

# The Anthropocentric Truth of Soren Kierkegaard: A Critique

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## Abstract

Truth as “subjectivity” is an important theme in Soren Kierkegaard’s philosophy. Subjectivity rejects the absolute spirit, or the eternal truth of Hegel, and of idealism. Subjectivity is a paradigm shift from the traditional conception of truth to the individualistic perception of reality. Although, Kierkegaard did not deny the existence of the absolute truth but affirmed that absolutism is not certainty. The implication of objective truth is the negation of concrete individual. Objectivity is an abstract entity, which remains outside the realm of sensory perception. Using the method of philosophical analysis, the paper contends that Kierkegaard rejection of objectivism went too far in the opposite direction because, ‘Subjectivity as truth’ could end up in a form of epistemological relativism. Conclusively, the paper maintain that subjectivism is not sufficient to apprehend the truth; rather, a philosophical synthesis of objectivity and subjective; Su-objective philosophy will be required. A philosophical synthesis is the integration of two or more pre-existing elements of realities for the creation of truth that would be epistemological infallible

**Keywords:** Truth, Anthropocentrism, Objectivity, Existence, Subjectivity and Epistemic relativism

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## 1. Introduction

Philosophers of different schools of thought have given different definitions of truth. Truth is an entity existing outside the mind it is an entity in the intelligible world (Omorogbe, 1999: p.39). Truth is one eternal and unchanging. It is a ‘clear and distinct perception of the innate ideas. Truth is an indubitable knowledge, which comes within and not outside the individual. Truth is the perception of everything, and everything is a modification of God (Omorogbe, 1999:p.40).

Truth as the character of a thing, which agrees with its notions or essence (Nath, 2014:p.2). Nath (2014) Truth is a correspondence between belief and facts. There are two types of truth, the a priori and the posteriori (Akanmidu, 2006). The posteriori truth is the knowledge derived from contingent upon meeting the subject and object of experience. Experience refers to the original encounter of subject and object. While a priori truth is an innate knowledge derived from an abstract source.

According to Soren Kierkegaard, ‘Objective truth entails dispassionate, theoretical and abstract knowledge or realities. The traditional notion of God is an objective truth (Omorogbe contem.1999:p.46). Some may argue that objectivity is ‘myth, because it isolates individual experience. Objectivity is an abstract truth that negates the crux of human existence.

Objective truth is a denial of human freedom, choice, and responsibility (Daniel, 2003:p.3). Objectivity is a doctrine, which composes of rigid moral code or guidelines for human conduct. Individual who bypasses these moral codes is an actor and not a ghost of existence (Nath, 2014: p.1). The Objective truth is living inauthentic life that negates concrete existence. It is an attempt to run away from responsibilities. This is ‘bad faith (Omorogbe contem.1999:p.47).

## 2. Objectives and Method of the study

The philosophical subjectivism is good, but it is unethical response to the act of knowing the truth due epistemological individualism. The question is, how can we know the truth? There are many methods of knowing the truth, which include empiricism, rationalism, objection and many others. This study suggests the application Su-Objective philosophy in the act of knowing. Su-Objective philosophy would be a philosophical synthesis of objective and subjective truth. It involves a philosophical combination of parts, or elements of objectivism and subjectivism, in order to form a more complete view or system of truth.

This study adopts the technique of philosophical analysis. Philosophical analysis is a technique mostly used by researchers in the analytic tradition to "break down" and analyze philosophical issues. Philosophical analysis is a method of addressing problems through analysis of terms or concepts used. The rationale for analysis is to give insights into conceptual contents as expressed in necessary 'conceptual truths' (Omoregbe, 1999:45). "Philosophical analysis consists of the breaking down of concepts into their constituent parts in order to gain an in-depth understanding about things" (Monday, 2021:3). However, philosophical may not give final answer to the problems of truth. Nonetheless, It is a tool that allow researchers to perform wider and more in-depth studies to problems confronting humanity and proffering solution to them (Monday, 2021:3).

## 3. The Philosophical Foundations of Subjective truth

Philosophical anthropocentrism, popularly known as subjective philosophy could be traced to the works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte a German idealist, who invented subjective Idealism (Edward, 1912). His philosophy is

an antithesis of the Kantian philosophy of Noumenon (Archibald, 1922: p.1). Fichte's practical philosophy is a deconstruction of the Kantian notion of Noumenon.

‘Thing-in-itself’ cannot be known or explain because it is a mere representation of realities. The Nuomenon are realities unknown because they are transcendental things and non-empirical objects. This form of knowledge is with contradictions because it represents objects that are external to man, which poses difficulties for human apprehension (Omorogbe, 1999: p.125). A phenomenon represents object of sense experience or things as they appear or things that exist in relation to human sense perceptions

Akamidu (2006; p.30) cites Chipman that “the objects of experience exist only in spatiotemporal appearance, (b) In so far as we judge that there are appearance, we must be prepared to judge that there are things in appearance (c) To speak of a thing appearing is, by implication, to make use of the concept of a thing-other-than-as-it- appears,(d) Objective experience requires us to postulate thing-other- than-as-they appear or things in themselves”.

Things-in-themselves are imperfect idea because it isolates the ego and denies the existence of the non-ego, or multiplicity of experience. Self-consciousness implies consciousness of something else than self, and could not exist without it.

Given a brief philosophical survey of Kant's notion of the phenomenon and Noumenon, one could argue that things as they appear are abstract notions, which may not give accurate judgment about objects absolutely. For example, when we see a snake as it appears to us, this appearance does not re-presents its true nature, as it really is. Nevertheless, we rely on our

cognitive understanding to interpret these objects of perception in order to make a subjective judgment.

Furthermore, the idea of 'self-consciousness' is a shift of paradigms from the idealistic approach to a practical method of inquiry (Archibald, 1922:p-4). Archibald (1922) quotes Fichte "All that is the ego,' all that we know belongs to and takes place within our consciousness where reality is experienced and it is nothing more. Existence is only the thinking being, and their significance and interpretation of the thinking subject are the business of philosophy"

For Fichte, self-consciousness is a social phenomenon. It is a clear step taken in this direction of modern philosophy. Self-consciousness is a necessary condition for self-realization, freedom and the foundation of everything that we know (Omorogbe, 199:p125), (Edward, 1912). Self-consciousness is an immediate self-identity, which recognizes its own being. It is not an abstract or transcendental entity but a free agent without limitations (Omorogbe, 1999:p.125).

Liu (n-d) argues that Hegel did not hesitate to announce the end of unity in transcendental philosophy but criticized Fichte thus; 'Fichte's practical philosophical system fails the fundamental principle of Hegel's system because Hegel identifies with 'intellectual intuition', 'pure thinking of its own self', 'pure self-consciousness (or I = I)' or 'I am. Liu (n-d).

The distortion of the transcendental viewpoint is an incomplete synthesis of nature and freedom is an error. In particular, it is a synthesis of nature under freedom, establishing an asymmetrical relation with self-consciousness and negating natural drive. In fact, this is not objective thinking. Here, one could argue that Kierkegaard reactions to Fichte's practical philosophy, and his criticisms of Hegel's idealistic philosophy, formed the kernels of his anthropocentric or Subjective philosophy.

#### 4. Soren Kierkegaard Subjectivity

Søren Kierkegaard was born May 5, 1813, Copenhagen, Den. —died Nov. 11, 1855, Copenhagen). He was a Danish philosopher, theologian, and cultural critic. Kierkegaard was a major influence on existentialist/anthropocentric philosophy, and a Protestant theologies in the 20th century (Merold, n-d).

Anthropocentrism is a subjective philosophy. It places moral value, judgments, feelings, and emotions in terms of individual perceptions and experiences (Jonathan, 2015). Anthropocentrism refers to human being the primary holders of moral standard (Monday<sup>c</sup> 2020). The concrete man is the object of focus in the exploration of the realities (Omorogbe (2005:p.1).

Kierkegaard maintain that the traditional conception of 'truth' is supposedly based on objectivity, instead of subjective truth. Molina (1962) argues that 'truth is the existing individual in accordance with the notion of subjectivity'. Kierkegaard differs from Hegel's on the notion of 'I.' For Hegel; 'I' mean himself, and at the same time deterministic and universal. 'I' for Kierkegaard is individualistic and not deterministic but personal experience. Subjectivism denies objective knowledge or truth. It is a relative truth (Omorogbe, 2005:p.159). This implies that 'moral judgment of an action is an expression of personal deposition, attitudes, feelings, or emotions' (Omorogbe, 2005:p.159).

Subjective knowledge is paradoxical in nature. It is identical with faith. No rational knowledge but faith is paradoxical with possibilities of inducement. In our view, the paradox of faith is nonsensical because nothing intellectual in faith. It is fully emotional attributes to realities (Nath, 2014:p.2), (Daniel, J. (2003).

Subjectivity means human beings at the helm of affairs, directing one's own destiny; freedom, personal choice, personal commitment and responsibility. 'To exist is to be free, and to be free, is to be a Christian. Christianity is a leap into the dark. It is a leap into the dark because it lacks rationality and it destroyed absolutism (Omorogbe, 2005) (Blackham, 1953). Existence is the knowledge, which has relationships with the knower. Essentially, the existence of the individual should correspond with the realities or the concrete existing facts or state of affairs (Daniel, 2003: p.3).

Existence means freedom, choice, and responsibility. Omorogbe (contemn, 1999) that Man is a free agent, whose existence precedes essence. Unlike Hegel, freedom is something that man acquires in the course of his life. For the existentialist, man does not acquire freedom; it is identical with existence. Existence is neither accidental knowledge nor objective. It is a relationship between knowledge and the knower. It reflects the subjective thinking of the known objects. Subjectivity as truth' could end up in a form of epistemological relativism.

Kierkegaard's sees Christian truth as subjective. Christianity in its practical sense is uncertainty. It is an individualistic nexus or better still a personal choice. Nothing can relieve Christians of choice and responsibility. Here, it becomes impossible to accept the finite idea without contradiction rather accepts the infinite with passionate inwardness; this is the truth within a contradiction.

The traditional Christianity centers on historical claims, which are dogmatic and dispassionate. Objectivity abandoned for Christians to embrace passionate inwardness. This implies that Kierkegaardian Subjectivity is normative than a cognitive subject; it is more a conscious agent than an objective outlook (Datta 1970: p. 516). 'The truth for me is that I am prepared to live and die' (Omorogbe, 2005: p.15-155).

## 5. Evaluation of philosophical subjectivity

On the positive side, Kierkegaard's philosophy is applause for the affirmation of liberalism, freedom, choice, and responsibility. Kierkegaard's philosophy down-to-earth pragmatically suggested.

The notion of truth as subjectivity received different interpretations, and has generated many controversies in philosophy Omorogbe (2005) cites G.E Moore who criticized subjectivism from the moral point of view. 'Morality is not just personal like or dislike. If when one man says, 'this action is right' and other answers, 'No, it is not right' each of them is always merely making an assertion about his own feelings, it plainly follows that there is never really difference contradicting what the other is asserting. They are no more contradicting one another than if one had said; 'I like sugar' the other had answered, 'I don't like sugar.' This involves, therefore, the very curious consequence that no two men can ever differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong. Surely, the fact that it involves this consequence is sufficient to condemn it'.

'Emotivism' is subjective, and therefore does not pass the test of authentic moral judgment. Otherwise, there wouldn't be so much debate or controversies about moral matters or moral judgments. Making assertions about the realities (rather than express personal feelings) generates dispute among people.

Kierkegaard up-holds subjectivity negates rationalism but the adoption of philosophical anthropocentrism, leads to epistemological relativism. Subjectivism as Kierkegaard uses this term is personal, derived from a form of experience lacks the concrete epistemic foundation of knowing the truth. In our view, Kierkegaard's subjectivism is not sufficient; rather, a philosophical synthesis will be required, a synthesis of Subjective and Objective ideas,

which might be called 'Su-Objective', is needed. Omorogbe (Contemn, 1999) cited Unamuno: 'The existentialist irrationalism draws our attention, in a dramatic way, to the fact that man is not a completely rational being, for he is a man of flesh and bone. As a finite being, man has the limited cognitive power of his reason. This means that there are certain things in reality which are beyond his cognitive power'.

In summary, 'Su-Objective' philosophy, Kierkegaard would say that man is infinite being and that there are facts about reality that no man can completely apprehend through the subjective mind, emotions, feeling or passion alone. Through mutual adoption and a synthesis of rationalism with subjectivism, the Kierkegaardian philosopher would apprehend more about the world.

Furthermore, there is a very serious problem with Kierkegaard's notion of "Subjectivity" (a largely emotional state) as truth.

If subjectivity is the truth, then what if my subjective state tells me that I should engage in Jihad against all who believe differently than I do? Does the fact that I hold this view subjectively, along with strong emotions, make it true?

What if I 'subjectively know' that God has ordered me to fly jet aero plane into skyscrapers, resulting in the deaths of thousands of people? Do my subjective feelings or emotions make this belief true? I think not.

The problem here is that Kierkegaard must be placed in historical context. Kierkegaard lived in the 19th Century before the slaughter of World-war I, before the holocaust of World -War II, and before the advent of nuclear weapons. Conflict on this scale was unimaginable in Kierkegaard's time; moreover, Kierkegaard lived at the close of that period in Western history which is known as 'the Enlightenment'. It was during this period that Westerners learned (among other things) that, unless we live in peace with

those who believe differently than we do, there will never be peace. Hence, for Kierkegaard, the idea of religious conflict in his day-and-age was unthinkable. Religious wars were relics of the unenlightened past. The very idea of something like "religious terrorism" would have seemed absurd to Kierkegaard. But times have changed.

Sadly, the Enlightenment was a phenomenon restricted to Europe and nations with a strong European heritage; it never reached the Muslim world. "**Arab Spring**, wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings that took place in the Middle East and North Africa beginning in 2010 and 2011, challenging some of the region's entrenched authoritarian regimes" (Arab, n-d) So, now, we live in a world where people can use 'subjective' knowledge or certainty to justify monstrous acts. Surely such 'knowledge' cannot be part of Christianity or any other truly enlightened religion. I should add that -- in my own opinion -- I believe that the Muslim world is experiencing its own Enlightenment at this very moment.

It is bloody and violent and it may take a long time. The European Enlightenment was preceded by the Thirty Years War, during which Catholics and Protestants butchered each other simply for holding different beliefs. Such horrors result from taking the subjective experience as 'knowledge' or 'certainty'. It is neither.

## 6. Philosophical Synthesis

Philosophical Synthesis is one of central concepts in Kant's philosophy (NWE, n-d). It has two roles; "describing a certain type of resolution to an argumentative conflict, and describing a mental process that combines representations" (NWE, n-d), philosophical synthesis is an unconscious mechanism, which is diverse spheres of human experiences. The empirical

understanding of the mind synthesizes “diverse information coming from the object such as color, smell, textual feelings and, as a result, conceives a unified object” (NWE, n-d). Philosophical synthesis is the perception of mind and matter as two sides of a coin but the two sides taken a whole is God. Here (Omorogbe, 199:p.40). Akamidu (2006; p.30) cites Kant that synthesis of perceptions is the actual knowledge of an object, plausible through the power of cognitive judgment; namely, the intuitive sensibility, which produces sensation and conceptual understanding of thought.

## 7. Conclusion

Objective is a paradox! The Objective paradox means the existence of objective and subjective truth. These remain a necessary fact. However, the objective truth makes the individual be a spectator instead of an actor of life experience. Using paradoxical remarks, Kierkegaard attempts to establish a limit for objective thinking, and that paradox embraces absurdity, in the face of contradictions. Accepting Objectivity as truth means a truth without an empirical or scientific evidence. ‘This can be seen in the Christian belief in the incarnation of Christ, which is paradoxical in light of the evidence.’ The paper suggests a philosophy synthesis of objective and subjective truth for proper apprehension of realities

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