guardini suggested that personal acts are those in which “the human assumes responsibility for him- or herself” ([29], 154). This, however, does not correspond to Anti-Climacus' most fundamental view of the human self; it rather corresponds to his view of the ideal or full-fledged form of selfhood. It is true that Anti-Climacus suggests that becoming a true self is a task and involves responsibility, but even when this task is wrongly executed, one still remains a self. To be sure, selfhood in its fullness is not attained, but this does not mean that one would be deprived of selfhood altogether. The point of Anti-Climacus' analysis of despair is exactly to demonstrate that selfhood can be realized to a greater or lesser extent. However, even when the relation to oneself or to

God becomes a misrelation, it still remains a relation. Thus, expressed with Guardini's terms, the act in which *person* is formed always takes place, even when it is performed in an utterly irresponsible way. The risk the human runs in such a case is not that of losing his or her personhood; rather it is that of actualizing it in minimal measure.

This means, however, that Guardini's notion of *person* corresponds best not to Anti-Climacus' basic notion of the self—as intended in Guardini's texts—but to the ideal of a fully developed self which Anti-Climacus defines in the following way: “In relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it” ([22], 130; [23], 14).

As a final remark, it is important to note that Guardini's critique of Kierkegaard's theory of selfhood, and especially of its ethical and religious dimensions, can be seen from yet another perspective: from the perspective of the theory of grace. From this perspective Guardini's critique touches upon a substantially more complex issue, and his concern is perhaps more legitimate. Although, as a religious philosopher, Guardini approves of Kierkegaard's incorporation of religious categories into anthropology, he sees in Kierkegaard the tendency to overemphasize the supernatural aspect of reality and downplay the natural order of things. As he explained in his essay *Gedanken über das Verhältnis von Christentum und Kultur*, Kierkegaard tends to abolish the productive tension between nature and grace ([28], 189 – 199), creating an unhealthy hegemony of the supernatural over the natural.<sup>5</sup> Whether this is indeed Kierkegaard's position cannot be determined in this essay; however, it seems to be an important factor that predefines much of Guardini's criticism of Kierkegaard's philosophical anthropology.

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<sup>5</sup> This objection is found in a number of twentieth-century critiques of Kierkegaard, often in analyses of his concept of intersubjectivity. See, for example, my comments on Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard's concept of neighbor-love ([33], 826 – 827). An alternative reading of Kierkegaard which does not affirm this objection can be found in Martin Murányi's exposition of *Fear and Trembling* [34].

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