

Usefulness and uselessness of history: History, memory and the contemporaneity of faith according to S. Kierkegaard

Gabriel Amengual i Coll*

Universitat de les Illes Balears

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Abstract

According to Kierkegaard, history can be considered in two ways: On the one hand, it is useless in its pure objectivity of data and dates, casual deeds and events; on the other hand, it is essential if we consider the fact that the eternal has become present in it, hence that God has become part of it. Thus, Kierkegaard differs from both Socrates and Lessing by thinking about reason, truth and the eternal as present in history. The instant is the category with which Kierkegaard tries to think about this historical convergence of the historical and the eternal.

Key words: History, Kierkegaard, Christianity, memory, Socrates, Lessing

In a society defined as post-traditional, in which tradition therefore plays no part, we must consider whether it is necessary to interact with tradition, and if so, how we can. However, since things are rarely a matter of simply yes or no but rather the measure and manner in which they are done, in meaning and differentiation, we should ask what is unrenounceable in tradition and what is an accessory or even what is a disturbing burden, and to what extent or in what aspects should a tradition be continued or interrupted.

To grapple with this question we shall examine Kierkegaard, since he pondered it extensively. According to this philosopher, what is at stake in this question is the authenticity of Christianity, its revitalisation: what role does history play in faith, or framed in terms of Lessing's challenge, which Kierkegaard himself mentions, how can casual historical truths be the foundation of eternal truths of reason? (Lessing, 1969: 34). Kierkegaard reformulated this challenge in these terms: how can casual historical truths, or historical deeds, be the place or object where eternal happiness is decided? (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 13, vol. I). Here what is being questioned is the value of the historical, which ranges from the life of Jesus (the question, so disputed today, of the value of the historical Jesus) to the history of the Church, the testimonials of so many believers which are significant milestones in the history of faith expressed in the

* Contact address: Gabriel Amengual. Departament de Filosofia i Treball Social, Universitat de les Illes Balears. Cra. de Valldemossa, Km. 7.5. 07122 Palma, EU. E-mail: g.amengual@uib.es

theological terms that Kierkegaard made his own: namely the Bible, Tradition and the Church itself as the institution that makes the Bible and Tradition present today.

The question, as can be seen, is posed by Kierkegaard in clearly Christian theological terms, yet in it we can also glimpse the broader question about the place and importance of tradition in its broader cultural sense: can we begin from scratch? Or, conversely, is the reference to history indispensable; that is, is it necessary to have been first formed in order to be a creator? Is it necessary to have appropriated a tradition in order to do away with its established rules? And when we ask about the role of history and tradition, we are also questioning the role of memory, which ranges from the study of the past to the attempts to bring it into the present, either through commemorative festivals or operative or institutional projects.

Kierkegaard's discourse is totally centred around faith, around becoming Christian, and his history refers to the history of Christ. Around this central question we shall see him deploy an entire dialectic that reveals an essential dimension of history, yet also shows extrinsic, superfluous or even erroneous, false, distorted and disorienting aspects.

This is the major question he examines in several works, yet mainly in *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) and *Postscriptum* (1846), in addition to some pages in *Practice in Christianity* (1848-50). It is the question that is often very briefly presented with the terms of faith as contemporaneity with Christ, leading us to believe that contemporaneity is established by faith and that therefore history has nothing to do with it. Though this statement is truthful, it is not exact; it requires major clarifications since history plays an essential role; for this reason we must shade and distinguish the different meanings of history. Christianity, or its core fact (man-God, Jesus Christ), is an essentially historical deed, and in this sense history is supremely relevant for Christianity and distinguishes it from speculative or scientific systems. Yet at the same time, the historical deed holds no interest in and of itself, in its immediacy; there is no (historical or scientific) data that can ground, demonstrate or justify faith. What is more, a historical consideration of Christianity may entail its dissolution. Therefore, we shall consider the complexity of the relations between Christianity and history.

What is at issue in these considerations is access to faith, and therefore access to God through Jesus Christ; what is at issue is Christianity, which shifts between being a tradition and its experience, which can be explained as integration into a tradition, into a history or even into a culture,¹ while also being a subjective and immediate act of faith with neither cultural (symbolic) or social (inter-subjective and institutional) mediation. By extrapolating the terms that Kierkegaard uses, yet also making use of all the sustaining material and structure, the question can be understood as access to the truth, to the truth of existence (Pieper, 1968: 30).

We shall begin by examining the role played by Socratic memory, which has nothing historical about it (1), and then we shall consider historical memory as presented by objective knowledge (history or a historical view of Christianity) (2). Based on these two considerations, we can begin to see what Kierkegaard means by contemporaneity (3) and the place of history in Christianity (4). In the second part, which is a bit more systematic, we shall examine the different ways of considering history and contemporaneity that Kierkegaard offers (5) and the different kinds of knowledge that must be distinguished in order to differentiate the Christian faith (6).

¹ This aspect of religion was revisited by sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1993).

Finally, we shall summarise Kierkegaard's position by distinguishing it from those of his interlocutors: Socrates and Lessing (7).

1. The insufficiency of Socratic memory

In *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), as we shall examine further on, the question is: "Can there be a historical point of departure for an eternal conscience; to what extent could such a historical point of departure be more interesting than purely historically; can eternal happiness be founded upon historical knowledge?" (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 13). In his examination of this question, Kierkegaard begins by recalling the Socratic theory of memory, which is Socrates' response to the problem of to what extent can virtue – or truth in general, as posed by Kierkegaard – be taught. To Socrates,² all learning and searching is a form of recollection. Furthermore, to Socrates, the significance of this recollection is that the truth should not come from the outside, but that each person can find it within himself. For this very reason, the teacher can do nothing more than help each person bring from inside, engender and bring to light the truth he carries inside himself, making the job of the teacher similar to that of a midwife.

However, the question and the conception of the terms at stake prevent Kierkegaard from following the Socratic approach. In effect, in the case of Christianity, or of man with regard to God in general, that is, of whoever wants to be Christian,³ we find that when he returns to himself, the learner, as Kierkegaard calls it, can only discover the non-truth. So what is achieved by remembering? Nothing; it is not enough (Pieper, 2000: 82s, 85s). One must leave oneself, and outside help is needed; a teacher is needed who can not only help but also engender. Because the teacher, who is needed here, must provide two things: truth and the condition for being able to understand the truth. And obviously these two things (providing the truth and the condition) come not from a teacher but from God. In this case, God would not save the learner from returning to himself, but what he would discover would not be the truth but the non-truth, which is a non-truth through his own fault, that is, sin.⁴ By providing the truth and the condition for understanding it, God appears as a saviour, a liberator (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 7-15), and as the learner accepts it, decides in favour of it, he will appear as a new man, reborn (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 84-88).

The point of departure is, as always, Socratic, but it is soon exceeded. The Socratic theory of memory refers to oneself, and the teacher is nothing more than a helper, a midwife. In contrast, in Kierkegaard's approach, one must emerge from Socratic interiority and open oneself up to the outside, to the action and contribution of

² Kierkegaard's Socrates is the one presented by Plato, so in general terms we could say that Kierkegaard does not distinguish between the two. What is more, his understanding of the principle of the Socratic-Platonic theory of knowledge seems to have been taken from Hegel, as he outlines them in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. (Hegel, 1989: 127-181; Kierkegaard, 1981b: 168-170).

³ It would be very complex to examine the question of to what extent this serves for existential training processes. In Kierkegaard's terms, Socratic memory is enough to take the step from the aesthetic state to the ethical state; however, it is insufficient for taking the step from the ethical to the religious. Yet to what extent can the religious state have a purely existential version?

⁴ *Only God can teach and trigger awareness of sin, just as only He can engender, because it is the shift from non-being to being and because his love engenders life, while what is common and supreme to man is helping* (Kierkegaard, 1981b: pp. 9, 29, 45).

someone else,⁵ with a clear reference to History, an outside deed which he makes present from the outset with the concept of the ‘instant’, the instant of release, an instant in which God’s action becomes present, an instant which is temporary and fleeting “yet nonetheless decisive, and nonetheless full of the eternal. Such an instant should be called by a special name; let us call it the plenitude of time” (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 16). Thus, this reference to the instant already marks a difference with respect to Socrates. “Inasmuch as we do not accept the instant, we go back to Socrates, and he is precisely what we would like to leave to discover something new.”⁶ The newness stems from the fact that the ethical being was accustomed to thinking about the eternal as something extra-temporal, supra-temporal, always valid, and now we must recognise anything that appears as a historical deed, which as such is linked to the conditions of space and time, as eternal. And precisely this casual historical deed must be the condition through which man emerges from his non-truth and attains the truth (Pieper, 2000: 87s). “Inasmuch as the eternal has become a fleeting moment, the individual being does not manage to interact with the eternal in time [...]; rather *in time* he manages to interact with the eternal in time” (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 282, vol. II). As we come upon this convergence of history and eternity with the instant, we face a paradox. The paradox appears because the contribution of the truth begins with the discovery of the non-truth because this happens in time, and yet a dimension of eternity is contained in it because God appears in the humblest human form: as a slave (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 49). With this paradox comes outrage, too, which cannot be an invention of understanding; thus, outrage can be considered mediate proof of the rectitude of the paradox. However the central point around which it revolves is the instant (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 48). In the instant, the learner learns his non-truth; instead of self-knowledge, he acquires awareness of sin; and instead of establishing the self-reference, reference to another is given: God.

Therefore, the instant pinpoints the difference with “Socratic memory” (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 59). To Socrates, instants are only occasions that can lead to memory, whereas here the instant is first the human decision to open up and to welcome, and secondly God’s action which provides the truth and the condition for understanding it. There is interiority in Socrates, but no history; there is an encounter or return to oneself, but no reference to the other, to exteriority, while in Kierkegaard there is not only interiority but also exteriority, reference to the other and to the exteriority of history.

What breaks the schema of Socratic memory and yet makes it go beyond it, therefore, is the fact that God has become present in history, meaning that history has undergone a substantial change: it ceases to be a temporary, casual, fleeting occasion (to be remembered and for knowledge and self-knowledge) to become the presence of eternity, to harbour the dimension of eternity because Eternity has become present in it and because in it man’s eternal happiness is at stake (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 52-56).

This strong sense of history, which makes itself present in the instant, does not erase the vulgar meaning of history in the sense of historical information and knowledge, yet it does spotlight its insignificance.

⁵ Habermas praises Kierkegaard’s ethical project as “post-metaphysical”, even though he admits that it is in no way post-religious; in any event, he thinks that this religious relationship can be interpreted or translated, not in the sense of “dependence on an unavailable power” but “as an interpersonal relationship” (Habermas, 2002: 11-28).

2. The futility of history

Despite this major reassessment of history, in that it is inhabited by Eternity, in another sense history is futile. This title, “The futility of history”, is borrowed and perhaps exaggerated, but it is what comes to mind when one reads Kierkegaard, since what first draws the reader’s attention in these questions is the disdain he shows for the historical. At first his position seems to closely resemble that of Nietzsche: history does not interest us; life does (Nietzsche, 1980: 242-243). Let us examine what this position consists of and on what it is based.

In his *Postscriptum*, he continues, reframes and radicalises the question examined in *Philosophical Fragments*. Here, at least at first, the interlocutor is Lessing, with his celebrated claim that “casual historical truths can never become the proof for necessary [or absolute] truths of reason” (Lessing, 1969: 34). Despite the “word of gratitude” and praise addressed to this interlocutor (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 55s, vol. I), just like with Socrates, Kierkegaard will partly follow him and partly depart from him. Let us note that in this text – not only is it much longer (it is the longest in his output along with *The Alternative*, 1843) but it is also one of Kierkegaard’s most important – the same question of history is situated in a much broader context; specifically the question of truth, the insufficiency of objective truth since “truth is subjectivity” (Kierkegaard: 1981a: 179, vol. I) is the subject, along with the appropriation made of it and therefore the pathway, the process, the way it is experienced.⁷ Within this broader framework, history is yet another case of objective truth. There are two forms in which the objective truth is presented: history and philosophy. Historical truth is considered that which refers to facts and deeds from the past, which is achieved through critical discussion of the different deeds. The question as to philosophical truth affects the relationship between what has historically been given and recognised as valid doctrine and eternal truth. While in the former, historical truth, personal interest is nonexistent, in the latter, philosophical truth, an interest begins to emerge, although the subject is not yet infinitely interested in it yet; eternal happiness is not at stake in it (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 17, vol. I); that is, existence is not at stake. In addition to these two forms of objective truth, at other times Kierkegaard also includes within it the natural sciences and especially mathematics, which seems to be for him a paradigmatic example of a kind of thinking that is both exact and indifferent to existence (Kierkegaard: 1981a: 195, vol. I).

In historical truth, or the historical consideration of the truth of Christianity, what stands out is inquiry into reliable information on what constitutes authentic Christian doctrine. Therefore, historical inquiry appears, or is regarded, as inquiry into what is authentic, original and true. Regarding this historical knowledge, Kierkegaard’s position is that “the greatest certainty is only an approximation” (Kierkegaard: 1981a: 18, vol. I)⁸. And, in fact, the interest, inherent in subjective truth, in truth in its existential sense has nothing to do with interest in the latest scientific or theological novelty. No matter how much information can be provided, no matter how much more real and faithful an image of what happened to Jesus and his followers can be presented, it is not decisive; rather it is at most a chance for decision.

⁷ On the question of truth, cf. Amengual (2008).

⁸ On this sense of approximation, cf. Pieper (1968, 130-135).

Kierkegaard saw this (objective) historical way of considering the truth in three aspects of Christianity: the Holy Scripture, Tradition and the Church. To him, what all three share is that they can be presented as a palpable objectivity which seems to show everything to be right. They are in fact three important points in all fundamental theology: what God has uttered, that this word has been faithfully conveyed to us, and that it is faithfully present and presented today by the Church. Thus, to Kierkegaard, if all this does not pertain to the world of uselessness it does pertain to what in any event can only serve as the occasion for faith to emerge, although it does not pertain to faith itself.

Regarding the Bible, Kierkegaard reminds us that even the best scholarship cannot go further than approximation and that “between this and a personally infinite interest in one’s own eternal happiness there is an essential misapprehension” (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 19, vol. I), that is, they are totally unrelated. The questions posed by biblical research do nothing more than hinder the real problem from being posed: the subjective. Therefore, they act to mask and falsify the real problem. The real questions should be posed on the level of the subject, since “faith does not stem from a simple, directly scientific inquiry; to the contrary, with such objectivity one loses the infinite personal and passionate interest which is the condition for faith” (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 25, vol. I). What is decisive for faith is passion, and passion is not compatible with certainty. The more objective the consideration of the truth is, the less fertile it is for eternal happiness. Faith is a decision and can only be rooted in subjectivity, in a passionate subjectivity (Larrañeta, 1990).

Just as the Protestants have sought protection in the Bible, using it as a refuge for their securities, the Catholics have sought protection in the Pope. However, despite this insinuation, both the paragraph on the Bible and the one on the Church target the Danish Church (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 32, vol. I). What he criticises is that in both cases, what is sought is safe footing to decide what is Christian. Regarding the Bible, which is a book that recounts things from the past, the Church is of today and therefore has the capacity to make the Biblical message relevant today. Although he recognised some truth in this, Kierkegaard retreats from it by stating that in order to do this, it has to be apostolic, that is, it has to be the same as always and therefore it is then remitted to the past; the Church itself is a historical magnitude, just as the Bible is, from which it derives its authority.

In point of fact, Kierkegaard actually questions not tradition but the existence of Christianity over the course of eighteen centuries. As is known, this has been regarded as an apologetic argument in favour of Christianity, and this argument is the one that Kierkegaard considers the least valid since “a hypothesis can become more probable if it endures for 3,000 years, but that does not make it an eternal truth, decisive for anyone’s eternal happiness” (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 43, vol. I). That is, the years can make a truth older but not eternal. His arguments are first that the duration of something is quantitative and can trigger admiration or astonishment, but in any case more time makes an idea no more credible than a single day. The other argument is that there is no direct connection between the passage of time and faith because in reality there is no direct connection between anything (neither truth nor fact nor scientific data) and faith; the only thing leading to faith is a leap.

3. Contemporaneity

Despite the ambiguity of history (and memory), it is present in the concept of contemporaneity, which is likewise the key to grasping believers' current relationship with Jesus Christ, that is, faith, and is therefore the key to grasping the way Kierkegaard views the relationship with the past, tradition. Kierkegaard distinguishes between two kinds of contemporaneity:⁹ one is *immediate*, the kind that Jesus' contemporaries were able to have, those who had direct information about him, heard his words, saw his deeds, knew him, dealt with him. The other kind of contemporaneity is *real*, the kind that does not take place through anything immediate, either information or knowledge, so it is a kind of contemporaneity that anyone can access at any time. Kierkegaard would define faith as contemporaneity in this sense of real contemporaneity (Kierkegaard, 1961: 73, 111, 128, 150, 152, 160, 238, 336).

Kierkegaard introduces his distinction between the two kinds of contemporaneity using these words: "One can be contemporary without, however, being contemporary; one can be contemporary and yet, although using this advantage (in the sense of immediacy), be a non-contemporary, what else does this mean except that one simply cannot be immediately contemporary with a teacher and an event, so that the real contemporary is not that by virtue of immediate contemporaneity of real contemporaneity but by virtue of something else. Thus, despite his being contemporary, a contemporary can be a non-contemporary; the genuine contemporary is the genuine contemporary not by virtue of immediate contemporaneity; ergo the non-contemporary (in the sense of immediacy) must be able to be a contemporary by way of the something else by which a contemporary becomes a genuine contemporary" (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 64).

From the outset and therefore speaking about immediacy, contemporaneity seems to make a radical distinction between contemporaries and those who come later, the second-hand disciples, that is, between those who received the message as eyewitnesses and all of those who received and will continue to receive the same testimony from those privileged witnesses. Therefore, as obvious as this distinction may seem, the situation of both, the firsthand and second-hand, is the same. The only thing that changes is that the former have historical information, firsthand historical knowledge obtained directly, while the latter have knowledge based on the formers' testimony. However, their situations are totally identical. They both have information that in itself brings nothing; it is only the occasion for each to take his own decision. Becoming an eyewitness is easy, but this direct knowledge, which is nothing more than knowledge of historical data, does not make an eyewitness a disciple. The contemporaries' advantage is that they can go to see and hear the teacher, but that does not make them become disciples (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 60). What is more, they have their own difficulties since the eyes deceive and can easily grasp the external figure but not its meaning. Contemporaneity brings no advantage (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 63). Just like for those who come later, memory can engender the external figure but not faith (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 62). This in itself is enough proof that the historical is indifferent. Knowing the life of Christ is historical information for the contemporary, just as it is for someone today, and for both it is equally an occasion to take the step, but the step does not automatically come through knowledge of the historical information; it is

⁹ With these reflections, we return to Kierkegaard (1981b: 56s). The distinction can be found on page 64.

“historical, casual knowledge, a thing of memory” (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 57)¹⁰. Faith is not knowledge or an act of will; that is, it is not something that springs directly by itself from the subject. If it were, we would be in the Socratic world in which the teacher has nothing to offer (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 59).

To become a disciple, a believer (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 61), to grasp the reality that unfolds in history, the eternal and the historical should not be separated (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 57); only then does the historical stop being purely historical and becomes the instant, and then the paradox inherent to faith appears, which consists of seeing that the eternal takes place in time (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 62), or in making the historical eternal and the eternal historical (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 58). This is, in short, the real contemporary, the person who receives the condition of God to understand the truth. The understanding of the truth, therefore, does not come from pure perception, from pure narration or information on facts and doctrines, nor does it emerge simply from oneself; rather it is a gift from God to whom man opens himself with passion and interest and decision.

And so what good are history and memory? We have seen that history can only produce immediate contemporaneity, and this can only be the occasion, which depending on whether or not it is seized, which depending on the use made of it and the attitude taken to history, will give rise to the different kinds of contemporaneity. In effect, if man limits himself to immediacy, the only result will be historical knowledge. If, on the other hand, the contemporary looks at deeds socratically, he can use them to enter himself and then contemporaneity disappears. Finally, if the contemporary takes advantage of the occasion to receive the condition of God and thus be able to see the eternal in the historical, then he achieves real contemporaneity, that of faith (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 66s). In short, contemporaneity is the simultaneity that occurs in the instant in which God appears in human form, is revealed in Jesus Christ, and the instant in which man opens himself to God’s gift, accepts the revelation as a decision. Contemporaneity occurs through the simultaneity of the instant, the plenitude of time, in which God acts and man decides and makes the act of faith; in this sense it is understanding that faith is defined as contemporaneity, which comes from the instant. God’s action and man’s decision to open himself up to faith are what establish contemporaneity, a contemporaneity, therefore, that has nothing to do with memory, since in the best of cases memory is only an occasion for decision.

4. The history of Christianity

Despite the appearance that real contemporaneity, which comes from faith, seems to eliminate all historical references to situate itself on a purely spiritual or subjective plane, history and the historical are an essential part of Christianity. History enters Christianity essentially, not only through general, external considerations of a historical religion which has a place and time of birth, is expressed in a cultural world, has phases of development and therefore characteristics of the historical, but mainly for internal reasons; it is historical itself because it consists of the faith in the presence of the eternal in history so that God has to be perceived, believed, as present in history. For that same reason, it lives on historical memory and its credo is a (his)story. And more than anything, access to Christianity is historical, though not purely historical, because it

¹⁰ As much as Kierkegaard belittles memory, I find this text extremely significant in that he places memory at the level of the historical casual.

requires a condition that is not actually historical itself; it is not a deed of history but took place in history. Despite all the relativisation of history which Kierkegaard sometimes radically performs, he never forgets this essential role history plays, so that forgetting history, forgetting that 1800 years ago – as he said – Christ lived, would mean reducing it to doctrine and forgetting Christ himself (Kierkegaard, 1961: 185).

Because of this historical nature, with everything it implies about openness and otherness without losing any of its interiority, Christianity is distinguished from Socrates' maieutic project; in this, too, the shift from the aesthetic to the ethical is precisely distinguished from the shift from the ethical to the religious (Pieper, 2000: 86-88). In effect, the shift to the ethical only requires a maieutic teacher who helps to shed light on what man holds inside. The task of the maieutic teacher is to help the disciple discover his potential and show him how to use this potential. Man can make the shift to the ethical by himself. The maieutic teacher can only help everyone achieve their own autonomy, ethical autonomy, overcoming the heteronomy of the aesthete. The instant when this shift takes place is not meaningful, at least in the biographical sense, because the condition of truth has been harboured inside for eternity. In this case, there is no history except for each individual's own biography, because man carries the conditions of possibility inside himself; everyone has always possessed the conditions of truth inside himself and only has to transform them from inside-oneself to for-oneself. The condition of possibility of the truth can therefore not be lost, and the only thing missing was its actualisation.

In contrast, the shift from the ethical to the religious takes place at completely different coordinates. Man finds himself radically in non-truth, so it is not enough to discover what he carries inside himself; he does not harbour inside himself the conditions for taking the leap. A teacher is needed, but it must be more than a maieutic teacher; rather, it must be a teacher who engenders, because the conditions of possibilities to find and understand the truth, of self-realisation, must exist inside the disciple. He will be made to discover his emptiness, his lack of self, and must internalise the teacher in order to attain a self. This is a true rebirth. With this we can now see that the object of faith is not doctrine, but the teacher (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 59). The teacher is not a maieutic, but one who engenders life, a saviour, a liberator, a redeemer (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 15). The major differences with regard to the shift to the ethical is that the ethical being is used to considering the external as something outside of time, beyond time, always valid, while the religious being must now recognise what is presented to him as a historical fact, totally bound to the conditions of space and time, as eternal.

5. The ways of considering history and contemporaneity

As we have seen, to Kierkegaard the question of historical truth is about what we could call the core of Christianity and faith, and ultimately it is about human existence. This historical truth is not primarily a concept but a historical deed, the fact that the eternal has become historical, thanks to which the individual re-establishes his broken relationship with God and attains his authentic and full self-realisation. This requires the individual to take a decision (Pieper, 1968: 130).

However, history is not always considered with this density, inherent to the instant, to the fullness of time. According to Kierkegaard's reflections, we can distinguish three ways of considering and using history: 1) the objective or the history

of the historical sciences, 2) the philosophical or Socratic and 3) the existential,¹¹ the one Kierkegaard proposes, which is Christian, the history pertaining to faith (Pieper, 1968: 131).

The *objective* consideration of history comes from the historical sciences, whose legitimacy is not disputed (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 85, vol. I). The criticism is targeted at the attempt to convert history into the underpinning of faith. In effect, and this is the argument, if the certainty of faith springs exclusively from the existential relationship, then all attempts to try to understand it from the outside will lead to misunderstanding (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 286, vol. I). The error of the historical consideration of faith consists of the attempt to try to ground faith upon historical knowledge, that is, on the basis of objective elements, which always remain outside of faith, such as the Bible, Tradition and the Church. The error of this approach lies in the assumption that the truth can be objectively demonstrated based on external data, things that can be impartially proven. However in relation to the historical, Kierkegaard claims that “the best certainty is only an approximation” (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 18, vol. I).

The *philosophical* consideration of history turns it into a springboard for achieving knowledge of the eternal idea. The utmost appreciation achieved by historical truth is serving as the occasion for the discovery of what was always there, eternal thinking, and in this sense it could be considered a moment in the system, on the pathway to the quest for truth. Applied to Christianity, this consideration turns it into a kind of thinking that can be absorbed by the system. The error of this consideration lies in the fact that all the reality existing behind the concept is lost, which is much more than what the concept can contain and express, and in particular the entire existential dimension of truth and history is lost, the priority of existence over thinking; likewise, everything apparently becomes absorbed in a static system that lacks all the movement of existence.

The *existential* consideration, as seen by the criticisms of the other considerations, takes history seriously, since the eternal has made its presence known in it and existence and eternal happiness are at stake in it, yet at the same time it is a dimension that escapes both the objectivity of the historian and the philosopher’s thinking, since in the end it is a history in which the subject must become personally involved through his own decision, not through scholarly or speculative considerations of the facts or concepts.

According to these three ways of considering history, we can distinguish three kinds of contemporaneity. The first is the *immediate* (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 64, 66), the kind produced by historical, objective knowledge. This contemporaneity can exist in both the contemporary, the eyewitness, the one who lived with Christ, and the second-hand disciple today, the one who has received the word of Christ’s life from the eyewitnesses. The difference between the two is merely one of amplitude or quantity, as well as the fact that the former can personally check the information while the latter has to trust the historical sources. For both, however, Lessing’s judgement that casual historical truths cannot serve as the underpinning of eternal truths of reason is valid, that is, that they are not a solid enough underpinning for deciding eternal happiness. Both

¹¹ I call it existential with the intention of trying to express its meaning, even though the term does not come from Kierkegaard, who always speaks explicitly of faith and the believer. Pieper calls it *geschichtlich*, taking advantage of the distinction allowed in German between *historisch* and *geschichtlich*. However, actually this distinction is not Kierkegaard’s since in the same German translation *geschichtlich* is used to refer to the objective sense.

need to take the decisive step which consists of acknowledging with faith the absolute paradox of the presence of the eternal in the historical and receiving the condition of God to do this, a step which is inexplicable by both. In this sense, deeds are equally casual for both.

Philosophical or Socratic contemporaneity is the kind for which historical knowledge can become the occasion for knowledge of oneself, of what man has always been, so that the historical deed serves as the mediation (occasion) for knowledge of an ideal reality. The historical deed is necessary as an occasion, but it becomes superfluous as soon as knowledge is attained. For this reason in itself, there is no history for this contemporaneity and the teacher is indifferent; man already carries the truth inside him, all he needs is the occasion that triggers externalisation and awareness of that knowledge.

According to *existential*, or real, contemporaneity, as Kierkegaard called it (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 64), neither the immediate nor the philosophical have understood the historical deed, since to the former it is simply a casual fact without any further importance or meaning, while to the latter it is an eternal fact, which is a contradiction *in adjecto* (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 96), what we could call an ahistorical fact. Neither has grasped the deed. The deed in question is also not just any deed; rather it is the deed of God that must be recognised as God's, which cannot come from oneself; man cannot do this by himself, rather a condition is needed that only God can give and that comes with faith itself, so that by the believer accepting it out of faith one can cross over to one's own immanence. Existential contemporaneity is precisely the condition of the possibility of faith, which God gives. Therefore, this is a kind of contemporaneity that does not come from the simple fact of knowing the objective historical deed; rather it must be given complementariness by God. This contemporaneity is regarded by Kierkegaard as synonymous with the concept of faith. The concept of contemporaneity aims to express first that faith underpins the Christian understanding of history, and secondly and more importantly that the act of faith itself takes place in time and occurs as an 'instant'. In contemporaneity we can distinguish the same twofold nature of faith: faith *qua* (as an attitude) and faith *quae* (as the content), since contemporaneity makes it possible to recognise the deed in its true size and scope, while this deed itself is the object and underpinning of faith. With this rejection of all outside help for faith, it becomes clear that faith cannot be grounded upon either the historical or the philosophical pathway. Contemporaneity only occurs through contemporaneity; that is, existential passion is decided exclusively on contemporaneity with Christ, with which the individual interacts with God. Real religious contemporaneity comes in the personal relationship with Christ.

6. Historical knowledge, eternal knowledge, natural faith and Christian faith

We are facing a dual kind of knowledge.¹² First, there is *historical* knowledge, which is attained by the eyewitnesses through their very presence, through what they see and feel, and which subsequent generations attain thanks to the documentation available to them. This kind of knowledge is *a posteriori*; the more material man has available, the more complex the knowledge can be and consequently the more likely the knowledge is accurate. Then there is *eternal* knowledge, which is *a priori*. Its source is understanding, since it is engendered by itself, reflectively, by reconstructing the conditions of its own

¹² On this issue, I follow Pieper (2000, 88-89).

functioning. The historical has nothing to do with it; “having no history is part of the perfection of the eternal” (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 72). Through their sources, they are two totally different kinds of knowledge, and it is unthinkable for eternal knowledge to be grounded in the historical because this would mean grounding what is always and unconditionally valid on something that has happened in time, that has begun to be. This would be a contradiction for understanding. Therefore, if man only had his understanding to appropriate the truth, it would be impossible to ground his happiness on a historical deed. In this we must admit that Lessing was right.

However, Kierkegaard believed that man acquires knowledge not only through his intellect; instead, as a being who feels, desires and acts, he also has other means of accessing the world and is capable of other forms of knowledge. This is because the being is more than a pure being of understanding; rather he is more an interested being (*inter-esse*) and as such always hovers between the historical and the eternal. Furthermore, whatever it is that understanding separates is brought together in interest, in existential behaviour. By existing, man relates the historical to the eternal, so that he takes an infinite interest in the historical, though not theoretically, for knowledge itself, but practically, for the sake of practice.

We can distinguish between two kinds of practical interest in the historical: an ethical interest and a religious interest (Christian believer). Through ethical interest comes an interest and an appropriation of the historical as though it was one’s own history, even though I myself am not the exclusive agent. This entails taking responsibility for what has happened. Kierkegaard calls this appropriation *faith*, understood in its *natural*, not religious, sense. Through this faith, man does not attain objective knowledge, since objectively he can only know about that with which he is disassociated. Therefore, only subjectively can I appropriate the historical and act as if I myself had been the agent, and then take responsibility for it, according to the unconditional ethical demand. This natural faith, which Kierkegaard describes as a “feeling for events” or an “organ for the historical” (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 81, 78), can be understood as practical reason, which reveals its ethical interest in the good in historical deeds and actions. This ethical perspective shows that the historical can have a dimension of utter validity, of eternity, which is lacking the purely theoretical perspective, so instead of theoretical indifference (uncertainty or doubt) we have the certainty that faith can overcome all doubts by integrating the historical into one’s own history and ethically qualifying it. Therefore, existentially it is possible to relate the historical and the eternal with no contradictions in the interest of faith.

However, this interrelation between the historical and the eternal does not yet make it possible to ground eternal happiness upon any historical deed, because ethically it is taken for granted that man has an awareness of eternity and therefore by himself obeys the unconditional ethical demand, under which he appropriates the historical and takes responsibility for it. What is experienced here is the transformation of the historical, in light of the unconditional ethical demand, even though it has been subjectively conferred, by the subject who has personally accepted the responsibility. Here the historical takes on an eternal meaning, but it does not follow from that that the eternal is grounded upon the historical; rather what happens is the opposite: the historical is evaluated according to an eternal norm and laid upon its groundwork. Therefore, despite the relationship that has been established between the historical and the eternal, Lessing is still right.

So far we must conclude that man cannot ground his eternal happiness on anything historical by either thinking or believing, either intellectually or ethically. We

must always assume the eternal in order to recognise something historical as unconditionally binding. However, there is a third possibility for understanding the historical and its relationship with the eternal, namely the *Christian faith* (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 56), whose object is the instant in which the eternal becomes historical, the eternal is born from the historical moment. This is a paradox that understanding cannot grasp either theoretically or practically; rather the condition for understanding it must occur. Through this faith, an individual begins to exist as eternal, deciding to recognise sin as his own action and Jesus Christ as the condition that enables him to overcome his non-truth. The instant when this occurs is crucially important. In this instant, the believer makes the dual movement that Jesus made: the descent to Earth (corresponding to the fall into sin, recognition of one's own sin) and exaltation (resurrection) as his elevation to God (the externalisation of the historical) (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 58).

In this way, in the Christian faith man grounds his eternal happiness upon the historical deed, which becomes contemporary inasmuch as it is reproduced inside him. The very notion of the instant, designating both the moment of the historicisation of the eternal and the moment of the act of faith, of the reproduction or realisation today of the Christian mystery inside the believer, implies this contemporaneity, which has nothing to do with historical knowledge, feeling or remembrance but with bringing the existential into today.¹³

The simultaneity produced by the Christian faith stresses the meaning of the temporal, designating the instant in which God became man, thus yielding the truth and the condition for understanding it and the instant in which the individual accepts himself as a sinner and recognises Jesus Christ as God. Simultaneity does not mean being contemporary with Jesus; if it did, everyone who lived afterward would be at a disadvantage. Rather simultaneity means repeating the existence of Jesus Christ so that the lost eternity is recovered.

This is the aspect that Lessing did not take into account, and for this reason he was unable to grasp that a historical deed could be grounded upon an eternal truth. His consideration of the historical was ultimately solely intellectual, exterior, or it simply provides testimony of reason, which encounters a paradox for which something more than the intellect is required.

7. Conclusion

Philosophical Fragments opens with the Socratic question of whether virtue or truth can be taught. The Socratic answer is no. There is no need to teach the ethical truth because we carry it inside us; all we need is the occasion to arouse it and for us to decide to live it, to unfold the potentialities that are always harboured within us. To Socrates, history, in the best of cases, is merely this occasion. The thorny question arises when we note that man has lost (the sense of) truth and finds himself in non-truth. He can only discover the non-truth inside himself. Yet even to do this he needs to leave himself and meet with someone, a teacher, before whom he can still discover that he is only the truth of his non-truth. For this reason, a teacher who is more than maieutic, as Socrates proposed, is needed, one that engenders, that gives new life. Herein lies the limitation of Socratic memory, which is not actually memory itself but internalisation, the encounter with and discovery of oneself, because through it man does not leave himself, and in it

¹³ Based on the consideration of the thing we could add that it also brings the sacraments to today, although Kierkegaard makes not a single reference to them.

there is no history or otherness, exteriority, necessary in the case of the specific historical man (a sinner who has lost the truth).

However, this special teacher who brings the truth and provides the condition for understanding it is God, but a God whom one has accepted as one's one, who has appeared in human form in the humblest way possible, as a slave. Herein lies the paradox: the eternal – what the ethical, the Socratic, had thought of as eternal, that is, beyond time, similar to how Lessing thinks of truth and reason – has become temporal. This poses the question with the terms that are also formulated in the foreground of *Philosophical Fragments* (almost as if it were a subtitle or the leitmotiv of the book): “Can there be a historical point of departure for an eternal consciousness? To what extent can such a historical deed be of interest more than purely historically? Can eternal happiness be grounded upon historical knowledge?” (Kierkegaard, 1981b: 1). This is carefully examined at length in the *Postscriptum* through a dialogue with Lessing. The enlightened German Kierkegaard grants him that all historical deeds and historical knowledge and memory (as well as doctrinal and conceptual knowledge) are good for nothing, neither for the eyewitnesses nor for future generations. In this, Lessing was totally right. The contemporaneity of faith is not attained on the basis of either knowledge or memory. Divine intervention which opens the heart is needed; the condition furnished by God is needed.

However, the Danish thinker contradicts Lessing, because there is a single historical deed which is the springboard to eternity, the fact that a specific man named Jesus, Son of God, who lived humbly amongst us and in whom the eternal became historical, making the historical eternal, has given an eternal quality to history. This is a paradox that can only be accepted those who also receive the condition for it, seconded by their own decision, which has the connotation of a kind of ‘sacrifice of understanding’ or, as the Danish philosopher put it, “the crucifixion of understanding by faith” (Kierkegaard, 1981a: 276, vol. II).

Kierkegaard agrees with Socrates that the truth is decided inside, subjectively; in contrast, according to our Danish thinker, what Socrates did not take into account was that this very subjectivity has to be constituted; it cannot found itself; it must find its truth and this must come from the outside, and therefore from any external, historical event, that is, from the action of anyone capable of grounding subjectivity. Thus we find that unlike Socrates, who presents interiority without exteriority, without otherness, without history, Kierkegaard claims history, as exteriority, not only as an occasion but as a condition for attaining the truth since subjectivity by itself exists in non-truth and must be liberated.

Kierkegaard agrees Lessing that history, regarded in its pure objectivity, that is, as a series of deeds and events, as a set of data and dates, always more or less random and casual, is useless, since it has no interiority, no presence of the eternal, and therefore from history man always finds himself obligated to think about the truth as something that is atemporal or supra-temporal (as Lessing, in fact, does). With history viewed thus, in allusion to the celebrated quote by Hegel, it must be admitted that reason is not history (Hegel, 1970); history is then purely exterior. Therefore, Lessing is right that purely objective history is not decisive for the truth, for existence. Kierkegaard also recognises the coincidence of this purely objective history: the facts that constitute it do not lead to the truth. However, compared to Lessing, Kierkegaard goes on to retract two things. First, the rational, philosophical truth, too, operates on the same plane of objectivity that does not yet affect the truthful, the subject or existence.

Secondly, he retains a purely objective consideration of history, extracting the truth and reason from it and thinking about it outside of history and therefore as extra-temporal.

The new development, which distinguishes Kierkegaard's conception from both Socrates' and Lessing's, consists of thinking about reason, truth and the eternal as present in history. The category with which he tries to think about this historical convergence of the historical and the eternal is the instant, which paradigmatically takes place in two decisive moments: one is the incarnation of the Son of God, through which God becomes man and becomes present in history; and the other is the moment of the leap of faith, in which the teacher who engenders it gives the action to God and provides the condition through which the subject may access the truth and the subject's consequent decision, through which he becomes a believer. In this way, one can see that faith establishes a contemporaneity between the believer, his decision and the action of God through which he enters history and acts in the believer, engendering new life in him. In this sense, history takes on a new value: not only is it not distinct from the truth and reason (as Lessing thought, and ultimately Socrates as well, because he does away with it); but it is the condition for attaining the necessary reason and truth (in Lessing's terms): history is the condition for attaining faith and eternal happiness (in Kierkegaard's terms), for attaining a successful existence, because God has appeared in history, the eternal has become historical, so history is inhabited by eternity. History is not only the occasion (as it was in Socrates) for the return to the self but the condition for the free human decision to open oneself up to the other and to God, that is, to his action which brings the truth and the condition for understanding it and welcoming it, in short, for deciding.

Kierkegaard's contribution to the concept of history is important to the distinction between the ways it can be considered and the different levels that he establishes in it, so we can claim that history is useless yet simultaneously claim that it is essential: it is useless in its pure objectivity of data and dates, casual deeds and events; it is essential when we consider that history has been conferred a new dimension by the fact that the eternal has become present in it, hence that God has become part of it, and by the fact that the decision with which man stakes his eternal happiness is made in it. The true relationship with history obtains when history is seen as the place in which man stakes eternal happiness, existence, which has an absolute value, a necessary truth, of reason (if reason is expanded to also encompass the leap of faith and the decision), so that man opens himself up to eternity in history. This is the dimension that escaped Lessing.

By applying this Kierkegaardian concept of history to the question posed at the beginning regarding the rupture of tradition, the first thing that must be stated is the need to distinguish between a tradition made of data and dates, of external cultural values consisting of mores and customs, and a tradition that is the expression of the decision which refers to an interiority and creates the space for the choice and also provides the occasions, the conditions and the referents for the decision. We cannot lose sight of the fact that "there is a recorded tradition that is catastrophe" (Benjamin, 1991a: 591), a pure continuity made up of external deeds which therefore is not only exterior but can also suffocate the capacity to take decisions. What counts is the decision, the discovery of the truth. Yet nor can we forget that the quest for the truth must be made possible by the historical situation, by the offer of meaning that becomes present through tradition, so that solely by having interiorised and personalised tradition, man can do away with his objectivisations and past expressions, start with a *tabula rasa* and

create from scratch (Benjamin, 1991b: 215) and innovate, precisely in the most genuine spirit of tradition itself.

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