

Kierkegaard's Concepts

Psychological experiment

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Psychological experiment [*Psychologisk experiment, experimenterende psykologi*]

The Danish 'experiment' (old spelling) is derived from Latin (*experimentum*: a trial, proof, test; *experīrē*: to try, prove, put to the test); 'psykologi' is a combination of ancient Greek (*psuché*: the source of movement in man and other living creatures) and post-classical Latin (*logica*: science, discipline).¹ For Kierkegaard the 'psychological experiment' or 'imaginary psychological construction' is a performative strategy. It enables him to dramatize an existential conflict in an experimental mode.² Kierkegaard's aim is to study the source of movement that animates the existing individual (this is the psychological part). However, he is not interested in the representation of historical individuals in actual situations, but in the construction of fictional characters that are placed in hypothetical situations; this allows him to set the categories in motion "in order to observe completely undisturbed what these require"³ without caring to what extent someone has met this requirement or is able to meet it (this is the experimental part).

The 'psychological experiment' is a category of indirect communication that is developed most extensively by Frater Taciturnus, the pseudonymous author of the third part of *Stages on Life's Way*. (I) Taciturnus introduces the psychological experiment as a new trajectory in modern literature that offers an alternative to poetry and speculative drama. He develops this new trajectory in

¹ Cf. *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog* online, eksperiment, psykologi; *OED* online, experiment, psyche, psychology.

² The Danish 'experiment' has the same root as its English equivalent. However, in their translation of Kierkegaard's works, the Hong's have chosen to use the notion 'imaginary construction' instead of 'experiment' (see *R*, xxi-xxxi; 357-62 for their explanation of this choice). Other English translations, which I follow, favor 'experiment' (e.g. *CUPH*, 262; *KJN* 2, 220, 242).

³ *SKS* 6, 431 / *SLW*, 467.

praxis (in the novella “Guilty?”/“Not Guilty?” A Story of Suffering: A Psychological Experiment by Frater Taciturnus’)⁴ as well as in theory (in the ‘Letter to the Reader’ that accompanies his novella).⁵ (II) Two other pseudonymous authors further enrich the conceptual field of the psychological experiment.⁶ Constantinus Constantius develops the notion ‘experimenting psychology’;⁷ Johannes Climacus reflects on the reader’s contemporaneity with the character.⁸

I. Frater Taciturnus and the psychological experiment as a new trajectory in modern literature

Within the complex and multilayered text of Frater Taciturnus’s ‘Letter to the Reader’ a new theory of literature emerges that is suggested rather than explicated. Taciturnus introduces the psychological experiment as an alternative for two trajectories in modern literature: poetry (e.g. Shakespeare) and speculative drama (e.g. J. L. Heiberg). All three trajectories—poetry, speculative drama and the psychological experiment—deal with existential passions which are made visible by creating a contradiction between the ideality and the actuality of a character. However, they fundamentally differ in the way this is done. (1) In poetry, an absolute passion is posited that leads to an irreconcilable contradiction between ideality and actuality. This contradiction is either essentially comic or essentially tragic, but never both at the same time. (2) In speculative drama, the contradiction is just a moment in a larger development. Therefore, only a relative passion is posited and neither the comic nor the tragic can properly take hold of the situation. (3) In the psychological experiment, a new kind of absolute passion is posited: the religious. This religious passion complicates the contradiction between actuality and ideality

⁴ *SKS* 6, 173-368 / *SLW*, 185-397.

⁵ *SKS* 6, 369-454 / *SLW*, 398-494. See also Taciturnus’s letter in *Fædrelandet* (*SKS* 14, 79-84/ *COR*, 38-46).

⁶ A third and a fourth pseudonym could be added: Petrus Minor (*Pap.* VII B 235 14-6 / *BA*, 15-7) and Vigilius Haufniensis (*SKS* 6, 147-148 / *CA*, 54-56).

⁷ The notion ‘experimenting psychology’ appears in the subtitle of *Repetition*, but is not mentioned anywhere else in the book. Constantinus develops this notion in an unpublished reply to J. L. Heiberg’s review of *Repetition* (*Pap.* IV B 110-1, 116-7 / *R* 283-323).

⁸ Climacus hints at another, more philosophical conception of the experiment (e.g. *SKS* 7, 188 / *CUPI*, 206-7), but also reflects on the psychological experiment as developed by Constantinus and Taciturnus (cf. *SKS* 7, 239-40; 263-5; 453/ *CUPI*, 263-4; 288-91; 500-1).

in such a way that this contradiction becomes simultaneously essentially comic and essentially tragic.

(1) *Poetry*. In the first trajectory, the misrelation between ideality and actuality is expressed either as a tragic or as a comic contradiction. Taciturnus does not say much about the comic. However, from his few remarks it can be deduced that the comic expresses disbelief in the hero's ideality and incites laughter.⁹ When a girl declares that she is willing to die for her beloved (ideality) but leaves him as soon as she learns that he only has four toes on his left foot (actuality), she becomes ludicrous. The girl's ideality is exposed by the actual circumstances in which she is placed. The tragic contradiction, by contrast, expresses belief in the ideality of the hero and incites sympathy. Taciturnus gives the example of Romeo and Juliet; they love each other with absolute passion, but a family feud comes between them and makes them unhappy.¹⁰ In poetry, the tragic depiction of such an unhappy love has two characteristics. First, the lovers do not have the power to overcome the contradiction. Second, the contradiction is determined by external circumstances (i.e. fate, chance) and not by the lovers own relation to the ideality of love.

(2) *Speculative drama*. Taciturnus finds a second trajectory in speculative drama.¹¹ Speculative drama expresses the contradiction between ideality and actuality in such a way that it is neither comic nor tragic, but becomes a relative moment in a dialectical development. The speculative hero does not discover love as an absolute passion that is given, but as a possibility that still needs to be actualized in reality. For him, "there is no assurance that the outcome will be happy if only the external obstacles will be cleared away".¹² Unhappy love becomes a temporal contradiction which holds no lasting power over the speculative hero. Instead of despairing over the contradiction, as Romeo does when he poisons himself, the speculative hero overcomes it and moves on to a new love affair. "So," Taciturnus writes, "while one almost never hears mention of an unhappy lover, there is all the more competition about having been one, even more than once have suffered what these unhappy ones suffer, but also having overcome these

⁹ Cf. *SKS* 6, 391, 405 / *SLW*, 420, 437; *Pap.* V B 148: 17 / *SLW*, 633; *Pap.* V B 150: 17 / *SLW*, 633-4.

¹⁰ *SKS* 6, 378 / *SLW*, 407.

¹¹ *SKS* 6, 382 / *SLW*, 412.

¹² *SKS* 6, 380 / *SLW*, 409.

sufferings etc. etc. etc.”¹³ Speculative drama reduces the ideality of love to a “more or less happy love”¹⁴ that is one kind of beer for everyone. Therefore, the contradiction is neither comic nor tragic. In the eyes of Frater Taciturnus, speculative drama lacks a sense of the infinite; it rejects the absolute passion of poetry, but does not posit a higher passion that saves it from mediocrity. “If poetry is to continue to exist,” he argues, “it must discover another passion, one just as legitimate as love was for poetry.”¹⁵

(3) *The psychological experiment.* Taciturnus develops the psychological experiment as an alternative for poetry and speculative drama. (a) The psychological experiment posits a new kind of passion: the religious. (b) The religious demands a higher ideality that does not precede the actuality it contradicts, but is an act of freedom that comes after it. (c) To satisfy the demand of the religious, the individual has to make a double movement. (d) In the psychological experiment only the first of these movements is made by dramatizing an unresolved existential conflict in a series of contradictions that are simultaneously comic and tragic. (e) Only the affected reader—who undergoes a catharsis in the process—can make the second movement.

(a) *The religious.* Taciturnus discovers this passion, not as something he has realized himself but only as a possibility that comes to the fore in the character he has “conjured up”: Quidam (somebody). This Quidam is characterized as “a demoniac character in the direction of the religious—that is, tending toward it”.¹⁶ According to Taciturnus, the religious consists “in being infinitely concerned about oneself and consequently not deeming oneself finished”.¹⁷ This infinite concern for oneself is not the same as egotism, because it places the individual in a relationship to God. It is important to emphasize that God is here not understood as a unifying ground on the basis of which the individual can understand his life as a progressive movement towards self-realization. On the contrary, God signifies a loss of grounding. The religious passion confronts the individual with something ‘other’ that underlies his own relation to himself, but that will always escape his grasp. In poetry this transcendental element is also

¹³ *SKS* 6, 379 / *SLW*, 408.

¹⁴ *SKS* 6, 379 / *SLW*, 409.

¹⁵ *SKS* 6, 380 / *SLW*, 410.

¹⁶ *SKS* 6, 309 / *SLW*, 398.

¹⁷ *SKS* 6, 448 / *SLW*, 486.

discovered, but there it is determined as coming from outside, as something that happens to the individual (fate, chance). The religious passion forces the individual to acknowledge that this ungraspable 'other' is part of his own constitution as a self; therefore, it can no longer be perceived as something external.

(b) *Ideality as an act of freedom.* The religious passion is just as absolute as the passion of love that animates poetry. In both cases the passion constitutes an ideality that is higher than actuality. However, for the religious passion the ideality is not an abstract given that precedes actuality (as in poetry), but a concrete action that comes after actuality. "This ideality, therefore, is not an illusory anticipation that still has not seen the actuality but is an act of freedom after the actuality."¹⁸ In the psychological experiment, ideality is neither given as an absolute ground (poetry), nor won as a relative result (speculative drama). Instead, it is an act of freedom that places the source of movement within the existing individual.

(c) *The double movement of inwardness.* Taciturnus suggests that this act of freedom 'after the actuality' is the outcome of a double movement that has to be made to constitute inwardness. (i) An idealizing movement that turns the outer actuality into an inner possibility. In this idealizing movement the raw data of outer actuality are transformed to the qualitative opposites of inner ideality (e.g. guilty²/not guilty?) and appropriated as existential possibilities.¹⁹ This makes the individual free from the purely accidental in outer actuality. (ii) An actualizing movement that turns the appropriated possibility into an actualized inwardness. In this second movement the individual chooses himself by linking the idea (e.g. guilt) to his own existence and taking it up as his task.²⁰ This makes him free from the abstract indefiniteness of possibility. Taciturnus describes this double movement of inwardness as a "negative infinity".²¹ This simply means that this double movement will never be concluded in a positive result (at least not in time), given that "first of all, the result lies in the internal and, second, is continually postponed".²² The result lies in the internal because it is not the outcome of a continuous process of development, but is determined by a rupture: the choice of the individual. The result is

¹⁸ SKS 6, 391 / SLW, 422.

¹⁹ SKS 6, 406 / SLW, 439; *Pap.* V B 148:17 / SLW, 633.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ SKS 6, 411; 448 / SLW, 444; 486.

²² SKS 6, 408 / SLW, 442.

continually postponed because the choice only holds true for the moment in which it is taken. The individual remains unfinished and ungrounded and, therefore, has to choose himself over and over again.

(d) *The dramatization of an existential conflict.* The literary artist cannot give a static representation of the double movement of inwardness, but somehow has to activate the reader to make this double movement for himself. In Taciturnus's psychological experiment, the character—Quidam—only makes the first movement and discovers the qualitative opposites of ideality (love/ no love; guilty/not guilty). However, he fails to complete the second movement that links his own existence to the idea. Instead of choosing himself in the idea, Quidam let the circumstances decide if the idea is present or not and, therefore, he “enters into dialectical agony”.²³ The dialectical agony is not represented as fixed state, but dramatized as an unresolved existential conflict. This dramatization does not decide if the ideality of the character is to be believed or not, but expresses both possibilities. In this way, a “dialectically infinitized spirit”²⁴ will simultaneously see both the comic and the tragic in the same situation. This duplexity makes clear that the circumstances cannot decide if the idea is present or not; only the existing individual can decide this.

(e) *Catharsis.* Both poetry and the psychological experiment are indirect forms of communication that presuppose “an ability to be affected on the part of the spectator”.²⁵ In both cases this ability to be affected is assisted by awakening fear and compassion. However, poetry aims to take away “the egotism in the affected spectator in such a way that he loses himself in the hero's suffering, forgetting himself in him”.²⁶ In contrast, the religious passion gives a new twist to this notion of *catharsis*. From a religious perspective “fear and compassion are something different and are purified not by turning outward but by turning inward”.²⁷ The psychological experiment aims to let the outer world vanish in such a way that the reader becomes infinitely concerned about himself as an existing individual.

²³ *SKS* 6, 416 / *SLW*, 451.

²⁴ *SKS* 6, 391/ *SLW*, 420.

²⁵ *SKS* 6, 425 / *SLW*, 460.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *SKS* 6, 359 / *SLW*, 462.

II. Constantius and Climacus on the psychological experiment

Both Constantin Constantius and Johannes Climacus see the psychological experiment as a way to deal with the existential difficulty that the inner is not the outer. (1) Constantius develops an experimenting psychology to activate the inwardness of the reader, without defining it in any way. (2) Climacus reflects on the psychological experiment as a way to make the reader contemporary with the character.

(1) *Experimenting psychology*. The central theme of Constantius's *Repetition: A Venture in Experimenting Psychology*, is motion or movement. Constantius follows Aristotle's definition of movement [*kinesis*] as "the transition from possibility to actuality"²⁸. According to him, this transition must be understood as a *repetition* in the sphere of freedom (individual existence) rather than as a *mediation* in the sphere of logic (general knowledge). For that reason, Constantius has to make sure that the reader does not relate himself contemplatively to the existential categories, but in freedom. To this end, Constantius develops a new writing strategy, which he calls 'experimenting psychology' or 'imaginatively constructing psychology'.²⁹ The aim of this writing strategy is to activate the reader in such a way that he finds the source of the movement within himself and is forced to become an active creator. Constantius creates this effect by imaginatively constructing individualities and situations that approximate actuality without ever reaching it. "I wanted," Constantius writes "to depict and make visible psychologically and esthetically; in the Greek sense, I wanted to let the concept come into being in the individuality and the situation, working itself forward through all sorts of misunderstandings."³⁰ These misunderstandings conceal the main idea "in order to exclude the heretics from understanding the book".³¹ Such heretics are figures of half-truth who are not able to distinguish between jest and earnestness. To deceive these heretics, Constantius turns his text into a riddle that can only be made fruitful by an existing individual who is able, first, to identify the confusions and, second, to develop the emerging existential category on his own. In this way, repetition—as the source of movement

²⁸ *Pap.* IV B 117 290 / *R.* 310.

²⁹ In their translation, the Hong's use both alternatives (e.g. *R.* 125; 311).

³⁰ *Pap.* IV B 117 282 / *R.* 302.

³¹ *Pap.* IV B 111 274 / *R.* 298.

within the individual himself—becomes “a task for freedom”³² that has to be taken up by the reader. “Only, in freedom’s relation to the task of freedom is there earnestness”³³, the rest is jest.

(2) *Making the reader a contemporary.* In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus characterizes the psychological experiment as a performative strategy that makes the reader “contemporary [*samtidig*] with the existing person in his existence”. This effect is achieved by employing “linear measures approximating actuality rather than the foreshortened perspective”.³⁴ In this rather enigmatic description, Climacus creates an opposition between what we could call ‘representations after the fact’ and his own psychological experiment. Representations after the fact create the illusion of actuality with the help of a distortive technique (the foreshortened perspective). Psychological experiments, on the other hand, make the reader contemporary with the character by confronting him with an undecided existential conflict that approximates actuality, but never reaches it (i.e. linear measures). This existential conflict is not depicted as something real that has already happened, but is invoked as a series of possibilities that still have to be decided. In another passage Climacus formulates this as follows: “the imaginary construction [the experiment] does not take as its starting point a later moment in time and relate a remarkable conflict as something past, nor does it slacken the conflict in a reassuring conclusion, but by means of its teasing form makes the reader even more contemporary that he is able to become by way of a contemporary actuality and leaves him stuck in it by not giving a conclusion”.³⁵ For Climacus, the difference between a *representation after the fact* and a *psychological experiment* is that the former communicates a result that is already decided whereas the latter creates a performative effect by making the reader contemporary with the character in real time and burdening him with an existential problem.

See also: authorship; comic, the/comedy; movement, motion; psychology; religious, the/religiousness; tragic, the/tragedy

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³² *Pap.* IV B 111 293 / *R.* 312.

³³ *Pap.* IV B 111 268 / *R.* 292; *Pap.* IV B 117 287 / *R.* 306.

³⁴ *SKS* 7, 453 / *CUPI*, 501 (translation altered).

³⁵ *SKS* 7, 263 / *CUPI*, 289.