FILOZOFIA
Volume 80, Number 1, 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31577/filozofia.2025.80.1.5

Kierkegaard and Stirner: A Comparison on the Fundamental Philosophical Question

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RODRÍGUEZ, P. U.: Kierkegaard and Stirner: A Comparison on the Fundamental Philosophical Question
FILOZOFIA, 80, 2025, No 1, pp. 67 – 80

The relationship between Kierkegaard and Stirner has been little studied. Although they didn't directly influence each other, they shared a similar cultural milieu, and both rejected the Hegelian and post-Hegelian solutions to the crisis of modernity. They argued that concepts such as spirit, humanity, or society alienate the concrete existence of human beings. Instead, they emphasized the singularity of the human self and suggested that philosophical reflection should begin with the question of the meaning of individual life. This analysis aims to explore their affinities and divergences concerning the fundamental philosophical question.

Keywords: Kierkegaard – Stirner – self – philosophical question

The relationship between Kierkegaard and Stirner remains virtually unexplored, and the joint analysis of the two post-Hegelian thinkers is currently subject to clear limitations.[1] Our present knowledge of Kierkegaard's and Stirner's biographies denies any influence of the one on the other and vice versa. Although they were geographically and temporally close and although their education and intellectual development shared virtually the same environment, neither Kierkegaard nor Stirner read the other's works (directly or indirectly), and neither would have been aware of the other's existence. Despite this lack of historical contact, it is evident that their philosophical proposals do not run parallel without crossing paths. Our task will be to locate

1 There are a few worthy exceptions to this: Buber (1963, 63 – 72), Löwith (1964), Arvon (1954, 177 – 178), Du Toit (1971), Viallaneix (1977, 17 – 19) and Kramer (2005, 245 – 282).

and explore this point of intersection. In particular, we are interested in determining whether they coincide on the fundamental question that post-idealist philosophy must adopt as a new starting point.

The anti-speculative *pathos* of their respective thinking finds expression in clearly similar categories. Kierkegaard chooses the Danish word *hin Enkelte*; Stirner, the German term *der Einzige*. These categories are not easy to translate but the expression "the Single Individual" is a good option for *hin Enkelte*, and "the Unique One" is the best alternative for *der Einzige*. These words aim to express the unrepeatable and non-transferable character of each human being. With these concepts, both philosophers, on the one hand, refer to the new reality emerging in the modern world through what Hegel, in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, called the "loss of ethical life"; on the other hand, they also critically confront the Hegelian attempt to solve the profound crisis of Christian bourgeois culture through the establishment of a rational state. The "loss of ethical life" takes place with the transition from family to civil society (cf. Hegel 2003, 219). This movement implies the passage from an immediately common and harmonious world to which individuals belong toward a disjointed set of self-absorbed particularities, without visible bonds between them, struggling for their private interests and needs. For Hegel, the state constitutes the solution to this situation of disintegration. However, Hegel did not advocate a return to the ancient substantial community because he considered that respect for individual conscience and its practical initiatives was an undeniable historical achievement of the modern Christian world. For this reason, the role of state institutions is not to stifle the internal dynamics of civil society but rather to prevent and correct its dysfunctional consequences. According to Hegel, the constitutional monarchy was the appropriate legal order to channel the particular into the universal (cf. Hegel 2003, 282).

Post-Hegelian thinkers, by contrast, condemned the Hegelian political-philosophical project of a reflected or mediated ethical life as nothing more than a form of downward social integration (from above to below, from the state to civil society) that alienated the truly existing individual. Some post-Hegelians rejected the statist solution and advocated instead the reinforcement of horizontal ties among human beings. Feuerbach's conclusion in *The Essence of Christianity* was that the individual could achieve a fulfilling life only if he stopped seeking refuge in transcendent and abstract entities and united with his fellow human beings in the common unity of the human species. Marx took a fundamental step toward the realization of these ideas. He argued that Feuerbach's "unity of man with man" found its most faithful translation into

the requirements of the time in the communist proposal for a transformation of human working conditions and a materially egalitarian reorganization of society. Stirner and Kierkegaard voiced their dissatisfaction with these answers too. They recognized in Feuerbach's "humanity" and in the Communists' "society" the same danger that they had detected in Hegel's state. Formally speaking, the reason for rejection was the same in both cases. Both Stirner and Kierkegaard consider "humanity" or "society" to be instances essentially estranged from the individual, interfering with or disturbing their intimate relationship with themself. In *The Sickness unto Death,* through his pseudonym Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard writes that every individual existence that "vaguely rests in and merges in some abstract universality (state, nation, etc.) … is nevertheless despair" (Kierkegaard 1980, 46). For Stirner, the state is the citizen's concern; humanity, man's; the egalitarian society, the communist worker's; but "My concern is neither the divine nor the human [nor the society], not the true, good, just, free, etc., but solely what is *mine*, and it is not a general one, but is – *unique*, as I am unique" (Stirner 2000, 7). Based on this coincidence, Arvon concludes his book on Stirner by stating that Stirner and Kierkegaard have accomplished the same liberating work against the cultural influence of Hegelianism. They placed the self at the heart of the philosophical reflection, that which every system forgets, the fundamental originality of every human being that each person expressed by the pronoun "I" (cf. Arvon 1954, 178). The Unique One and the Single Individual remind us that no speculative theory of reality can assimilate first-person existence.

The existing research on Stirner and Kierkegaard´s relationship primarily focuses on comparing the notions of *der Einzige* and *hin Enkelte*. These studies aim to uncover similarities between the two concepts while, more importantly, highlighting their differences. The purpose of this paper is to establish a preliminary question. Kierkegaard and Stirner turn the theoretical enquiry "What is the self?" into the vital interrogation "What does it mean for me to exist as a self?" However, they articulate this question in a radically different, almost antagonistic, ways. The first section of our article attempts to specify the basic philosophical question faced by Stirner and Kierkegaard. The second section deals with Stirner's reformulation of this question as a claim for individual existence against ethical perfectionism. Finally, we present Kierkegaard's existential-ethical proposal as a project that rivals Stirner's position. In this last section, we aim to develop our argument on a strictly

philosophical level, disregarding the theological aspect of Kierkegaard's thought as much as possible.[2]

I. The Initial Question of Philosophy from Kant to Feuerbach

In his *Lectures on Logic,* Kant states that philosophy, in its cosmopolitan sense (as the science of the final ends of human reason), must confront four fundamental questions: i) What can I know? (ii) What should I do? (iii) What may I hope? (iv) What is man? Metaphysics is responsible for the answer to the first question; ethics for the second; religion for the third; and anthropology for the fourth. However, "because the first three questions relate to the last one" (Kant, 1992, 538), these questions do not share the same level of importance. It is clear that this hierarchy of questions gives anthropology a predominant position in relation to the other philosophical disciplines. What would that position be? Kant would argue that only the philosophical reflection on human nature can establish the foundations of true philosophy. At the same time, the reference of the first three questions to the fourth assigns them all a specific orientation. Anthropology must have as its object a being capable of knowing the world scientifically (*Critique of Pure Reason*), acting according to duty (*Critique of Practical Reason*), and believing philosophically (*Critique of Judgement* and *Religion within the bounds of bare Reason*). Indeed, it ultimately comes down to asking, "What can man know?," "What should man do?," and "What may man hope?"

Thanks to Kant, anthropology attains an unprecedented value in the history of philosophy. This discipline no longer only seeks the truth concerning the human being but also claims to have the power to decide on the truth of ideas such as God, the world, laws, or freedom. The highest and most explicit expression of this "anthropological turn" can be found in the writings of Feuerbach, whose aim is the renewal of philosophy. In *Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy,* Feuerbach writes convinced that "all speculation concerning right, will, freedom, and personality without regard to man; i.e., outside of or even above man, is speculation *without unity, necessity, substance, ground,* and *reality*" (Feuerbach, 2012, 172). Following this line of thought, in his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future,* he defines anthropology as *próte philosophía* (first philosophy) and identifies anthropology as the *universal science* because the human being is "the exclusive, universal, and highest object of

[2] For our justification of this approach, see Rodriguez (2022, 159 – 162) and Rodriguez (2024, 27 – 29).

philosophy" (Feuerbach, 2012, 243). The famous first chapter of the Introduction to *The Essence of Christianity* addresses the question *What is man?* through an inquiry into human essence. Feuerbach identifies the human essence with the unity of reason, will, and heart. Now, reason, will, and heart are not simple faculties or instruments at the service of the individual human being. Instead, they are powers that transfix and constitute all human beings. In summary, reason, will and love, as perfections of the human essence, are the purpose of the existence of every concrete individual (cf. Feuerbach, 1989, 3). The existence of the human essence, its sensible manifestation or objectification, is the human species. However, the species is nothing but the innumerable multitude of the individuals that constitute it. In this manner, the human essence becomes enriched with the arrival of every new human being into the world (cf. Feuerbach, 1989, 152 – 153). The answer to the question of *What is man?* is therefore not to be found by delving into the dispositions and capacities of the individual but by attending to the temporal development of the species, that is, by observing the open history of humanity. The conclusion that Feuerbach's philosophy leads us to is obvious: we can never arrive at a definitive understanding of human nature. A premature solution to this enigma is provided by theology: God. In God, the future becomes present; what extends in a timeline throughout history is contained in a single moment in God. According to Feuerbach, God is the distorted concentration and exposition, once and for all, of the richness of the human essence in a single being. The task of philosophy and each individual is to reappropriate the human treasures that religion has deposited in the heavens.

II. Stirner´s Question: The interrogation *Who am I?* as Critique of Ethical Perfectionism

Stirner is a turning point in the history of the question *What is man?* He concludes *The Ego and his Own* by proposing a radical reframing of the question:

> The conceptual question, "what is man?" – has then changed into the personal question, "who is man?" With "what" the concept was sought for, in order to realize it; with 'who' it is no longer any question at all, but the answer is personally on hand at once in the asker: the question answers itself (Stirner, 2000, 323 – 324).

These words, in a certain sense, show that Stirner sought to address the fundamental questions posed by Kant in a literal manner. What can *I* know?

what should *I* do? and what may *I* hope?; these are strictly personal topics that concern *me*. Idealism and Feuerbach, the latter in secret continuity with the former, make these subjects an impersonal matter. They make them human affairs and, consequently, foreign to me. Stirner suspects the question *What is man?* is not an innocent question but rather hides dangerous consequences. The definition of the human essence is necessarily conceptual and is (and can only be) constituted through general predicates. Now, these universal categories do not fully apply to specific individuals. In a text addressed to his critics in 1845, Stirner writes:

> One flattered oneself that one spoke about the "actual, individual" human being when one spoke of the *Man*; but was this possible so long as one wanted to express this human being through something universal, through an attribute? (Stirner 2012, 55 [translation slightly modified]).

The question *What is man?* inevitably distances us from the singularity of the existing individual. However, there is something even worse. The inquiry into the human essence pushes the individual life into the background and subjects it to a negative moral judgment. The question *What is man?* is, in the end, prescriptive. The notions of man or the human essence do not reflect the reality of flesh and blood human beings. Instead, they express what individuals ought to be, rather than describe what they actually are. Individuals, the particular human beings experiencing existence, always remain lower than the human essence. The concrete existent becomes guilty before its model. While Christian theology used to require individuals to be perfect like God and branded them as sinners when they failed to do so, post-Hegelian philosophy proceeds in the same way when it demands that individuals realize the perfections of the species and labels them as selfish if they are unable to accomplish this objective. To summarize, by posing the question *What is man?* post-Hegelian philosophers replicate the alienating mechanism of Christian religion, while keeping its core intact: the category of sin, or more precisely, the subjective awareness of being a sinner, of not being (individual existence) what one ought to be (common essence). It is worth pointing out that this reproduction of religious logic is, at the same time, its reinforcement. Stirner thinks that the Feuerbachian human essence intensifies theological domination because this new deity: 1) "can possess everyone, believers and unbelievers alike" and 2) "the scrutiny of my

own conscience is harder to evade than that of a transcendent subject that flutters 'over our heads as a dove'" (Leopold 2019, 275).

The Ego and his Own aims to open the way for the question *Who is man?* But what is this question truly asking? Stirner gives us an indication when he says: "the answer is personally on hand at once in the asker." The one who asks is a concrete individual, so what he is ultimately asking is *Who am I?* Stirner wants to formulate and reply to this issue for the first time without any moralizing purpose. The new Stirnerian question serves a clearly anti-perfectionist project of existence.[3] Individual existence is all about one's own flourishing and manifestation; it is not meant to be the fulfillment of a shared human essence. For Stirner, the question *What is man?* works as an instrument of domination because it morally *interpellates* the human individual so as to subordinate them to a system of coercive norms. It turns the individual into the abnegated servant of the selfish cause of another, in this case, humanity (cf. Stirner, 2000, 5 – 7). By contrast, the interrogation *Who am I?* attempts to abolish any exigence addressed to concrete existence. "A man," as Stirner writes in the penultimate section of his book, is "called" to nothing, and has no "task," no "destiny," as little as a plant or a beast has a "calling" (Stirner, 2000, 288). There is no vocation or calling because there is no transcendent instance that summons or calls the individual. According to the author of *The Ego and his Own*, the question of the meaning of one's own being can be formed and answered only in the first person, within the immanent limits of a unique singularity.

III. The Individual in the Place of the You: Kierkegaard´s Critique of Stirner

Kierkegaard coincides with Stirner in thinking that the most important question to ask concerns the uniqueness of each individual. The difference between them arises as to how this inquiry should be approached. While Stirner argues that it should be framed in the first person (Who am I?); Kierkegaard, for his part, considers that it should be formulated in the second person (Who are you?). The fundamental question, therefore, is not a reflexive one; it´s not an interrogation that we put to ourselves, but an interrogation addressed to us by another.

The first chapter of *The Sickness unto Death* contains what are probably Kierkegaard's most conceptually dense paragraphs. These opening words offer the most comprehensive expression of his understanding of human

[3] For an analysis of Stirner's critique of perfectionism, see Leopold (2019) and Quante (2019).

existence.[4] The beginning of the book can be overwhelming, as questions arise only to be immediately replaced by others. The first question in the series is missing, moreover, although it is clearly implied by the initial sentence. Kierkegaard is able to overlook the question because it has already been raised by Kant and the post-Hegelian philosophers. By effectively omitting the question, Kierkegaard shows that he understands it is essential to move beyond it. What is man? A spirit. What is spirit? A self. The obvious conclusion (that the human being is a self) is postponed, and instead, the ultimate question is presented: What is the self? (cf. Kierkegaard 1980, 13). However, in framing this last question, the pseudonymous author, Anti-Climacus, does not call for a purely traditional and conceptual definition of the self. He formulates the question following the total intention of his book, namely to upbuild and awaken the concrete existing individual. Anti-Climacus's answer is well-known: the self is a self-relating activity. But the crucial aspect is understanding, first of all, how the self actually relates to itself and then how it ought to do so. The description of despair and its multiple modalities explains the first point; the description of faith clarifies the second.

According to Anti-Climacus, the self is not itself but is in the process of becoming itself (cf. Kierkegaard 1980, 30). Tension, the absence of an immediate coincidence with oneself, is the basic condition of the human self. In the course of existence, the self finds itself as the task of becoming itself. The term "despair" designates both the failure in this task and the subjective suffering caused by this failure. For this reason, the pseudonymous author of *The Sickness unto Death* advocates a perfectionist or teleological understanding of the self and is convinced that the very existence of the phenomenon of despair supports his view. The self must become itself. This implies, first and foremost, that the human self is not destined for a supra-individual instance. The aim of individuals does not consist in the achievement of a universal essence, which is the same for all human beings, in all places, and at all times. It is important to note, secondly, that, unlike biological growth, becoming oneself is not a natural or spontaneous development process. Becoming oneself requires a conscious and deliberate movement. The self must achieve clarity in the knowledge of its own being, and, more importantly, it must fully accept and take charge of its being (cf. Kierkegaard 1980, 47 and 55). In short, the self

[4] A detailed analysis of these opening paragraphs is not feasible within the confines of this paper due to the limited space available.

must will itself to be the self that it is (cf. Kierkegaard 1980, 20).[5] The reason for this is rooted in Anti-Climacus's *phenomenology of the desperate spirit* (Stewart 1997) i.e., in his "psychological description of the forms of despair as these appear in actuality, in actual persons" (Kierkegaard 1980, 151). The pseudonymous author's analysis states that individuals can remain completely indifferent to themselves (unconscious despair), or they can take a negative stance towards themselves (conscious despair). In the latter scenario, they may either refuse to be the self that they are (despair of weakness), or they may strive to be a self that they are not (despair of defiance). Therefore, according to Anti-Climacus, the actual situation of every human self is that of someone who does not want to be what he or she actually is (cf. Theunissen 2005, 5).

The main interest of Anti-Climacus is to determine what or who has assigned the self the task of becoming itself. In the first chapter of his book, he presents a well-known alternative: the self "must either have posited itself or have been posited by another" (Kierkegaard 1980, 13).[6] In other words: does the self interpellate itself or is it interpellated by another?[7] By resolving this disjunction, the Kierkegaardian pseudonym defines what is the central question of philosophy: Who am I? or Who are you?

The treatment of the final form of despair exposes the existential project, which embodies one of the terms of the disjunction: self-position. It also shows the impossibility of this project. Consequently, the analysis of the supreme form of despair leaves only one of the alternatives from the first chapter standing: the self has been posited by another. The individual who despairs in defiance, writes Anti-Climacus, "wants to be master of itself or to create itself, to make his self into the self he wants to be" (Kierkegaard 1980, 68). This characterization undoubtedly applies to the reflective aesthete portrayed in the first volume of *Either/Or*, the individual seeking to transfigure the world and his life artistically so as to enjoy them (Kierkegaard 1987a, 304 – 306). But Anti-Climacus would also extend it to the author of the second part of *Either/Or*, the

[5] For an account of the notion of self-acceptance, see Rodríguez (2020, 91 – 93) and Rodríguez (2023, 26 – 27).

[6] The Hongs' English version uses the word *establish* to translate the Danish verb *sætte*. Following Larsen's suggestion, we opt for the verb *posit* (Larsen 2015, 37).

[7] Larsen explains that the verb *sætte* literally means *to place*, for example, *to place something somewhere*. However, it also can be used in a figurative sense: "to describe a particular aspect of a situation, or a person's relation to a certain event" (Larsen 2015, 40). In this sense, *being posited* implies being affected by a specific situation that demands certain behaviors and attitudes.

ethical B (Judge William), who argues that by choosing himself, the individual becomes something like the editor of his own existence and determines what belongs to it or not (Kierkegaard 1987b, 260). Both the reflective aesthete and the ethical B place the individual in the position of the I, as the sole center, source and ground of his or her own existence. This kind of self wants to begin its existence a little earlier than other selves, not at and with the beginning, but in the beginning; the self, in the position of the I, wants to be the one who defines its task (Kierkegaard 1980, 68). Now, since the self has within itself the power to determine its task, it also has the power to revoke it. For this reason, Anti-Climacus argues that the sovereignty this self intends to exercise over itself is entirely fictitious (Kierkegaard 1980, 69). As Kierkegaard sets it out in a journal entry from 1850, what authority can anyone has over himself or herself if it is no stronger as the one who imposes the task than as the one who is subordinated to it? (Kierkegaard 2014, 42)

In response, Kierkegaard points out a fundamental fact about our subjectivity: when we explore the course of our conscious life, we realize that we do not start from the position of the I, nor are we the first to speak. Instead, in reviewing our existence, we discover ourselves initially situated in the position of the You, we find ourselves as the receiver of another's word. In this primordial scene of subjectivity, if the individual speaks, it is because someone else has previously spoken to them.[8] The question *Who am I?* in which the self gives an account of itself – is only possible to the extent that the self receives the invitation to become itself through the inquiry *Who are you?* Let's consider this in more detail.

Is it correct to place self-interpellation at the origin of conscious life? This possibility is examined in the first chapter of the pseudonymous book *The Concept of Anxiety*, signed by the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis. The psychological analysis of Adam, the first human being, highlights precisely the emergence of conscious life. Vigilius Haufniensis introduces the hypothesis of self-interpellation when he suggests, regarding the biblical words of prohibition and punishment, that Adam talked to himself. Immediately afterward, the pseudonym must clarify that the first human being was not proficient in the use of language, as he did not know the meaning of the words he used (Kierkegaard 2013, 45). The fact that Adam talked to himself through

[8] According to Kierkegaard, the Christian message seeks to make individuals aware of this original existential condition and to establish this initial position as the starting point of their ethical-existential task.

a language over which he did not have complete control necessitates making a minor correction to the previous hypothesis: although it is Adam´s voice that sounds, it is actually language that is talking through him. To reinforce his hypothesis, Haufniensis points out that language is not the invention of a particular human being or the product of an agreement among individuals but something that precedes each human being and makes an understanding between them possible (Kierkegaard, 2013, 47, 186). Every self-interpellation is formed from something external to the subject and can never be entirely original and singular. In other words, when we interpellate ourselves, at a certain point, we are also being interpellated by an other.[9]

Anti-Climacus summarizes these ideas by asserting that the self relates to itself before another. In the view of Anti-Climacus, this other is more than a mere spectator; it is the measure or criterion of the individual, a goal by which the self measures itself (Kierkegaard 1980, 79 – 80). If the author of the treatise on despair had read Stirner, he would have agreed with him on one point. There are indeed others (e.g., nature, reason, the state, the family, society) which, by their abstraction, disturb the relationship of the individual to itself. Nevertheless, the existential project proposed by Stirner is also flawed and doomed to fail, because an individual that relates exclusively and monologically to itself gets hopelessly bogged down in its own darkness. According to Anti-Climacus, the individual's undisturbed relation to itself is mediated by another. So, to establish a proper relation to oneself, everything hinges on determining the character of this other. From a theological standpoint, Kierkegaard´s texts are clear about the identity of this other: God or, more precisely, Christ, the God-man. Philosophically speaking, Kierkegaard's writings are limited to making two fundamental and interconnected contributions through the notions of power and transparency.

Regarding the concept of power, Kierkegaard offers a clarifying commentary in a remarkable journal fragment from 1846, which presents a thought-provoking contrast to Stirner's perspective. Stirner asserts that all power external to the self is coercive because it aspires to fulfill its own cause, for which the individual must sacrifice itself. Kierkegaard, however, considers

[9] For example, individuals always interpellate themselves within a socially determined context that exceeds them and never in the vacuum of a neutral situation. This fundamental difference between Stirner and Kierkegaard lies in their respective understanding of the human individual. For Stirner, the individual is only himself: "*I* am my species" (Stirner 2000, 163). For Kierkegaard, "is both himself and the race" (Kierkegaard 2013, 28).

that identifying power with mere domination is a limited and worldly perspective that fails to grasp the full essence of power. Stirner characterizes the power of a finite being. A finite being cannot go completely beyond itself, because it is bound to itself by the care of itself. To preserve itself, a finite being needs to advance on what surrounds it. By contrast, only an infinite power "can take itself back while it gives away, and this relationship is indeed the independence of the recipient" (Kierkegaard 2011, 57). Infinite power is not the amplification of finite power; it is not the exercise of irresistible violence "precisely because it is absolutely exempt from the self-assertion strategy of finite power" (Dietz 1994, 73). Thus understood, power exercised by another can be a restrictive force that oppresses singularity but also a productive force that enables the emergence of personal freedom and identity.

According to Anti-Climacus, transparency is one of the most significant elements of the proper relation of the self to itself. We say that something is transparent if it allows things to be seen through it without distortion. In this sense, the self relates transparently to itself when it actually becomes itself and not something else. However, this movement depends on the other, in whose presence the self exists. The other can act as a pole of attraction, breaking the relation of the self to itself. In this case, the self moves towards the other instead of towards itself. In other words, the other can obscure transparency, the other can draw the self from being itself (Kierkegaard 1980, 46 and Kierkegaard 1991, 159). Transparency is not a fact, not an innate and immediate quality; it must be achieved by effort (Cruysberghs 2010, 131). However, what triggers this effort comes from something external to the self that nonetheless directs the self towards itself.[10] The self-assertion of the self is the confirmation of a being that has previously been recognized and valued by another. According to Anti-Climacus, another is needed to *invite* the self to become itself (Kierkegaard 1991, 159). The statement that the self is posited by another does not negate the ethical task that demands that each individual take control of their own existence. Instead, it defines the boundaries and prerequisites of that task. Put in our own words, the question Who am I? originates from the question Who are you?

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[10] For a discussion of diverse interpretations of the category of transparency, see Rodríguez (2020, 93 – 95 and 2023, 22 and 29).

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