

Becoming One Self: A Critical Retrieval of 'Choice Biography'

Frits de Lange

Professor of ethics, Protestant Theological University (Kampen), The Netherlands
fdelange@pthu.nl

Abstract

The modern life course is described as a 'choice biography.' Rationality and control, and life planning and self-management are central notions. Instead of rejecting the notion categorically, this article opts for a more balanced approach. The Protestant tradition shares central characteristics with choice biography, as Calvin, Edwards, and Bunyan show. However, there are dissimilarities as well. Fundamental in 'choice biography' is its lack of transcendence. Modern individualism threatens to collapse into one-dimensional secularism and egoism. In retrieving Kierkegaard's legacy, the notion 'choice biography' might undergo a critical re-appraisal. In his philosophy, we find both the absolute value of the individual's choices, and a plea for transcendence.

Keywords

choice biography, Protestantism, Kierkegaard, self-realization, transcendence

Choice Biography

In global modernity, the human life course is increasingly represented as an individual construction. Especially in rapidly urbanizing contexts, traditional institutional frameworks of education, marriage, family, work, and retirement—self-evident until far into the 20th century—are losing their regulating, normative function. In the organization of the life course, a process of global de-institutionalization is occurring. How people organize their lives over time is less and less embedded in a compelling network of social expectations, but seems to be more and more the object of personal choice.

Sexual identity, marriage, begetting and raising children, work and career, care, education—they seem to have become individual life style options. Shall I become hetero or homosexual? Shall I live together in a living apart together

relationship, engage in a marriage, or shall I stay single? Do I opt for an ambitious professional career for which I am prepared to set everything aside, or do I want to live more broadly, with more free time that is filled with voluntary work, leisure, social responsibilities, and culture? Do I have children, and if so, with whom shall I raise them?

These are important choices and are often experienced as existential dilemmas, for which no traditional blueprints are available. The pressure on individuals to make their life course into a personal success is heavy, and often so high demanding that a breakdown is near. Even in affluent societies, modernity can have its 'dark side.'¹

In his book, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), Anthony Giddens draws a penetrating sketch of what modernization means for personal identity. He paints a picture—which I would simply like to circumscribe here as 'liberal'—of the modern life course in which individual choices, strategic planning, and self management are the central notions. Giddens describes the identity of the modern self as a self-reflexive project.

Self-identity for us forms a trajectory across the different institutional settings of modernity over the *durée* of what used to be called the "life cycle", a term which applies much more accurately to non-modern contexts than to modern ones. Each of us not only "has", but lives a biography, reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life. Modernity is a post-traditional order, in which the question, "How should I live?" has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat—and many other things—as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity.²

The only way of giving meaning to our lives is to autonomously shape the narrative of our life story. Strategic life planning becomes an important value; we have to colonize the future by pulling the future, as it were, into the present. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck, another lucid analyst of modern personal identity, coined the word "choice biography" for the postmodern life course.³

Shall I marry or divorce, study or work, change jobs or stay, continue a friendship or end it? At moments at which people have to make important decisions,

¹ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 122.

² Giddens, *Self-identity*, 14.

³ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992).

crucial for their careers and future, they experience how fragile and fateful their lives are. Illness, death, tragic accidents all represent interruptions in daily life and are a threat to a scheduled life plan. At such moments, it becomes clear how uncontrollable a life course interpreted as an individual reflexive project ultimately can be.

Nevertheless, according to Giddens, individual control is an important high modern device. Mastery is the new moral demand that replaces the prescriptive social morality of traditional society.⁴ People who cannot cope with the pressure of autonomously constructing an autobiography are getting into serious trouble. Their sense and meaning of life, being no longer socially given, depends on how successful they are in realizing their ambitions, and on how creative they are in re-interpreting their successes and failures into a more or less meaningful whole.

Giddens offers a recognizable, almost compelling, depiction of the modern life course. Today people experience their lives in the way he described it. The modern individual's life course, in his description, is lifted out of the dimensions of time and space by the 'disembedding mechanisms' of the modernization process. Kinship ties are becoming external to one's identity. They also become the objects of choice in a certain sense, by becoming dependent on personal commitment. Generations (vertical attachments) and family ties (horizontal attachments) are no longer constitutive for self-identity. Relationships, even the most intimate, now have an instrumental function, and a conditional, 'until further notice' character.

The modern life course demands an enterprising self; a self that is ready to create a coherent identity in a constantly changing environment. The individual has to take inner distance from traditions and conventions and must constantly be prepared to accept new roles and challenges. Coherence of identity-over-time no longer consists in belonging to social group(s), but has to be constructed personally. Life span is organized around 'open thresholds of experience,' no longer around ritualized passages in fixed communities. Each transitional phase in the trajectory of life tends to become an identity crisis and is often experienced that way by individuals.

Despite its obvious 'dark side,' it must be admitted that the 'choice biography' has an attractive, strong, moral appeal. It presupposes the autonomy and worth of every single human being. In doing this, there is a considerable moral gain over long centuries of patriarchal and authoritarian oppression. Modernity

⁴ Giddens, *Self-identity*, 102.

turns people into “homeless minds”⁵ that is one side of its coin. The other, brighter one is that the ‘taken for granted’ character of oppressing traditions and institutions has ended. This is not only the case in the affluent West, but affects every region in this world that is pulled into the dynamics of globalization. A second wave of modernization is taking place that globally involves cultures that were never rooted in or touched by the European Enlightenment.⁶

Apparently, from a Christian perspective, a genuine negative judgment on the immoral nature and devastating effects of modern individualized culture seems the only one appropriate. Modernity seems to be driven by just one ideology, (neo)liberalism. And liberalism, so the argument goes, does not only defend a secular world view in which there is no room for belief in God, but is also inspired by an egoistic morality. In its concentration on the absolute value of the individual, it conflicts with and, in the end, overrules the value of community. Therefore, a public theology should clearly defend an alternative vision of human reality, and replace liberal individualism with a more communitarian oriented, relational anthropology.

There might be truth in this way of arguing. But it is one-sided as well. I think that a critical theological stance toward modern culture should at least be informed and accompanied by a thorough analysis of the complexity of its history, the cultural realities in which it is rooted, and the moral and religious ideals by which it was inspired. Theologians working within a Protestant tradition should especially and clearly acknowledge their affinity with certain central notions in modernity’s anthropology, even if they have to dissociate themselves from its derailments. A Reformed public theology, therefore, should be a critical ally of modernity, not per definition its self declared enemy. Its function is not only to warn modern culture prophetically, but also to inspire it with dreams, ideals, and values by bringing back into its mind the faith and the passion that moved it in the beginning of its era.

I would like to practice some ‘moral archeology’ here in order to show that the modern ‘choice biography’ does not only has roots in secular liberalism, but is also strongly influenced by central characteristics of Reformed anthropology. The modern idea of the reflexive self appears to have deep roots in the religious mythology of modern Western civilization. In the remainder of this article, I begin to argue that the image of the life course as an individual

⁵ P. Berger, B. Berger, H. Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

⁶ Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 8f.

trajectory of choice has had a fertile religious breeding ground in continental Protestantism. It is much more than an abstract, philosophical concept; it is a root narrative put together so cogently by Protestants in early modernity that it still penetrates the world, even though for many its religious charge has evaporated. One can trace “elective affinities”⁷ between the Calvinist idea of the Christian’s pilgrimage on earth and the dominant liberal myth of the biography of choice.

One should not be shocked by this discovery, or turn your back to this Protestant legacy. On the contrary, subsequently I want to plea for a critical retrieval of the concept of self and personal identity that is hidden in it. I end the article with showing how in the 19th century the Lutheran Søren Kierkegaard tried to do this in an exemplary way by elaborating his philosophical concept of the self.

The Life Course as a Personal Pilgrimage⁸

As long as human beings have walked upright, have traveled from A to B, and told others about it, they have interpreted their lives or the life of their community in terms of travel, quest, passage, voyaging, pilgrimage, exile, homelessness, homecoming, wandering, sojourning, etc. In the pilgrimage metaphor, the image of the life journey receives an archetypal religious interpretation.⁹ According to anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner, pilgrimages must be regarded as a rite of passage in which people either collectively or individually go through three phases: First, a separation or detachment from the ordinary that leads to an ambiguous ‘outsider’ status; second, a ‘betwixt and between’ phase of ambiguity—a walking in the margins termed ‘liminality’—that then produces reincorporation with a new stability (aggregation); and third, the resumption of ordinary life.¹⁰ Also in the history of Western Christendom, pilgrimage has become an established practice.

⁷ Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik I. Eine Aufsatzsammlung*. Ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr), 77, speaks of *Wahlverwandschaften*—a concept borrowed from Goethe—between the Reformed religion and the capitalistic work ethic.

⁸ In the next section, I return to my earlier article, “Life as a Pilgrimage. John Bunyan and the Modern Life Course,” in P.N. Holtrop, F. de Lange, R. Roukema (eds.), *Passion of Protestants* (Kampen: Kok, 2004), 95-126.

⁹ About the universal scope of the pilgrim metaphor, see Mircea Eliade, *Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

¹⁰ Victor W. Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 2.

Via the influential theology of Augustine, the pilgrim metaphor became firmly anchored in Western spirituality. It exemplifies both the spiritual journey to God of the individual believer, as well as the fortunes of the elect community of faith—the city of God on earth on its way to fulfillment. For Augustine, the traveler's condition is that of being a foreigner. He stresses the provisionality of this life and the abstention of earthly enjoyments (*uti, no frui*) that the Christian has to practice.¹¹

In modernity, however, the significance of the pilgrim metaphor shifts. Reformed theology was suspicious of pilgrimages; its practice being closely connected with the adoration of the saints and the doctrine of works-righteousness. Culturally, the beginnings of Protestantism are intermingled with the rise of a civil society that emphasizes individual agency and active subjectivity. The conduct of daily life in a rationalizing world of labor hardly allows for the interruption of one's professional life that is required by a factual pilgrimage. Protestantism supports this shift towards bourgeois culture by making pilgrimage into a metaphor for the daily 'inner-worldly' life of the Christian.

Calvin's verdict on the pilgrimage as a practice is negative;¹² yet it becomes one of his beloved metaphors for the Christian life course, next to the image of life as a struggle against the powers of evil.¹³ Struggle and journey, *agon* and *hodos*, have been widely accepted metaphors for the life course since Homer. An intriguing passage in the *Institutes* shows how Calvin places these conventional metaphors into a new framework. The life span becomes an active quest for improvement toward personal perfection.

No one will travel so badly as not daily to make some degree of progress. This, therefore, let us never cease to do, that we may daily advance in the way of the Lord; and let us not despair because of the slender measure of success. How little so ever the success may correspond with our wish, our labor is not lost when today is better than

¹¹ R.J. O'Connell, *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969); Cf. Augustin, *The City of God*, XII, 14.

¹² Pilgrims believe that "if they sweat, [they] think that every step ought to be reckoned to their account by God and that God would be unjust unless he approved of what is offered him at such a trouble" (*Comm. Jer.* 6:20, quoted in W.J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin. A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 62. Calvin shares his disdain with humanists like Erasmus: "Another goes to Jerusalem, Rome, or to St. James (Santiago de Compostela), where he has no business, while he leaves behind wife and children" (*Praise of Folly*, XLVIII).

¹³ William J. Bouwsma, "John Calvin (1509-1564)," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2002 <http://www.hfac.uh.edu/gbrown/philosophers/leibniz/BritannicaPages/Cal-vin/Calvin.html>

yesterday, provided with true singleness of mind we keep our aim, and aspire to the goal, not speaking flattering things to ourselves, nor indulging our vices, but making it our constant endeavor to become better, until we attain to goodness itself. If during the whole course of our life we seek and follow, we shall at length attain it, when relieved from the infirmity of flesh we are admitted to full fellowship with God.¹⁴

The Christian life is a test, a learning process, an exercise “in the school of Christ,”¹⁵ and a pedagogical journey to eternity. Sanctification is the key word: a life commensurate with justification.

Calvin reinterprets the traditional metaphor of the pilgrimage in a characteristic way:

1. The Christian life journey is aimed at one *transcendent goal*: a life at the service of the glory of the gracious God and an active meditation of the future life. In it all lines and patterns in the life course must consciously and actively be organized. Here we already see the entire outline of the Calvinist ethos that requires a regulation of the whole of conduct that penetrates to all departments of private and public life.¹⁶
2. Though undertaken within the community of the church, the journey is presented as an *individual enterprise*. The *Institutes* can be read as a book of instruction for the individual believer. For Calvin, the church is primarily a pedagogical means by which believers support each other and build each other up, an external mean, not a goal in itself. The congregation is primarily an institute of sanctification (*Heiligungsanstalt*).¹⁷ In subsequent Calvinism, the church seems more and more as a strict educator rather than a nurturing mother. The individual gains an independent status over against the church.
3. Personal perfection is sought by rationally controlling the passions and the senses. Enjoyment has no intrinsic value, but, at best, is a herald of eternity or a pedagogical means that points to God's goodness. There is no denial of the passions and emotions. Stoic *apatheia* is not the goal.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.6.5, trans. Henry Beveridge. <http://www.smartlink.net/~douglas/calvin/entire.html>.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.9.5.

¹⁶ Weber, *Protestantische Ethik*, 30.

¹⁷ Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1912), 626.

Joy, but also suffering, must be lived through.¹⁸ The passions must not be denied, but they must be ruled and governed by reason. *Rationality*, however, is not an intrinsic virtue that leads to happiness—as it was for example with Aristotle—but a reflexive means by which one can effectively order one's goal oriented life. For the believer that seeks the glory of God, rational reflection is an instrument of sanctification.

4. It is also striking that progress is indeed possible and acutely advisable, but that *perfection* is never reached. One could say that in his lifespan the pilgrim remains an adolescent, who never reaches the confident discernment of the adult or the mature wisdom of old age, even though he has the years.

The metaphor of the lifespan as a journey continues to play an important part in Calvinism. Well known is Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "The Christian Pilgrim or The True Christian's Life a Journey Toward Heaven" (1733), a sermon on Hebr. 11: 13, 14: "And confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things, declare plainly that they seek a country."¹⁹ The subject of the sermon is announced as follows: "This life ought so to be spent by us as to be only a journey towards heaven."

Edwards widely draws the image of the journey to speak to the heart of the hearer. We recognize the traditional elements from the biblical and patristic tradition: the human life as a pilgrimage, and placing earthly life into perspective over against life in heaven—the temporal over against the eternal.

With Edwards we also recognize the emphasis on the individual. The entire sermon is about and directed to the individual person. Only in the very last paragraph does the sermon receive a social dimension. Edwards call upon Christians to 'help one another in going this journey' and not to hinder one another. The church is not so much a community of destiny as it is a society for mutual assistance. The other is primarily a helper—a supporter.

There are many ways whereby Christians might greatly forward one another in their way to heaven, as by religious conference, etc. Therefore let them be exhorted to go this journey as it were in company: conversing together, and assisting one another.

¹⁸ "For Calvin denial of passion is a denial of the passion" (Kyle Fedler, "Calvin's Burning Heart: Calvin and the Stoics on the Emotions," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 22 (2002), 133-162, 149).

¹⁹ I use here and in the following references the version available at the internet: <http://www.biblebb.com/files/edwards/pilgrim.htm>.

Company is very desirable in a journey, but in none so much as this.—Let them go united and not fall out by the way, which would be to hinder one another, but use all means they can to help each other up the hill.²⁰

What is new with Edwards in comparison to Calvin, however, is the rhetoric of *choice*. Edwards paints a stark contrast between the road to heaven and the road to hell, “the broad way to destruction” and the “straight and narrow way to life,” and then presents it to the pilgrim to make a choice: “You are placed in this world with a choice given you, that you may travel which way you please, and one way leads to heaven. (...) Where can you choose your home better than in heaven?”²¹ Edwards places the doctrine of double predestination that had remained in the background with Calvin in the center of his theology. In 16th and 17th century Calvinism, the parable of narrow and the broad way (Matth. 7: 13,14) is placed in a dogmatic framework in which the believer is never sure of his eternal life, but is continually faced with the choice: is my life the life of the elect or the rejected?²²

The believer cannot enter into God’s secret decree. What he can do is strive to make his life that of a saint’s—honoring and serving God, and thus showing that one truly belongs to Him. Edwards, at the conclusion of “The Christian Pilgrim,” refers to 2 Peter 1: 10: “They who are converted, should strive to make their calling and election sure”; “All those who are converted are not sure of it, and those who are sure, do not know that they shall be always so, and still, seeking and serving God with the utmost diligence, is the way to have assurance and to have it maintained.”²³ Active sanctification places a barrier against uncertainty and fear. For the believer, it confirms that he is ‘on the right road.’ The choice facing him is to stay on this road. If he does not

²⁰ Edwards, *Christian Pilgrim*, section IV, concluding direction 4.

²¹ Edwards, *Christian Pilgrim*, section IV.1.

²² According to Weber, with Luther, God’s gracious decree is a fundamental experience, but as a doctrine it remains in the background; just the opposite is the case with Calvin: the more he is at loggerheads with his dogmatic opponents, the more it comes to the fore. It was only fully developed in the third edition of the *Institutes* (1543) (see book 3.20.21, 1559 edition), and only became of central importance posthumously in the culture war underlying Dordt and Westminster. Calvin saw himself as an instrument in the hands of God and had assurance of his position of grace. He had but one answer to that pressing question about the assurance of salvation: trust in Christ. With Calvin personally the *decretum horribile* is not, as with Luther, “derived from religious experience, but from the logical necessity of his thought.” (Weber, *Protestantische Ethik*, 121).

²³ Edwards, *Christian Pilgrim*, Section III.3.

continually persevere, or if he does not concentrate on growth and perfection, it could be a sign that he is a reprobate. The one who does not choose repeatedly has never made a choice.

16th and 17th century Calvinism saddles the individual up with a paradox: God's sovereignty renders him a passive object of his grace, on the one hand, yet at the same time challenges him to restless activity. In order to obtain assurance regarding his eternal salvation, which is beyond his control, the believer in his sanctification in the end becomes . . . himself responsible for his eternity.

With Calvin, the metaphor of the life course as a pilgrimage is part of doctrine. Conversely, in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) doctrine has become part of the metaphor.²⁴ The journey of Christian who moves away from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City on Mount Zion has deeply influenced the collective imagination of—primarily, but not only—the Western world.²⁵ In its use of the archetypal metaphor of life as a journey, the book is far from original. But in his allegory, Bunyan interprets and reconstructs it in such a way that this traveler has served as a model for the modern Western citizen right up to the 21st century, even if he is not (or no longer is) religious. Christian is no Abraham, no Odysseus, no Virgil, although he too makes his life journey. Christian is a Calvinist Protestant: he goes through life as an individual, in a broken relationship to his often hostile environment, not to become happy on earth himself, but called to realize a higher commission. He has one goal in his life, and that is to serve the God in whom his eternal salvation depends. Constantly living on the edge of the sword, alert, living intensively, and continually needing to make choices. He is oriented toward the future, does not look back with nostalgia or resentment; he is not really attached to what lies behind him. His life is a learning process, in which maturity stands for an increased sense of reality and self-knowledge. The further on

²⁴ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), Ed. Roger Sharrock (London: Penguin, 1965).

²⁵ Sharrock, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Introduction. "An allegory depends on an intellectual framework: 'this = that.' But the significance of images and figures like Ignorance, Vanity-Fair, the Slough of Despond, the Delectable Mountains, the scenery and the traveler can no longer be separated from the image in which they have been incorporated. They become a symbol: the reference becomes part of the image itself. Bunyan takes traditional symbols like the journey and the struggle up again and re-styles them in a way recognizable to modern people. . . . the image of the purposeful journey through life still has great evocative power; it is reflected in all those long fictions of which the main theme is individual growth, from Proust to Anthony Powell and C.P. Snow" (Sharrock, "Introduction," xxi).

the road of life, the fewer illusions about the world and himself and the more he watches out for what could take him off his road. He is active, a real striver, and does not give himself any rest or time. But does he really make any headway in life? Does he grow personally, or does he make any progress? Finally, he reaches the moment of his death—salvation—every bit as uncertain as when he started his way as a young adult. He will never be able to blindly navigate by the wisdom of his experience of life; right before the gate of heaven yawns anew still another road to Hell.

In conclusion, the life course seen from a Protestant perspective, rendered as a mythical fiction with Bunyan, is, just like Giddens' late modern self, a risky trajectory in which the individual's freedom of choice to actively impart a coherent shape to one's life is the determining factor. There is a clear structural affinity between the Puritan Christian who detaches himself from space, time, tradition, and is determined to go to heaven, and the environment and the reflexive life project of the liberal self. Three hundred fifty years lie between the tinker from Bedford and the Cambridge sociologist. The religious content of Bunyan's Protestantism has completely evaporated in Giddens' world. But for both the life course is considered to be a reflexive project in which one is individually responsible for the choices one makes. Disembedded from his natural framework of space, time, kinship, and tradition, the modern individual seeks the truth about himself—seeks authenticity—in intensive but usually short-term relationships. He no longer seeks eternal salvation for his soul, but rather his true self, which he is trying to reflexively realize in his life project. That is his one goal in life. The Calvinist's transcendent God-ward orientation has imploded, as it were, into the active orientation of the late modern citizen toward the construction of his self as a meaningful narrative. For this, however, the self is just as dependent on others as Bunyan's Christian was dependent on the dialogues with Talkative and Faithful. The other is the source and guarantee of its authenticity, by recognizing its worth as a self. Just like Christian, people in late modernity have great relational mobility. Every new relationship is an opportunity for self-realization, but at the same time a continuous source of crisis in their life project.²⁶

As soon as Christian has entered the narrow gate, it is clear that he belongs to the elite of the elect. But is the modern individual who manages to realize his life project not also a chosen one? Just like the pilgrim Christian, he makes

²⁶ See for this, also Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

free choices from the very moment he chose to set out on his journey, again and again.²⁷ But the person who really manages to plan a life project and realize it also seems to remain a lucky exception.

Awareness of the 'selective affinities' between the concept of self laying behind the 'choice biography' should make a Reformed public theology suspicious of a massive critique of culture in which the modern notion of self-realization is categorically dismissed as self-centered individualism. A moral archeology into central strands of Protestantism reveals that there is a strong religious impulse behind the idea that the life journey of every single person is a life-long search for perfection in which fundamental choices are at stake.

Kierkegaard and the Loss of Transcendence

These striking resemblances, however, should not make us blind for the differences. In my opinion, one of the most relevant dissimilarities in this respect is the complete loss of transcendence in the modern concept of self. Somewhere between Calvin, Edwards, and Bunyan, on the one hand, and Beck's choice biography, on the other, the constitutive openness in the very concept of the self, characteristic in Protestant religiosity, fell out.²⁸ 'Every single person stands directly for God' is the message of Protestantism. But exactly the paradox that is hidden in this 'standing for,' the presence of an inner space in which a self defines itself ultimately by transcending its self, has been lost in the dominant conception of self. Modern personal identity has become one-dimensional, the modern self a *homo incurvatus in se*—as Luther's description of human's state of sin runs.

However, instead of a categorical rejection of the modern search for self-realization, I think we should look for its critical reappraisal in trying to restore the loss of transcendence in its center. If it would be able to prevent the notion of an authentic self to collapse in this identification of the self with . . . itself, there would be room again for the discovery of a difference within identity, a longing for a reality that transcends the borders of the self—a reality that is

²⁷ Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 209.

²⁸ Cf. the challenging thesis defended by William Placher that Reformed orthodoxy in the 17th century 'domesticated' transcendence in order to be able to integrate its theology into the world view of modern science (William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence. How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong*, Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 1996).

closer to the inner self than one's interiority; a reality that reaches further than the utmost frontiers of experience.²⁹

The right guide for this endeavor is Søren Kierkegaard. As a Lutheran theologian strongly rooted in the Reformed tradition, and as a philosopher attempting to incorporate modernity and the culture of authenticity of Romanticism, I consider him to be the one who can help us to reconsider the notion of 'choice biography' in a balanced way. I think he can be of great help because he stresses both the importance of the individual self and the severity of the fundamental choices it has to make during its life course in his philosophy, as well as the necessity of self-transcendence in order to live a dignified life. The remainder of this article will be dedicated to Kierkegaard's thoughts on what it entails to become a self in one's biography.

Self realization and Choice

In one of his principal works, *Either/Or*, published at the age of thirty, Kierkegaard (1813-1855) observes how people around him run their lives. He is astonished and saddened about their lack of purpose and the meaninglessness of their existence. "And this is what is so sad when one contemplates human life, that so many live out their lives in quiet lostness; they outlive themselves, not in the sense that life's content successively unfolds and is now possessed in this unfolding, but they live, as it were, away from themselves and vanish like shadows."³⁰ They might be honored citizens, at old age looking back at an impressive career or at least a virtuous life. But the judgment still has to be harsh, according to Kierkegaard: they lost their lives in living it. Kierkegaard judges lives existentially. The question whether people are ageing successfully is not answered by the measure of their physical or social well-being, but depends on which fundamental choices they made in their lives. What were their ultimate commitments? Kierkegaard wonders whether people are really conscious of their own fundamental choices, and whether they want to be responsible for their selves. They should be more concerned about their own self, but they seem to have no idea what it entails.³¹ Kierkegaard is driven by the conviction that every human being is "primitively intended to be a self,

²⁹ Cf. the philosophical project of Charles Taylor in notably his *Sources of the Self*, and the *Ethics of Authenticity*.

³⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or. Part II*. Ed. and transl. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 168.

³¹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 169.

destined to become himself.”³² His entire *oeuvre* might be described as “an ethic of self becoming.”³³ Every single individual is unique and of absolute worth. With other 19th century Romanticists, Kierkegaard is gripped by the ideal of authenticity. As a theologian and Christian, however, he cannot imagine self-realization without self-transcendence. To him, the self is an ideal that only realizes itself when it is radically chosen for. The self does not represent some hidden embryonic essence to be developed in the course of a life time, but realizes it self only when people engage themselves passionately with their own, concrete individuality. Only on that very moment is their uniqueness revealed, and their true self displays itself in its absolute, eternal validity. For Kierkegaard, becoming one self is no self deployment—“a development just like that of a plant”³⁴—but self realization. No gradual expansion of an original kernel, but the conscious decision to realize one’s own uniqueness in commitment to a ‘general’ existence with others. To display your singularity, you have to immerge in plurality.

In judging a life, chronological age is not decisive. Neither is lifestyle. Decisive for the quality of a life is the passion with which one dedicates oneself to one’s tasks and responsibilities at a certain stage of life. “Strangely enough, it is always the same thing that preoccupies a person throughout all the ages of life, and one always goes just as far, or rather, one goes backwards.”³⁵ The only difference that counts in a life trajectory is whether one is a novice or an advanced on the path of self-realization. Maturity or adulthood is determined by the extent to which people realize their self in the concrete tasks they become entangled in during the course of their lives. Then age does not count.

However, a progression can be made that justifies a distinction between older and younger, mature and immature, or the novice and the advanced on the path of self-realization. The self can grow in authenticity and come a bit closer to self-completion. Kierkegaard does not share the Nietzschean ideal that we have to face a multiplicity of life possibilities until our last breath. He thinks it is possible to advance in personal veracity, “a growing progression, in which the original is increased.”³⁶

³² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death. A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 33.

³³ Cyril Lansink, *Vrijheid en ironie: Kierkegaards ethiek van de zelfwording* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997).

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 225.

³⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or. Part I*. Ed. and transl. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 34.

³⁶ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, II*, 142.

Kierkegaard defends an explicitly normative vision on biography. People can make the best of their lives, but they can also waste it. He distinguishes between two modes of existence—the aesthetic and the ethical, hierarchically positioned as a sequence of stages in which a human being comes closer to his or her true self.³⁷ Maturing in life means being able to integrate the aesthetic into an ethical attitude towards life. The confrontation Kierkegaard stages in *Either/Or* between both modes of existence is dramatically spelled out in a dialogue between a young man (A) and an older judge (B).

The young man remains an outsider in life; he never really comes of age. He is an observer, who rejects responsibilities and is wary of long-lasting engagements and commitments. He does not want to age, and withdraws himself from the history that he is part of. He hesitates to appropriate his past and his future, but wants to stay forever in the actuality. To enjoy life is his motto, the intensity of its very instants his highest value. In his eyes, the two attitudes towards life—the aesthetic and the ethical—are irreconcilable. The aesthetic will judge the ethical life—being married for years with the same wife, going day after day into the same office—as extremely boring. He does not want to bury himself that way before dying! The ethicist, however, replies that he estimates momentous joy as high as the aesthete does. However, he would like to integrate his enjoyments in the continuity of a historical self. Therefore, Judge William confesses, he experiences the apotheosis of the aesthetic dimension of his own life in his unconditional choice for his ordinary life as a husband and citizen. In his daily care he savors the real joys of life. In an ethical life, enjoyment matures into satisfaction. The ethical, therefore, does not reject or underestimate the aspirations of the aesthetic, but trumps them.

In the context of Copenhagen's 19th century bourgeois culture, Kierkegaard already philosophically anticipates the individualization of the life course of the 21st century by reflecting on the question of what it means to become a true self.

He determines individuality as particularity. We are finite creatures, he says. Finite, not only in the sense that we shall die some day, but also in the sense that our specter of choices decrease during our lifetime. The older we get, the less options we are left with. The choices we make while progressing in age often consist of whether to stay with our earlier choices or to abandon them. We are beings, finite in time and space. I have to find my way with my genetic makeup, my talents and handicaps, and my failures and successes. This self is the only one I have.

³⁷ Lansink, *Vrijheid en ironie*, 67.

Now Kierkegaard defends that only the one who unconditionally chooses his or her self in its finitude and tries to bring that to completion and fulfillment bestows it with eternal worth. This woman or man makes the self, in all its transitory concreteness into an eternal reality. The passionate choice with which I dedicate myself to my perhaps modest, ordinary life determines how close I get to the completion of my true self. In this Kierkegaard moves far away from the ideal of self-fulfillment that was broadly developed in the 1860s and 70s. The reality of the Other—the ones with whom I live together, the work I am engaged in, the friends whose company I enjoy, and the people who are dependent on my care—is constituent for the realization of the Self. In order to become myself, Kierkegaard states, I have to have the courage to live a general life with others.

No one else can step into the inner relationship that I have with the realization of my own self. Nobody can make my choices on my behalf. Even in imitating another's life style and living the ordinary life of Everybody, I am unique in the sense that I am the only one that has to live my life and die my death. If everything in my life is relative, the necessity that I have to live it myself—and the ability of doing it—is an absolute.

Kierkegaard's work can be described as "existential dialectics."³⁸ His anthropology is not a closed theory, but aims at human beings "on the move."³⁹ As long as I live, my self is not completed. Until my last sigh I will stay a possibility. I never coincide with myself. I am not what I am; I am becoming what I am. The essence of human life, according to Kierkegaard, is *ex-istere*—being open to what is not me, the Other.

For those who shrink back for the challenge of self-realization, Kierkegaard reserves the term 'despair.' Those who accept it, however, and engage themselves in living are the ones who have 'faith.' Nobody can refuse the invitation. Every human being, as we heard earlier, is "primitively intended to be a self, destined to become himself."⁴⁰ "But if the self does not become itself, it is in despair, whether it knows that or not. Yet every moment that a self exists, it is a process of becoming, for the self *kata dunamin* [potentially] does not actually exist, but is simply that which ought to come into existence. In so far,

³⁸ Pieter Vos, *De troost van het ogenblik: Kierkegaard over God en het lijden* (Kampen: Ten Have, 2002) 38.

³⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Abschliessende Unwissenschaftliche Nachschrift zu den philosophischen Brocken. Erster Band* (Simmerath: Grevenberg Verlag Dr. Ruff & Co., 2003), 136.

⁴⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death. A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 33.

then, as the self does not become itself, it is not itself; but not to be itself is precisely despair.⁴¹ Kierkegaard places the process of self-realization under a high ethical tension, by constantly measuring the actual, empirical self to the absolute, authentic self that we have to become. This is a never ending, never completed exercise. We will never be perfect in our passion for life. Obviously, we can only speak in a paradoxical way about self-realization. Apparently, self-realization can only exist in the striving to be a real self. But on the other hand, this self is really *present* in its realization.

A Choice for Eternity

According to Kierkegaard, every single human being must become its self. There is no escape, except at the cost of despair. This harsh, categorical ‘must’—where does it come from? Why not live your life easily as it comes; why should you long to realize your true self and not be satisfied with your actual self?

Here we meet the religious dimension in Kierkegaard’s vision of the self. In our individuality there is something that transcends it. We may think of the biblical narrative of the human being created in the image of God (Gen. 1:21ff.), but Kierkegaard is also drawing here, close to his confessional heritage, on Luther’s doctrine of ‘calling,’ or ‘vocation,’ according to which every single human being is called by God to accomplish a specific life mission. One may state that this doctrine receives a modern, philosophical re-translation in Kierkegaard’s conception of the self. Theologically, the dignity of a human being consists in the covenant relationship with God. By responding to His invitation, they realize their status as a creature of God.

Kierkegaard takes up this religious heritage in the vocabulary of modernity. Every single human being receives a calling, he repeats.⁴² The same, however, may be formulated philosophically as: every single human being ‘owns’ an eternal self, of which he or she has to become conscious. Judge Wilhelm can become lyrical about that: “To become conscious in one’s eternal validity is a moment that is more significant than everything else in the world.”⁴³ The human self is bestowed with an almost divine status and shares in the glory of the Everlasting. An immortal spirit is living in us, an eternal self, and in that

⁴¹ Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 30.

⁴² Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 291.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 206.

we are all equal, “whether man, woman, servant, girl, cabinet minister, merchant, barber, student, or whatever.”⁴⁴

However, this eternal self is not essence of substance, not an immortal soul that will outlive us in heaven. Eternity only becomes real the moment I passionately choose for it. A chance that can be ignored quite easily, whether I am consciously in despair or—as the aesthetic—refuse to engage myself in life deliberately. “And yet one can refrain from doing it! You see, there is an Either/Or here.”⁴⁵ Kierkegaard’s valuation of the individual self draws on the religious belief in the eternal worth of every human being in its singularity. He formulates, in a vocabulary understandable for Hegel and the Romantics, a normative vision of humanity that would have been unthinkable without Christianity.⁴⁶

However, although one might consider Kierkegaard a believer who made his evangelical convictions increasingly explicit in his later work, ‘God’ never becomes an object of metaphysical speculation. In his existential language, ‘God’ stands for the horizon of the human longing to become one self. At the bottom of the self’s immanent subjectivity, it is confronted with genuine transcendence that is experienced in the inner obligation to commit itself to the concrete Other. Although this duty does not find its sources within us, it is not imposed from the outside. The individual has the duty of self transcendence in itself. For the one who lives ethically “duty will not split up for him into a multiplicity of particular stipulations, for this always indicates that he has only an external relation to duty. He has put on duty; for him it is the expression of his innermost being.”⁴⁷ The one who listens carefully to his or her own self hears a voice that, at the same time, seems to come from afar. A call away from itself and forward into life. It makes us aware that we do not coincide with ourselves, but have a destiny. A destiny that is not reached by a gradual unfolding of what is hidden in our inner nature, but by an outside-oriented, ethical engagement. The more one is called out of oneself, the more the “inner theology” of the true self pushes it to its fulfillment.⁴⁸

Grounded in God, Kierkegaard says, we have a ‘double existence.’ In our finiteness we experience the eternity; in engaging with the Other, we discover our Selves. There is grandeur in the way Kierkegaard offers self-realization to

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 85.

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II*, 206.

⁴⁶ Peter J. Mehl, *Thinking through Kierkegaard: Existential Identity in a Pluralistic World* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 62, 66.

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, II*, 254.

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, II*, 274.

ordinary people. In society, the worth of the marginalized and the poor may be neglected, but in the perspective of Kierkegaard's religiously inspired ethical attitude, their value is inestimable. Only few may have talent or chances to develop, but everybody has a calling. However insignificant one may be, however humble, seen from Eternity, one may be an ethical hero. "Even if he is the lowliest hired waiter, he does not exist for the sake of any other person. He has his teleology within himself, he actualizes his task, he is victorious."⁴⁹ Here Kierkegaard honors a basic intuition in Christian faith. "Christianity teaches that this individual human being, and thus every single individual human being... exists *before God*" and is "invited to live on the most intimate terms with God!"⁵⁰

Having faith implies the choice for one self: confirming the self with which you were born, the self that you became until now, not fleeing or denying it, but to take yesterday's and today's self as the starting point for tomorrow's. That implies self acceptance, but at the same time, actively realizing that self in the particularity and specificity of the contexts in which you are situated. It also means self-dedication—the self gets real in the ethical choice with which it lives forward. It takes its responsibility within the actual concretion of its individual life.⁵¹

So, for Kierkegaard, everything turns around choice, but in a very specific way. The hundreds of daily choices are not decisive, but the one and only existential choice behind them: either we accept our selves as a task to fulfill, or we do not. The answer is revealed in, under, and with the ordinary choices we make. Judge William describes this category of fundamental choice as the "nerve of my life-view."⁵² In his eyes, one might say, every biography can count as a 'choice biography.' However, the concept of choice should not be interpreted in a reduced voluntaristic way, but existentially as the choice between dedicating myself to the life with and for others in the time and place that are set for me, or trying to withdraw myself from the concrete tasks it entails. In the choice for authenticity I realize my uniqueness, not by being original, but by passionately accomplishing the tasks that I have to fulfill (even those, one may add, that I did not choose freely, but that just happened to me). Anyone may lead such a non-spectacular life, but only I can really want to live it,

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, II*, 275.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 85.

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, II*, 251f.

⁵² Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, II*, 211.

choose for it, and express my individuality in it. In doing that, I do not need to be creative. What counts is not whether I am an artist in the art of life, but whether I want to be a 'general human being,' one among others. "To be the unique human being is not so great in and by itself, for every human being shares this with every product of nature, but to be that in such a way that he is thereby also the universal—that is the true art of living."⁵³

Superficially observed, Judge William leads quite a dull life. Looking more closely, we discover how he passionately defends marriage, work, friendship—long-lasting social relationships in which he reveals his dedication and faithfulness. In his excitement for ordinary life, he should not be easily dismissed as a typical 19th century bourgeois. In the eyes of Kierkegaard, marriage, in particular, represents the durable social bonds that exist only by grace of the constant repetition of a dedicated choice. The married judge William incorporates any single individual that wants to become concrete and historic by making irrevocable choices in his finiteness. For, in marriage, two people make an unconditional choice for one another and engage themselves in a yet unknown future. Every morning, they unconsciously have to repeat the choice they once made at the town hall or in church anew. In doing that, they realize their absolute worth. Being married is "to live in eternity and yet to hear the cabinet clock strike in such a way that its striking does not shorten but lengthens his eternity."⁵⁴ Becoming one self is not a matter of organic growth, but of ethical repetition. In the bonds of work and friendship, Kierkegaard also discerns the call into self realization.

Although Kierkegaard defends the worth of the individual, superseding absolutely the value of relationships, he is, by far, not a stubborn individualist; it is only *in* these relationships that he expresses his uniqueness. "In the movement toward himself, he cannot relate himself negatively to the world around him, for then the self is an abstraction and remains so. His self must open itself according to its total concretion." "The individual stands higher than every relationship, but from this it in no ways follows that he is not in that relationship."⁵⁵ In dedicating ourselves to others, we discover ourselves. Our singleness is revealed in our existence among the many. So Kierkegaard can say in one breath: "The self that is the objective is not only a personal self but a social, a civic self."⁵⁶ We can observe that the religious dialectic of transcendence in the

⁵³ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, 256.

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, 138.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, 274f.

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, 262.

immanence of the self, as depicted earlier, in Kierkegaard corresponds to a social dialectic as well: individuality is only realizable via the detour of an unconditional surrender to social existence. "He transfers himself from personal life to civic life, from this to personal life."⁵⁷ Also socially, a self misses its mark when it stays *incurvatus in se* (Cf. John 12: 24).

Conclusions

Looking back at the argument as developed in this article, we are able to draw some conclusions. The 21st century human life course can be depicted as a 'choice biography.' Modern culture confronts us with a complex set of choices, and, at the same time, offers little help in making them and dis-embeds us from conventions and traditions. "We have no choice but to choose," Anthony Giddens writes.⁵⁸ In order to live a life worthy of living, he suggests that each individual should develop a life style in which rationality and control, and life planning and self-management are the central notions.

How to respond? Instead of categorically rejecting the notion from a theological perspective, I opted for a more balanced approach. A Protestant outlook on the human life course shares central characteristics with choice biography, historically linked as it is to the development of modern culture. A modest moral archeology into the anthropologies of Calvin, Edwards, and Bunyan demonstrated this.

However, there are deep dissimilarities as well. Fundamental in the notion of self that underlies the 'choice biography' is its lack of transcendence, both religiously and socially. A dimension that is central to the Reformed heritage. From a Protestant public theology point of view, modern individualism threatens to collapse into a one-dimensional secularism and egoism.

We turned to Kierkegaard, a modern philosopher and a Protestant believer above suspicion, for help. In his thinking, we found both a philosophical hymn on the absolute worth of the individual, in concord with mainstream modernity, and a religious plea for transcendence in the center of this individuality. By claiming a fundamental difference within subjectivity, Kierkegaard is able to preclude the philosophical derailment that has devastating effects in many current versions of liberalism: the idea that the self is its own

⁵⁷ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, 263.

⁵⁸ Giddens, *Self-Identity*, 81.

origin, content, and destiny. Ultimately, there is one basic choice to be made in every choice biography. The choice whether you want to invest your finite self in the concrete life with the Other and others—or not.

In retrieving Kierkegaard's legacy and bringing it into the bloodstream of modern culture again, the notion of choice biography might undergo a critical re-appraisal.