

# The Idea of Authenticity and Inauthenticity of Existence in the Existential Philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard

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The idea of authenticity of life calls to mind the obvious fact that many individuals, seriously and inconsiderately, have allowed themselves to be swallowed in the faceless crowd to such extent that they have completely lost their true selfhood. It is an apparent danger in the existence of man, especially in modernity, that abstraction is substituted for reality. Nevertheless, the truth of the uniqueness of each individual person and the various and different situations of life where an individual person cannot but make a personal choice and decision engendered in man the need to necessarily authenticate his being. The researcher, therefore, deems it not only important but very expedient at this point in time, when there is not only a loss of personal identity but more still a total flow of existence in our modern society, to pinpoint what authentic life should be and how it is to be achieved. Hence, this work demonstrates how a Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, has done a masterly work of authenticating one's existence. He emphasized that one should become an individual person instead of being swallowed up in the appraisal of untrue crowd. In order to accomplish the goal, the researcher primarily applied the philosophical reflective approach.

*Keywords:* authentic, inauthentic, existence, subjectivity, individual

## General Introduction

Soren Kierkegaard is regarded as the father of existentialism; yet, existentialism is said to have blossomed in the 20th century while Kierkegaard was a 19th century philosopher.

Though Kierkegaard did not term his philosophy as existentialism, the breaths of his thought cover such mainline existentialist themes like existence, death, freedom, anguish, meaninglessness of life, anxiety, absurdity, subjectivity and the discussion on the three stages on life's way. (Ozumba, 2010, p. 67)

However, to understand Kierkegaard the existentialist requires that we know Kierkegaard the individual. Although his academic studies influenced his thought, the spirit of his writings arose from four turning points in his life. These were two relationships (with his father and his only female love affair) and two battles (with the press and with the Danish church)

Kierkegaard was subjected to a very severe upbringing by his father whom Kierkegaard later described as "crazy". His religious melancholia was a legacy from his father. His father raised him up in a very rigorous way,

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almost tending to fanaticism, and imparted on him at such early stage a sense of guilt and sin. As a university student, Kierkegaard rebelled against the religious pressures of his childhood. He tried to squeeze out of life all the pleasure he could. However, according to his journals, he was being eaten up by despair behind his carefree mask. Thus he says

I have just returned from a party of which I was the life and soul; wit poured from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me, but I went away and the dash should be as long as the earth's orbit, and wanted to shoot myself. (Bretall, 2002, p. 400)

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard reconciled with his father before his father died. He then came to understand that his father's rigorous religious upbringing was just a loving effort to save him from the guilt and melancholy his father suffered. Having realized this is father's love, Kierkegaard began to understand God's love and turned back toward Christianity.

The second influential event in his life that had an impact on his philosophy was his engagement to Regina Olsen. Because of his melancholic character, "he felt obliged to break off his engagement with Regina, something the Copenhagen bourgeoisie did not look kindly on" (Gaarder, 1996, p. 378 ). It was a tortuous experience for Kierkegaard, because he was passionately in love with her. Both before and after the engagement was broken, Kierkegaard found that his love for her brought out the best in him and inspired the writer within him to emerge (Lawhead, 2002).

The third influence on Kierkegaard was his lifelong war with the press. He worried that the press made individuals think of themselves as members of the anonymous, collective group known as "the public". His tension with the press came to a head in his famous battle with *The Corsair*. This was a popular newspaper that loved to report the gossip of the day as well as provide witty cynical book reviews. Kierkegaard's understanding of the significance of suffering was deepened and this brought him to realization that an authentic individual ought to stand alone, if necessary, against the crowd.

Finally, Kierkegaard entered into a battle with the Danish state church. He spared no energy in criticising what you might call "Sunday Christianity" (Gaarder, 1996). In his view, the church has abandoned authentic Christianity long ago. Nowadays we talk of confirmation Christianity. He rationalized how both the church and people in general had a noncommittal approach to religious questions. His health began to fail and hence, died on November 5, 1855. At his funeral, his brother Peter, a leading clergyman, apologized for Kierkegaard's attacks against the church. However, a number of university students who admired Kierkegaard's iconoclastic writings rose up to protest. "Even as he was being laid in the grave, Kierkegaard was still causing controversy and forcing people to take a stand. He would have wanted it no other way" (Lawhead, 2002, p. 400).

### **Kierkegaard's Authentic and Inauthentic Individual**

Kierkegaard distinguished between authentic and inauthentic individual. He made this distinction using *actor* and *spectator*. He argues that it is only the actor that is involved in existence in the true sense of the term. Though we can say that the spectator also exists, the term existence does not fittingly belong to inert, dormant or inactive things, be it a spectator or a stone. He then draws the comparison thus:

Eternity is the winged horse, infinitely fast, and time is worn-out jade; the existing individual is driver. That is to say, he is such a driver when his mode of existence is not an existence loosely so called; for then he is no driver but a drunken peasant who lies asleep in the wagon and lets the horses take care of themselves. To be sure, he also drives and is a driver, and so there are many who- also exist. (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 276)

The sleeping driver represents the person who is numb to his existence because either he hides himself within the community mindset or because he is pulled unreflectively by his impulse. He is what Heidegger calls *Das man*, that is, a crowd man. Only the person who grabs the rein and struggles with the decisive choices in his own life can be said to “exist” in the fullest sense of the word. Otherwise, a person is living an inauthentic life. In any case Kierkegaard says, “a crowd in its very concept is the untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction” (Kierkegaard, 2003, p. 360).

In his Christian faith, Kierkegaard sees individual immersed in the crowd as an attempt by the individual to gain meaning for his being. This however is an unprofitable attempt. The right attempt is to approach oneself to God instead of any other thing. In God’s sight, humankind constituted no crowd, for God comprehended every single individual as an individual within the society. Therefore, until man relates himself with God, his life will be full of anxiety. This anxiety is a result of the fact that while he lives existentially, he is alienated from his essential self (Jimoh, n.d.). This alienation in turn creates a dynamic drive in man which in turn propels him into the search for his selfhood. This man’s selfhood can only be discovered in the sight of the Infinite Majesty, God himself.

### **The Notion of Subjectivity in Soren Kierkegaard**

The concept “subjectivity” is the central point in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. “The ordinary meaning of the term ‘subject’ in philosophy is knower and accordingly, the nature or the state of the knower is known as ‘subjectivity’” (Nath, 2014, p. 2). His concept of subject is not abstract but concrete in nature. This subject is an individual who exists self consciously. This subjective existence is sometimes called simple existence or subjectivity. That is why the concept of “subjectivity” in Kierkegaard’s philosophy bears a deeper and dynamic meaning. In delineating Kierkegaard’s subjectivity D. M. Datta says “Kierkegaard’s subject is, therefore, more an ethical subject than a cognitive subject, it is more a conscious doer than objective onlooker” (Nath, 2014, p. 2).

Subjectivity is what is unique to the individual. “Subjectivity is that which the individual and no one else has” (Uka, 2010, p. 96). That is, we have past, present, and future and no one can have the other person’s past, present, or future. The important point is that to exist, the individual must make choices; the individual must decide what to do the next moment and on into the future. What the individual chooses and how he chooses will define who and what he is to himself and to others (Uka, 2010).

By subjectivity Kierkegaard means a total person assimilation of Christianity as a unique experience. His logic is that God who is the object of Christianity cannot be pursued in an “objective way”. This is because God is a subject, and therefore exists only for subjective inwardness (Stumpf, 2003).

### **Kierkegaard’s Indirect Way of Communication**

Kierkegaard as a subjective thinker was interested in ways to communicate his ideas to people so that the people will make the ideas their own without being biased or influenced by the author. In examining Kierkegaard’s writings, it is significant to note that Kierkegaard was greatly influenced by Socrates on whose concept of irony he wrote his master’s thesis. Consequently, in line with Socrates, Kierkegaard did not see the possibility of communicating the truth to anyone. Thus he uses the method of indirect communication that will lure his readers into discovering the truth for themselves. Kierkegaard states thus: “All communication of

knowledge is direct communication. All communication of capability is indirect communication” (Kierkegaard, 1978, p. 282).

In our world today, people believe or accept an assertion based on the person who wrote or said it. They no longer consider the authenticity or the truth of an assertion. What they are interested in is: Who said it? Is he/she popular? Is he/she an authority worth listening to? All these and many more made Kierkegaard to use pseudonymous author as a way of passing his ideas to people so that the people will discover the truth for themselves and make it their own and not because they know the author, but because it is a truth.

### Evaluation

Despite Kierkegaard’s contributions in curbing man’s predicament with his authentic existence, there are manifest faults in his approach and views, since he did not present a golden philosophy. His views gravitate towards extremism.

Kierkegaard’s conception of authenticity of life being achievable by concentrating on one’s interior feelings and attitudes will invariably give birth to self-centered attitude and eventual preoccupation with oneself. This is anti-social and very destructive of true altruism and capable of hindering the attitude of compassion toward others. In other words, this culture of authenticity as conceived by Kierkegaard will undoubtedly lead to self-centeredness and eventual collapse of the “public self”. It sets the individual against the public and the crowd, thereby negating the fact that man is a social and political animal and thus needs the other to survive in his environment. Aristotle rightly pointed out that he who leaves alone is either a god or a beast (Aristotle, 2001). If all men are to act on purely subjective ground, there will be no education, no system of morals, no organized religion, no government, and no philosophy. Thus, it will amount to the decimation of the very subjective individual whom Kierkegaard wishes to protect.

More so, by making truth completely subjective, Kierkegaard is ridiculing the coherence theory of truth, for if our judgement be always subjective, it cannot be consistent with the judgement of others. For instance, if the Holy Scripture is interpreted subjectively, its meaning will be totally adulterated by personal emotions and sentiments, to suit the individual and his intentions. Subjectivity will be chaos to humanity if it applies to every aspect of life because anything subjective cannot be regulated nor guided except by the subject himself alone.

Furthermore, one finds out that Kierkegaard could not formulate a universal theory of authenticity that could be applicable to all individual, because his highest stage of authenticity is the manifestation of his religious stage of existence. Can his religious stage of existence be applicable to Buddhist, Islam, who have neither idea nor regard the Christian paradox?

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