



TRUTH IN KIERKEGAARD: A PERSISTENT AND PASSIONATE STRIVING FOR SELF-GROWTH

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ABSTRACT: In this endeavor I intend to undertake constructive engagement with Kierkegaard's concept of self or person. The concept of subjectivity and his views on faith and reason would be explored as these are considered contentious and challenging by readers. Faith and reason are complex issues in the philosophy of the Dane, and the differentiation quality can acquire intricately carved contours. The differences developed by readers probably have thin textures and vague images which do not map so easily on the Kierkegaardian terrain. I would elaborate with respect to form and content such issues with more dialectical specificity. Kierkegaard's philosophy lays stress upon the real importance of being an individual. His story of person or individual is not only compelling but also the most involved facet of his philosophical thinking. Interpreters focus on single phase rather than constructing the whole picture of the individual by giving an overview of existentialism. I would remedy this approach by constructing a comprehensive view of the single individual.

KEYWORDS: Individual, Subjectivity, Truth, System

Introduction

Kierkegaard's philosophy is centrally concerned with the real importance of being an individual. The individual is the key conception and the centre of attention in the seasoned philosophy of Kierkegaard as well as in the other existentialist thinkers. The concept of the individual is the hallmark of the theory of subjectivity—a theory in which the individual has his own self-identity, that is the individual is not something other than a person, in other words, he is something other than a 'crowd' or a 'system'. Therefore, the individual must try to discover his own self rather than trying to be someone else. As each person is unique, each one must establish his or her own identity as an individual. Kierkegaard emphasizes as to how one can be a concrete person, how one can be a free existing individual, in contrast to the Hegelian brand of objectivity and abstraction in which a person's identity depended on the System or Society, or the State of which the individual was a mere constituent. For the existentialist, especially for Kierkegaard, freedom of individual was central for the authentic existence and development of his personality. It is the solitary individual, who is the centre of Kierkegaard's concern.



Kierkegaard upheld that a person was more than a race. The individual was more than a system; more than a crowd that is, a person is an *individual*. Kierkegaard scoffs at the crowd, at the system because the crowd and the system are non-entities. “For many fools do not make a wise man, and the crowd is doubtful recommendation for a cause. Yes, the larger the crowd, the more probable that that which it praises is folly and the more improbable that it is truth, and the most improbable of all that it is any eternal truth. For in eternity, crowds simply do not exist.”¹

Quite contrary to Kierkegaard, Hegel considered finite human personalities as insubstantial part of the Absolute Spirit or Mind. Human actions in the Hegelian speculation are rationally explained as arising out of necessity in the entire system of general consciousness. However, from Kierkegaard’s more plausible perspective there is no free human action in the Hegelian system, because for an action to be labeled as human action it has to be governed by freedom and choice and not by the factor of necessity or by any objective tenets or by any universal mind. In Kierkegaard’s view the existing individual is free and is in the process of making himself by his acts of choice. Subjectivity is freedom of the individual to choose the way of life, the stage of life, or the sphere of life. Whatsoever sphere of life a person chooses, his very act of this choice is intensive and personal that is a person ‘leaps’ into a particular way of life. ‘Leap’ is a celebrated Kierkegaardian watchword, characterized by inmost acts of choice. Leap is a subtle notion in Kierkegaard’s authorship, vitally associated with the concept of subjectivity. In Kierkegaard’s philosophy the interpretation of the term ‘leap’ is linked with the faith of the individual. The individual as considered by the existentialist is always in the mode of becoming as oppose to the abstract universal or system which is complete, necessary, and finished, and incapable to explain existence. Accordingly, for Kierkegaard it is only inwardness, subjectivity or personal existence which can account for existence because existence is never finished or complete. Corroborating his stand, Kierkegaard says, “For to be in a state of mediation is to be finished while to exist is to become.”² Existence is never determined or unfree, in fact existence is free thus an individual is also responsible for his actions. It is worth noting that as long as an individual lives, there is always an opportunity to lead an authentic life. As long as an individual lives, there is always a prospect to move to a greater distance in self-growth—there is always a possibility to move to a more advanced point in life.

Kierkegaard argues that inner growth of an individual is the real growth. Growing in life or existence means concrete development of human personality. Existentialism is a philosophy of life. It throws a stiff challenge to all individuals in its flamboyant assertion that **existence precedes essence**. This fashionable existential rally implies that human growth or self-growth is entirely the task and responsibility of an individual. There is no external system, state, society, or agency to carry this task on behalf of an individual. An individual has to work out his own destiny or salvation (moksha) because the individual exists as a solitary individual along with



his intimate freedom or subjectivity. Subjectivity “is an inward transformation.”³ It is “the subject’s transformation in himself,”⁴ which cannot take place without or in the absence of the individual.

Unlike Kierkegaard, Hegel is well-known to have manoeuvred in the realm of fixed and stable concepts providing a synthesis of thesis and antithesis, but was unable to grasp existence on the basis of concepts alone. On the other hand, in the philosophy of Kierkegaard a synthesizing or a compromising approach deprives an individual of his inwardness that is of an authentic existence. The Hegelian dialectic was governed by necessity and logic whereas in Kierkegaard the opposite ends are encountered by the individual with an either/or resolution, thereby striving for change, for growth, for development which is further than the present one. This self-growth in Kierkegaard’s view is a persistent striving. Quoting Lessing, Kierkegaard says, “IF GOD HELD ALL TRUTH IN HIS RIGHT HAND, AND IN HIS LEFT HAND HELD THE LIFELONG PURSUIT OF IT, HE WOULD CHOOSE THE LEFT.”⁵ In a similar vein, in the interlude of the *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard remarks, “the change involved in coming into existence is actuality; the transition takes place with freedom. No coming into existence is necessary. It was not necessary before the coming into existence, for then there could not have been the coming into existence, nor after the coming into existence, for then there would not have been the coming into existence. All coming into existence takes place with freedom, not by necessity.”⁶ The transition takes place through choice, through free decision, through leap, and leap is nothing more nor less than what Kierkegaard meant by subjectivity or faith. Though faith and reason appear to be quite contrary to each other, but Kierkegaard never discounted the role of reason; he rather gave reason its proper and competent sphere by excluding it from the super-mundane realm. He argues that it is an extravagant attempt of reasoners who attempt by their train of reasoning to prove the existence of God. Reason no matter even if it is at the highest pitch cannot prove the existence of God to anyone who does not have faith. The most solid and surest foundation of the existence of God lies in the existence of faith, if the individual has it. It is in vain, therefore, to insist upon reason in matters of faith. Reason has its own narrow limits thus reason cannot explicate spiritual categories. However, one can surely experience spiritual truth in one’s own life by the sheer power of faith. But this should not lead to the conclusion that the Dane is an anti-intellectual, rather the anti-intellectualism of Kierkegaard is directed towards the tendency to rationalize religious categories and not certainly towards reason. He strongly asserted faith can neither be distilled from the finest accuracy of detail nor it can be supported by objective proof.

Faith, as he says, is not a form of objective knowledge but it is a free act, an expression of will. The existentialists, as ever, are not interested in the truths of foundations of knowledge but they are concerned in a more deep and inmost sense with a style of living. What intrigues the



existentialists is what it is to be a person. And being a person for the existentialist is a matter not of knowledge but of involvement, of freedom, choice, commitment, despair, anguish, absurdity, contingency, and of constantly making oneself. A person is not selfish but he makes himself selfish; he is not virtuous but he makes himself virtuous. In an oft-quoted slogan of Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘man makes himself’.

Existentialism, thus, in a true sense is a lived philosophy. It is a philosophy in which existence precedes essence, in other words “subjectivity is the truth.”⁷ An individual must try to be his own self, this trying to be oneself is a continual process. This endeavour or trying to be one’s best self or oneself is not an easy task. It is, indeed a challenging task, in reality it is a trial or test faced by the existing individual. Human reality encounters paradoxical situations in life, such paradoxes of existence are not resolved by logic but by subjectivity, by passionate inwardness that is by involving oneself in the depths of one’s own self. People at times remain simply uninvolved with their own self-development. One must try to streamline one’s life, emphasizes Kierkegaard. He exhorts that one must venture to involve oneself with one’s own existence; only then personality development is accomplished. This self-involvement for self-development is a continual process, it is a becoming. “Not for a single moment is it forgotten that the subject is an existing individual, and that existence is process of becoming, and that therefore the notion of the truth as identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction, in its truth only an expectation of the creature; not because the truth is not such an identity, but because the knower is an existing individual for whom the truth cannot be such an identity as long as he lives in time.”⁸ Hence for Kierkegaard, “existence constitutes the highest interest of the existing individual and his interest in his existence constitutes his reality.”⁹

EXISTENTIALISM: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

(a) Beginnings of the existentialist way of thinking

The philosophy of Hegel is concerned with universal consciousness or general consciousness. This universal consciousness Hegel calls *Geist*. The *Geist* is the Absolute Mind or Spirit. In Hegel’s thought the individual is of insignificance, he is a merely a historical product that is the individual is something other than an individual, implying that the individual’s identity or his self-identity comprises general or universal consciousness. Thus, in Hegel’s speculation there is humanity as whole but no concrete individual human beings. Humanity as a whole was the truth for Hegel, and this humanity as a whole was an implicative system in which oppositions and contradictions were synthesized and reconciled by process of reasoning. Kierkegaard detested this over-compromising stand of Hegel. Indeed, Kierkegaard’s philosophy emerged against this attitude of Hegel. According to Soren, one has to take a clear-cut and definite position of either/or amidst opposite and conflicting choices, that is one has to act, one has to decide this



way or that way amidst variety of available options or choices. Mere thinking will not do.

The Hegelian dialectic is at the thought level, that is the dialectic would strictly and necessary go by rational procedures, but in Kierkegaard the dialectic is at the existential plane. The individual is faced with different pulls in different directions, it is up to the individual to decide and choose which course of direction to follow. This decision is an *act*, and not thought, abstraction, or speculation.

Hegel's concern was self-knowledge through general or universal way. Kierkegaard's interest is self-identity or personal identity of the individual. Hegel and the phenomenologists such as Husserl, and Brentano were interested in discovering the structures of consciousness that is for them acts were intentional or mental. The phenomenologists were concerned with describing the essential structures of conscious mind. The phenomenologists were concerned with foundations of knowledge that is what is it to know. Kierkegaard is sharply reacting to this attitude of the phenomenologist. His focus is not mental facts, knowledge, or mental contents but the existential experience of the individual in the world in which he lives. Of course, Kierkegaard's fierce and independent response is particularly against Hegel's systematic and rational analysis of human beings. On the contrary in Kierkegaard's philosophy of existence the individual encounters contradictions, and paradoxes in his day to day life and these tension-filled existential paradoxes cannot be rationally synthesized or resolved. These paradoxes and absurdities of human existence demand from the individual passionate commitment, an either/or decision, a leap, for their resolutions.

Hegel has fiercely attacked Kant for having formulated many divisions in philosophy namely phenomena and noumena, sensibility and understanding and so on. Hegel's basic intuition upon which his whole system is based is that being in its essence is a unity of opposites which systematically develops into an intelligible totality. Hegel postulated the Absolute not as the vanishing point of neither all differences, nor even an impenetrable something existing above and beyond all differences, but something constructed out of the reconciliation of them all that is an identity-in-difference. "The Ideal is inherent unity, a unity of its content, not merely a formal external unity but an immanent one."¹⁰

In Aristotelian style Hegel defines the Absolute as self-thinking thought, that is its thinking is a thinking of thinking. To recall Hegel's statement, "Reason is the certainty of being of all reality."¹¹

The Absolute which is dynamic manifests itself in the field of Nature and spirit and the full flowering of spirit is only possible when free will exist for itself as free will. However, Hegel says, not before Christianity did this idea enter into the world, namely that man in himself is destined to highest freedom independent of birth, strength of character, education or



philosophy. And this freedom can be destroyed if one accepts without reason the norms of society, state or church.

For Hegel, it is “in thinking I am free”¹² because in thinking I am totally “in communion with myself”¹³ and independent of others. “The ideal individual must be self-contained.”¹⁴ The thinking process of absolute spirit is reason and this process where one thinks and is determined by the self in the very act of thinking is the process of becoming free. Self-determination is freedom for Hegel. The thought process of thinking is also the process of becoming conscious of what one is thinking. The individual I is conscious of what it is to be an I. Just as an object that is determined within the totality of objective determination, so too the individual I is determined within the totality of all the other I’s that are self-determined. To be conscious of being free cannot be separated from the consciousness that all the other men are also free in the same way. “True independence consists solely in the unity and interpenetration of individuality and universality.”¹⁵ For Hegel to be free means to be conscious that one is free a freedom of which one is not aware cannot be truly labeled as freedom.

In his lecture on philosophy of history Hegel says: “The Orientals do not know that the spirit is free in itself, or that man is free in himself. Because they do not know it, they are not free. They only know that ‘one’ is free; therefore such freedom is only arbitrariness, ferocity and obtuseness of passion The consciousness of freedom arose among the Greeks, and therefore they were free; but they, like the Romans, knew only that a few are free, and not man as such. Only the Germanic nations have in and through Christianity achieved the consciousness that man qua man is free and that freedom of spirit constitutes his very nature.”¹⁶ In Hegel’s view no one is free if one is not aware of other’s freedom. “It’s only when all are self-determined and there is at the same time an equal consciousness of other’s freedom that one is really free, for the being of spirit cannot in case be taken as something fixed and immovable. Man is free.”¹⁷

Freedom, thus belongs to the very fact of being man. Man must also know the reason, as to why he is free, it’s only then he is truly and essentially free. Hegel equates freedom with rationality. Freedom and intelligibility is one and same thing for Hegel. The very reason which makes the individual I free must also make the rest of the I’s free for the very same reason. The reason which makes the individual I free is true if it is universally true. If there is no recognition by the individual I of the freedom of other I’s the individual I is really not aware of it’s own freedom.

Freedom for Hegel comprises thinking i.e., self-consciousness. “It’s principle is that consciousness is a being that thinks, and that consciousness holds something to be essentially important, or true and good only in so far as it thinks it to be such.”¹⁸ For Hegel in a stricter sense, freedom in thought consist of thought which is deprived of natural existence but this would imply that only God is free for it is only God; according to Hegel; who is ‘thought thinking itself’. Man, in Hegel’s view desires to be free in precisely this sense. In somewhat



similar vein, Sartre, too says that man desires to be ‘for-itself-in-itself’ that is God; and God is a contradiction in Sartre’s philosophy. But Hegel goes one step further than Sartre; Hegel holds that freedom which is equally applicable to all is also equally effective in all. “What is universally valid is also universally effective; what ought to be, in fact also is, and what only ought to be without (actually) being has no truth.”¹⁹

(b) Freedom in the parable of master-slave as viewed

byHegel

Hegel holds that lack of material possessions by the slave should not account for his dependency on the master, because it’s in the thinking that the slave is free, hence what matters is the recognition, a self-consciousness by the slave of his self-worth. Hegel points out that death whether deliberate or natural puts the life of the slave beyond the control of the master and the very reason for the slave to think that he is not dependent on the master. Moreover, the service rendered to the master also elevated the status of slave from being mere slave to a free person. Through his service the slave becomes an important person on whose service the master is somewhat dependent. Hegel further argues that “through work; however the bondsman become conscious of what he truly is.”²⁰

It is this mastery of his work that the slave realizes that he has some degree of independence. The master though he is a master, lacks mastery over work and things which the slave possesses. The master now comes to see himself as relying on the slave and the slave starts perceiving himself as enjoying some degree of mastery and freedom though in a restricted sense. The master’s dependence on the slave and the slave’s gradual recognition of his independence results in an unhappiness which they both rationalize.

(c)The Unhappy Consciousness

Hegel contends that when from consciousness its essentiality is drawn out into external existence, it gains a double sort of reality. It becomes a dual consciousness, it acquires duplicity, one that is empirical, chaotic and irrational and another that is eternal, rational, and real. Thus consciousness acquires a split within its singularity and this split in consciousness results in unhappiness. “The duplication of self-consciousness within itself, which is essential in the Notion of Spirit, is thus here before us, but not yet in its unity: the unhappy consciousness is the consciousness of self as a dual-natured merely contradictory being.”²¹

The unhappy consciousness is in line with the Judeau-Christian tradition of the fear of God in one’s own heart. The unhappy consciousness is the spirit of despair and disappointment. The unhappy consciousness seeks to escape the troubles and sufferings of the world by despising the world and accepting the life of spirit. Self-consciousness which splits against itself and neglects



the worldly-self in order to free from the worldly dependency, also becomes aware of itself as one with the whole of eternity, Therefore in its moments of unhappiness and despair, consciousness finds the road to Reason. “There has arisen for consciousness the idea of Reason.”²²

CONCLUSION: Thus I have obtained my goal to some extent by attempting to show that truth for Kierkegaard comprises action, a pursuit, a passionate search of individual for subjectivity, it implies freedom of the concrete individual whereas for Hegel it is thinking, a rational explanation, governed by necessity, unfreedom, and universality of the abstract system.

Footnotes:

1. Kierkegaard, SorenAabye, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, trsl. Douglas V. Steere, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1956, p.191.
2. Kierkegaard, SorenAabye, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to thePhilosophical Fragments*, translated from the Danish by David F. Swenson, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Minnesota, completed after his death and provided with introduction and notes by Walter Lowrie, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1944, p.178.
3. Ibid., p.37.
4. Ibid., p.38.
5. Ibid., p.97.
6. Kierkegaard, SorenAabye, *Philosophical Fragments*, trsl. Howard V. Hong, (Originally translated by David F. Swenson), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1974, p.93.
7. Kierkegaard, SorenAabye, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to thePhilosophical Fragments*, trsl. David F. Swenson, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1944, p.93.
8. Op. Cit., p.176.
9. Ibid., p.279.
10. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trsl. T.M. Knox, Vol. I, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, p.179.



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11. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trsl. A.V. Miller, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977, p.142.
 12. Ibid., p.120.
 13. Op. Cit., p.120.
 14. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trsl. T.M. Knox, Vol. I, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, p.181.
 15. Ibid., p.180.
 16. Carl J. Friedrich, *The Philosophy of Hegel*, The Modern Library, New York, 1975, pp. 11-12; (Comprises lectures delivered by Hegel).
 17. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trsl. A.V. Miller, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, p.204.
 18. Ibid., p.121.
 19. Ibid., p.151.
 20. Ibid., p.118.
 21. Ibid., p.126.
 22. Ibid., p.14.

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