



Subjectivity and Authenticity: The Existential Perspective of Kierkegaard

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Abstract

The philosophical movement of existentialism revolves around the meaning of individual existence. Existential philosophers focus on investigating the nature of human existence and what it means to be human by exploring the concepts of life's meaning, freedom, responsibility, thrownness, anxiety, absurdity, subjectivity, and authenticity. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre have extensively discussed the concept of the 'authentic self'. They believed that authenticity involves being true to oneself and achieving self-realization. Kierkegaard asserted that the meaning of human existence lies in becoming oneself, a unique individual through personal choices and commitments. He emphasized subjective experience and a personal relationship with God over the authority of the church as an institution. This article aims to discuss Kierkegaard's account of subjective experience and the authentic self. Furthermore, it explores how and why Kierkegaard justifies the discovery of truth for oneself without relying on objective realms or abstract reasoning.

Keywords: existence, human life, subjectivity, authenticity

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Introduction

There was growing skepticism about the optimistic promises of Enlightenment ideals regarding moral and scientific progress. Traditional sources of moral and spiritual authority were increasingly viewed as inadequate for providing guidance and meaning. Prominent 19th-century existentialist thinkers such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, and 20th-century thinkers such as Heidegger, Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus, acknowledged the immense challenge of realizing one's freedom and taking ownership of one's existence (Laceulle, 2018, p. 197).

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that gained widespread attention for its focus on the subjective reality of individual existence, freedom, and choice. It emphasizes the importance of each person forging their own path through their decisions and actions (Mallah, 2016, p. 1). A key principle of existentialism, articulated by 19th-century thinkers, is the idea that individuals transcend objective reality to embrace their subjective truth. This truth, whether rooted in lived experience, as Kierkegaard suggested, or shaped by personal interests, as Nietzsche proposed, is inherently tied to the individual's practices and actions. Such practices of discovering truth developed in response to the metaphysical doctrines of earlier centuries (Joseph et al., 2014, p. 41). Kierkegaard was one of the most influential philosophers of the 19th century and is often regarded as the founder of existentialism. He strongly criticized Christianity, arguing that it had lost its spiritual essence and become a lifeless institution (Cogswell, 2008, p. 29). However, his criticism extended beyond Christianity as an institutionalized religion; he also challenged the Enlightenment's emphasis on rationality and Hegelian dialectics. Kierkegaard opposed the dominant Hegelian Absolute Idealism and dialectical necessity, arguing that they fail to connect with individuals' lived experiences (Reynolds, 2014, p. 4).

Kierkegaard wrote extensively on philosophy, theology, and literature. His notable works include *Either/Or* (1843), *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), and *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849). In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard begins a chapter titled "The Subjective Truth, Inwardness; Truth is Subjectivity." He is more concerned with how an individual should personally relate to truth in their life than with the nature of reality itself. Kierkegaard's emphasis is not so much on what one believes (and whether it is true) but on how those beliefs influence the believer. He illustrates this by

focusing on Socrates, whom he credits with a deeper understanding of subjectivity (Smith, 2022, pp. 31–40). In favor of subjectivity, he rejected the idea of philosophers claiming objectivity, as if they observed the universe from a timeless, godlike perspective. He argued that it was absurd for speculative thinkers to view life and the universe as though they were outside of them. Since all who think must first exist, they are always participants in the world they describe (Cogswell, 2008, p. 32). He further explores the importance of personal experience, asserting that individual experiences are essential to being oneself and to forming a personal connection with God. For Kierkegaard, being true to oneself requires faith, commitment, and decision-making, rather than engaging in abstract intellectual pursuits (Stumpf & Fieser, 2015, pp. 462–467). As an existentialist, he defines the meaning of existence and argues that to exist means to commit oneself with passion, transcending any predetermined conception of oneself in universal terms (Joseph et al., 2014, p. 40).

To exist is to actively engage in life as an actor, rather than as a passive observer. It involves consciously and freely choosing a path in life, being aware of life's challenges, and taking full responsibility for one's choices. (n.d., p. 3). Existential philosophy asserts that individuals can transform their perspective on life by adopting new beliefs, taking deliberate actions instead of merely reacting, exercising willpower rather than passively yielding to circumstances, and consistently taking responsibility for shaping themselves and their choices. It is the only philosophical approach that emphasizes the essence of human existence and the unique qualities that define humanity (Mallah, 2016, p. 6). Kierkegaard's existential philosophy centers on the individual's personal experience and self-understanding from within. In contrast, Nietzsche presents a different view of human existence, utilizing nihilism and the concept of the "death of God" to critique the religious and moral foundations of Christianity. Nietzsche emphasizes a naturalistic perspective of life, grounded in the idea of willpower (Solomon, 2005, pp. 65–66).

The inner and subjective experience of an individual leads to the idea of the authentic self in Kierkegaard's philosophy. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche both believe that achieving true self-realization requires being true to oneself. They considered reason and intellect to be misleading in the pursuit of genuine self-realization. Both philosophers argued that an ascetic lifestyle and a heroic attitude could help individuals pursue continuous self-realization without being influenced by external factors (Beck, 1944, pp. 128–129). Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, however, have different views on individual experience.

Nietzsche focuses on overcoming and surpassing established values, whereas Kierkegaard emphasizes choosing among various stages of the self. Heidegger builds on their ideas by discussing “Being” from an ontological perspective (Earnshaw, 2006, pp. 72–73). All ideas, including personal experiences and the pursuit of self-actualization, revolve around and are grounded in the concept of subjectivity.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach to investigate Kierkegaard’s concepts of subjectivity and authenticity. Both primary and secondary sources, including books, research papers, and other academic resources, will be utilized to examine and explain the subject matter thoroughly.

Subjectivity

The notion of subjectivity has been widely debated across numerous philosophical and religious traditions. It refers to the personal and individual experience of the world and God. Kierkegaard argues that truth is subjective, emphasizing what is said rather than merely how it is said (Kierkegaard, 2009, p. 182). Several scholars interpret the term “subjectivity” in different ways. For example, Nath describes subjectivity as the state or nature of the knower (subject). He suggests that through the subjective experience of faith, one can know God, rather than through objective methods (2014, p. 4). Charles E. Moore contends that Kierkegaard placed little value on objective facts, which are derived through observation and abstract reasoning. Instead, Kierkegaard believed that to attain truth and truly be oneself, one must embrace deep inwardness. (S. Kierkegaard, 1999, p. xxiv). In his work, *Johannes Climacus*, Kierkegaard famously asserted that “subjectivity is truth.” This claim highlights the intrinsic connection between subjectivity and an individual’s inner life, encompassing emotions and personal experiences (Hannay & Marino, 1998, p. 9). Barrett explores Kierkegaard’s notion of subjectivity, describing him as a “subjective thinker” who focuses on the individual’s inner experience and the “inwardness” of human existence. To fully grasp this concept of inwardness, it is necessary to examine the nature of truth itself. Kierkegaard argues that religion is not merely a collection of propositions accepted as objectively true, such as a system of geometry. Instead, from an existential perspective, religion is ultimately about *being* religious.

In contrast, David argues that, in discussing subjectivity, the self, and the individual, Kierkegaard seeks to develop a philosophy and religious practice that moves beyond the abstract. Kierkegaard shifts attention back to the lived realities of existence. David contends that a thinker’s task is not only to explore

the object of thought, such as duty or devotion to God, but also to reflect on their personal relationship with that object (Gouwens, 1996, pp. 42–43). In addition, David points out that Kierkegaard's focus on truth as subjectivity does not eliminate the objective aspect of truth. Instead, it emphasizes how one genuinely engages with truth through ethical and religious passion (Gouwens, 1996, p. 105). Barrett introduces new perspectives and argues that it is crucial to clarify that Kierkegaard's "subjectivism," as well as the broader subjectivism or individualism often associated with existentialism, should not be conflated with the modern liberal focus on free choice prevalent in contemporary capitalist culture. This liberal perspective tends to overlook the profound personal and moral consequences that arise from the radical freedom of choice central to existentialist thought (Reynolds, 2014, p. 6).

Stack provides a new perspective on Kierkegaard by examining the relationship between subjectivity and ethics. Kierkegaard explores what it means to live with subjective inwardness, emphasizing that this is not a form of self-centeredness. Instead, it involves taking ethical responsibility, requiring self-discipline, self-control, and spiritual focus. While sustaining such a moral commitment throughout life is demanding, Kierkegaard argues that it becomes attainable through the pursuit of an ethical way of being. In Kierkegaard's philosophy, subjectivity and ethics are inseparably linked. He views subjectivity as the inner experience of the self's relationship with itself, grounded in personal realization rather than mere compliance with duty or universal moral laws. Kierkegaard further asserts that ethical living involves deepening personal experiences, which, in turn, connect the individual to the broader human condition. In this framework, becoming subjective reveals the essence of true humanity—not through abstract reasoning or detached consciousness, but through lived moral engagement with the world (1973, pp. 108–125). Kierkegaard's idea of truth as subjectivity focuses on personal experience rather than objective claims about God's existence. For him, truth comes from an individual's inner life, combining faith, ethics, and personal responsibility (Hamilton, 1998, pp. 64–65).

MacLane interprets "subjectivity" as inner experience, emphasizing the self rather than the external world. Kierkegaard focused on the transformation of human existence by exploring the self, its values, and its relationship with God. Drawing from the classical Greek tradition, particularly Socrates' call to "know thyself," Kierkegaard highlighted the importance of self-awareness. However, Kierkegaard was neither a self-centered subjectivist nor an idealist who regarded reality as merely a product of individual ideas. He acknowledged the everyday, common-sense view of human reality while

concentrating on the “stages of life,” or the different categories of human existence. His central concern was the self, its emotions, values, and its connection to God. Like Socrates, he shifted the focus from natural philosophy to the pursuit of self-awareness and understanding. Kierkegaard focused on everyday human life and the different stages of existence. He cared most about the self- its feelings, values, and relationship with God. Like Socrates, he emphasized self-awareness and understanding over natural philosophy (1977, pp. 212–213).

Subjectivity, Truth, and Ethics

Kierkegaard’s idea of truth as subjectivity suggests that truth depends on how deeply a person connects to their beliefs. While objective truth focuses on the belief itself, subjective truth emphasizes the sincerity and depth of an individual’s relationship with that belief. Even if a belief is false, a person can still be “in the truth” if their connection to it is genuine. Kierkegaard contrasts objective truth, which concerns what is said, with subjective truth, which concerns how it is said (C. U. P. Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 147). Kierkegaard believed his concept of subjective truth applied to both religious and ethical beliefs, emphasizing their deeply personal nature. He linked religious understanding to ethical behavior, seeing them as interconnected (Hamilton, 1998, p. 64). Cogswell also explored the relationship between subjectivity and truth. For Kierkegaard, truth is personal, as reflected in his famous phrase, “Truth is subjectivity.” He argued that the value of anything, even the pursuit of objective truth, depends on how an individual chooses and commits to it. Objective truths, such as “two plus two equals four,” are universally verifiable and straightforward. However, subjective truths are more complex, tied to how we live and experience life. St. Thomas Aquinas claimed that truth resides in the intellect, but Kierkegaard believed religious truth must be lived, not merely reasoned. For example, a true lover is not someone who merely thinks about love but someone who actively loves (p. 35). Kierkegaard viewed anything external as an “objective uncertainty.” At the same time, he criticized Plato and admired Socrates for embracing ignorance, seeing it as a passionate acknowledgment of truth tied to personal experience. Socrates’s claim to ignorance demonstrated that eternal truth resides in the individual who lives it (Stumpf & Fieser, 2015, p. 374).

As discussed earlier, subjectivity and truth are closely connected in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. However, when considering the idea that truth is subjective, we must also recognize the role of morality in this relationship. Ethics is deeply linked to subjectivity because it helps define the self and human existence. For Kierkegaard, Socrates was the first to connect ethics

with the question of the self, emphasizing that understanding oneself is the most important form of knowledge. Kierkegaard believed that Socrates did not teach in the traditional sense but instead demonstrated his ethical commitment through the way he lived. He agreed with Socrates that self-awareness is essential for becoming an ethical person. According to this view, Socratic virtue cannot be taught like a subject; it is instead a matter of practice, personal transformation, and authentic living (Stack, 1973, p. 108). Kierkegaard's ethics emphasizes personal realization rather than blind adherence to universal moral laws. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he presents this idea in its strongest form, arguing that an individual's existence is their highest priority and that engaging with it defines their reality. In living ethically, a person becomes truly human by striving inwardly to become an authentic self. Kierkegaard emphasizes that a genuine individual is not defined by knowledge or intellect but by ethical action and existence (C. U. P. Kierkegaard, 1968, pp. 281–291).

Nath critically examines Kierkegaard's ethical philosophy and its emphasis on subjectivity. He highlights that moral duties generally assume the presence of others and the existence of society, which form the foundation of morality. However, Kierkegaard's subjectivism raises the question of whether he acknowledges the existence of others or society. According to Kierkegaard, the only undeniable truth is a person's own inward understanding of their existence. In contrast, the existence of others and of society is uncertain and merely possible. Western ethics traditionally emphasizes duties toward others (2014, p. 4). According to Kierkegaard, an ethical life is not about selfishness but about a deep engagement with one's inner self. It requires self-discipline, self-mastery, and spiritual effort. However, while this process is challenging to maintain, it helps individuals achieve self-awareness and personal growth (Stack, 1973, pp. 112–122).

Authenticity

The concept of authenticity in existentialism is closely tied to the idea of existence. It begins with choosing among different ways of being, recognizing one's unique possibilities ("mineness"), and understanding that existence itself provides the foundation for these possibilities (Joseph et al., 2014, p. 202). In existentialism, becoming an individual is a central goal, and authenticity is a key part of this process. Authenticity and individuality are not innate but are instead achieved through conscious effort. To be authentic means realizing one's individuality, and the two are deeply interconnected. A person who avoids making choices and conforms to the crowd or functions as a cog in the system fails to achieve authenticity. Living according to, which is considered

inauthentic (Flynn, 2009, pp. 74–75). Kierkegaard’s vision of a life filled with infinite passion contrasts with public, objective approaches that hinder individuals from realizing their true selves. Authenticity is often best understood by examining its opposite—living in bad faith, being controlled by *das Man* (the “they”), or being trapped by stereotypes based on gender or race. This distinction between authentic and inauthentic living is explored by philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and de Beauvoir, each addressing it through their own unique terminology (Smith, 2022, pp. 47–207). Authenticity involves facing reality and accepting the difficult truth that we are always free and will never fully reconcile with ourselves. Sartre, in *War Diaries*, writes that “authenticity consists in adopting human reality as one’s own.” Similarly, Heidegger describes an authentic person as someone who rises above ordinary life by acknowledging their limitations and facing the reality of death with courage (Joseph et al., 2014, pp. 12–13). In existentialist thought, the idea of self-realization is a recurring theme. For Sartre and Kierkegaard, humans are free, and authenticity means fully embracing that freedom. For Nietzsche, authenticity means living in a way that stays true to life itself (Wicks, 2019, pp. 55–56).

Kierkegaard’s idea of authenticity emphasizes inner feelings and attitudes but risks promoting self-centeredness and detachment from others. This self-focus can harm compassion and altruism, isolating individuals from society, which thrives on human connection, as Aristotle observed. A purely subjective approach undermines education, morality, religion, government, and philosophy—key systems that sustain society. By making truth entirely subjective, Kierkegaard challenges the coherence theory of truth. Subjective interpretations, especially of sacred texts, can distort meaning and create chaos without shared standards for guidance. Moreover, his concept of authenticity lacks universal relevance, as the “religious stage” may not resonate with non-Christian faiths like Buddhism or Islam, which hold different values (Ebelendu & Nnaemeka, 2021, p. 40).

Butler once wrote that while a person can doubt many things, they cannot doubt their duty to live virtuously. Similarly, Kierkegaard argues that when faced with ethical choices, one cannot question the possibility of living a moral life. Even if someone tries to avoid it, they cannot deny the potential for living an authentic life. An inauthentic life is one that is not truly your own. It is a life where a person feels disconnected from themselves, making it hard to make clear decisions (Stack, 1973, p. 110).

Nietzsche describes authenticity as “becoming who you are.” For him, it is a heroic effort requiring one to overcome oneself and take control of life. This

involves conquering traits that enslave us, such as resentment toward those in power, and following the “will to power” with courage, striving for mastery and dominance, as discussed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Heidegger, by contrast, links authenticity to his analysis of existence in *Being and Time*. He connects authenticity to an awareness of death. As finite beings, humans live with the understanding of their mortality. Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* (a term for human existence) reflects this awareness, describing humans as “being-unto-death” (Laceulle, 2018, pp. 199–201).

Living authentically also involves breaking away from society’s fixed beliefs—whether religious, moral, or political—and deciding for yourself how to live. Existentialists believe that authenticity is not about discovering who you are but choosing who you want to be. Many existentialists write more about inauthenticity than authenticity. While authenticity is central to existentialism, it remains a formal concept. This raises questions, such as why we should be authentic and whether authenticity provides enough guidance for behavior. While these questions remain open, existentialism’s focus on autonomy, self-expression, and self-creation offers valuable insights into what it means to live a life that truly matters to you. (Smith, 2022, pp. 208–227).

Conclusion

Kierkegaard’s existential philosophy focuses on the ideas of subjectivity, truth, and authenticity, emphasizing the importance of personal experience, emotions, and inner life over objective facts, particularly in matters of faith and religion. He argued that true existence involves active engagement and ethical choices rather than passive observation. Kierkegaard distinguished between objective truths, which are externally verifiable but do not transform individuals, and subjective truths, which require personal commitment and can lead to spiritual fulfillment through a leap of faith. He criticized institutional religion, rituals, and abstract philosophy, advocating for a personal, existential approach to truth. Kierkegaard argues that the realization of freedom, responsibility, and individuality is essential for developing an authentic life. However, critics argue that making truth entirely subjective could undermine societal structures such as morality, education, and religion, potentially leading to inconsistency and chaos due to the unpredictability of personal feelings.

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