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### **Søren Kierkegaard – The Individual and Their Subjective Truth**

“Life must be understood backwards...but then one forgets...that it must be lived forwards.” With this succinct observation, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard condenses his principle of existentialism: acknowledging that an understanding of life comes from reflection but that one first must live and fully exist in life so that it may be later reflected upon. Born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1813, Kierkegaard is considered the father of Existentialism, but is also credited with contributing to modernism, his critique of Romanticism and his attempts to revitalize the Danish Lutheran church (McDonald). However, to understand Kierkegaard the Existentialist requires that we know Kierkegaard the individual. Like the Greek *sophos*, Kierkegaard’s philosophy and his life formed a “seamless whole” (Soccio 396). Raised in a devout Lutheran family, Kierkegaard initially studied theology but became increasingly interested in philosophical questions. During this time he came to consider himself a student of Socrates, and indeed much of his work is modeled on Socratic Dialectics. His published works are an exercise in authenticity and Socratic irony: he published under pseudonyms, hiding in plain sight to make a point regarding modes of existence and ways of living (Soccio 399). His own existence was heavily influenced by his father and by his one-time fiancé, Regina Olsen. Kierkegaard himself said that he owes “everything [he] is to the wisdom of an old man and the

simplicity of a young girl” (Kierkegaard, as quoted in Soccio 398). He struggled with his broken engagement to Olsen and for the rest of his life worked to reconcile his religious faith with his experience losing Olsen. The episode led him to question the application of abstract thought and its usefulness in life, famously summarized with his question, *what am I to do?* He wrestled with the existential application of such religious questions as *can I objectively model my relationship with God after Christ’s?* and *how can I know what God wants me to do?* Through his own experience with religion and personal loss, Kierkegaard reasoned that “universal principles must give way to individual predicaments” (Soccio 399).

Existentialism is the philosophy that “asserts that the most important philosophical matters involve fundamental questions of meaning and choice as they affect actual – existing – individuals” (Soccio 395). This philosophy counters Romantic idealism, the homogenizing of society into a single ego. The major philosophical movements of the past had overlooked the individual as he fit into the objective Truth; little thought was given as to how the objective philosophies would affect “the uniquely personal concerns of the individual” (Stumpf, as quoted in Soccio 395). Kierkegaard was particularly critical of the Enlightenment philosophers and accused them of obscuring the individual and the individual’s responsibility for his or her own life. The previous philosophical trends sought to describe human nature and morality in broad terms. In contrast, Kierkegaard’s Existentialism was interested only in describing each man’s own existence (Gaarder 379). Kierkegaard challenged the philosophers of abstract thought, which he accused of confining life to a desk, reflecting and philosophizing on life while ironically sheltered from it; we do not get our lives from objectively philosophizing about it and reasoning out our existence – we get our lives when we actively live it, engage it and especially

when we make “significant choices...that... relate to our own existence” (Gaarder 380). There is a Buddhist parable that illustrates the difference between abstract truth and existential truth:

Once there was a monk who asked Buddha if he could give clearer answers to fundamental questions on what the world is and what a man is. Buddha answered by likening the monk to a man who has been struck by a poisoned arrow. The wounded man would have no theoretical interest in what the arrow was made of, what kind of poison it was dipped in, or from which direction it came. He would be interested only in having it pulled out and the wound treated. (Gaarder 380)

Rationalistic philosophies cannot help an individual decide what to do, how to live or how to reasonably exist day-to-day. Particularly in times of crisis we exist only in the moment, rather than reflecting upon objective or theoretical facts related to that moment. Our truths come to us through action, based on what is important to existence at that moment.

Discovering these truths is what Kierkegaard called “subjective truth.” By this, Kierkegaard did not mean it doesn’t matter what we think, but that the genuinely important truths are personal, and that “the thing is to find a truth that is true for [you], to find an idea for which [you] can live and die” (Kierkegaard, as quoted in Soccio 401). Our daily choices, from one minute to the next, can create different outcomes to our existence. Mundane decisions permeate our reality and “on such inescapable daily choices hang the quality and shape of individual lives” (Soccio 404). Kierkegaard was disillusioned with Enlightenment reasoning because the objective truth could not be brought into deeper, personal meaning for his life. He persistently argued that abstract knowledge would never influence a meaningful life, insisting that “the ‘objective facts’ of a life cannot account for its existential quality” (Soccio 404) because metaphysical knowledge only observes life, it does not engage it. This gap between abstract and existential truth became

the center of his “project,” as he called it, repeatedly expressed in the question, “. . .not what am I to *believe*, but what am I to *do*” (Soccio 396). Kierkegaard doggedly sought the individual truths within an objective system, lamenting that “what good would it do me to be able to explain the meaning of Christianity if it had *no* deeper significance *for me and for my life*” (Kierkegaard as quoted in Soccio 404). Ultimately, Kierkegaard argues that while objective knowledge is useful in describing facts or evidence, it does not impart capital-t Truth. This kind of Truth cannot be reached through objective observation, reason or description. It is a subjective “quality of [the] inner condition” (Soccio 404) and determined by individual action, experience and personal meaning. Subjective Truth is predicated on personal relevance – truth must above all guide, and be applicable to, an individual’s choices and his or her daily life.

Kierkegaard had a keen insight into the significance of the existing individual. The Enlightenment philosophy saw everything as an expression of the one and only universal reason, organizing knowledge and ontology into generalizations and abstractions. However, the objective philosophies “mass” society into a “crowd,” thus breeding inauthenticity and losing the individual to assimilation. Inauthenticity, defined as “the result when the nature or needs of the individual are ignored, denied and obscured or sacrificed for institutions, abstractions or groups” (Soccio 400), was the symptom of the modern age: the loss of truth in exchange for conceit. Kierkegaard attacked the crowd and its accompanying conformity, pointing out that “the crowd overwhelms the individual” (Soccio 407), championing group mediocrity and inauthenticity. He rejected any group identity because “any collective identity is always somehow false” (Soccio 407). In order to assimilate to a group, an individual must sacrifice some part of their true self, subscribing to objective knowledge and succumbing to an inauthentic existence. Living anonymously in a crowd provides us with a substitute identity in place of any real understanding

of our individual identity. The crowd presents to us a mask to claim as our “identity” because it conforms to the particular group to which we belong. In other words, “rather than being ourselves, we tend to conform to an image or idea associated with being a certain type of person” (Soccio 408). This is classically inauthentic because we idealize an objective kind of person whose identity is constructed and approved by the crowd. These “types of person[s]” are generalizations – models of identity – that trap us in mediocre, half-realized, disingenuous lives. These types are collectively determined, another kind of objective knowledge. Since they are collectively patterned, they never truly fit or reflect actual individuals and distract us from discovering our true selves. Generalization “[does] not – and cannot – recognize the *existing individual*” (Soccio 408). However, Kierkegaard’s lasting triumph is in reclaiming individuality in the face of “massing society.” He recognizes, and challenges us to see, that “individuals construct philosophies, individuals interpret revelations...individuals decide what is objective and reasonable” (Soccio 421). Rejecting the premade identities of a crowd, Kierkegaard persists in uncovering truth through individuals: “the crowd is untruth... Truth is always in the minority” (Kierkegaard, as quoted in Gaarder 382).

The criticism that Kierkegaard held for the crowd was especially scathing in his attacks on the Danish Lutheran Church. He was convinced that the epidemic of inauthenticity was nowhere more prevalent than in the institution of the church; he saw that both the church and its members had a “noncommittal” attitude towards faith and religious questions. Faced with this bureaucracy of hypocrisy, Kierkegaard became increasingly preoccupied with “what it means to be a Christian” (Soccio 400). Kierkegaard challenged that a Christian faith required an authentic existence, defined as “an individual living honestly and courageously in the moment, refusing to make excuses and not relying on groups or institutions for meaning and purpose” (Soccio 401).

Subscribing to objective knowledge predicates passionless belief; Kierkegaard argued that one can know something without necessarily being passionate about it. Kierkegaard wasn't interested in proving God's existence, but rather only interested in differentiating between the philosophical *question* of God's existence and the individual's relationship *to* this question (Cheeks 152). Since we cannot rationally prove or objectively know that God exists, our relationship to the question of His existence must be approached via faith. In other words, if Christian doctrine had appealed to our reason, not to our irrational side, it would not be a matter of *faith*. Kierkegaard said of this: "if I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe" (Gaarder 381). By bringing God into the realm of rationality, belief suffers, faith is eroded and religious verve is diminished. Passionate belief and religious enthusiasm requires suspension of rationality and introduction of faith in the irrational, or as expressed in the Latin, *credo quia absurdum*, "I believe because it is irrational" (Gaarder 382). Kierkegaard posited that reaching belief in the irrational required a "leap of faith." This action is a "blind commitment to God" (Soccio 401) made without the reassurance of facts or proof. Faith is an irrational belief and cannot be approached rationally or objectively – it resides in the realm of subjectivity, thereby leaving each individual with the responsibility to reconcile the question of God's existence with their subjective truths. A leap of faith "is completely existential" (Soccio 401) because it requires faith in every moment of our lives, turning our faith inward as a subjective truth so that we may lead passionate, authentic existences.

Authenticity requires a passionate commitment to life and answers to philosophical questions should provide meaningful insight to guide that commitment. Kierkegaard argued that any philosophical epistemology should yield to the individual dilemma: how to live and what to

do. Kierkegaard's Existentialism rescued the individual from Romanticism's single ego – reframing philosophical matters so that once-obscure ontology and ethics became applicable to actual individuals. Søren Kierkegaard seeks to edify our lives by cautioning “it is easier to indulge in abstract thought than it is to exist” (Kierkegaard, as quoted in Socio 399).

Works Cited

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