

# Concept of Truth and Subjectivity in Kierkegaard's Philosophy

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## Abstract

*The concept of 'truth' and 'subjectivity' are important issues in Kierkegaard's philosophy. Unlike objectivist, he emphatically states that truth is subjectivity. There is no truth independent of subject. Truth is wholly subjective and personal. It is experienced by a subject inwardly. By the term 'subject' he means an individual who ethically exists and, therefore, it is not the cognitive subject. 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 simply Existence or subjectivity. That is why the concept of 'subjectivity' in Kierkegaard's philosophy bears a deeper and dynamic meaning. While emphasizing the subject he says that existence of other persons and society are not certain rather these are possible only.*

*In this paper I shall try to delineate Kierkegaard's concept of truth and subjectivity and finally add my own observation on it.*

**Key Words:** *existence, objectivity, self, subjectivity, truth,*

## Concept of Truth

The problem of truth is one of the central problems in philosophy. Centering round this problem, different questions spring up. Some of these are – what is truth? What is the exact location of it – subject or object? Or, is it the product of the combination of both subject and object? Or, does it reside anywhere else? In traditional philosophy it is said that truth is the agreement between a judgment and the fact in the world. This implies that in traditional philosophy truth is treated as something objective. But Kierkegaard rejects this traditional notion of truth. According to him, truth is always subjective. There is nothing called objective truth. He

observes that people are in the illusion of objectivity and he wants to make them free from this illusion. In his view, people have lost the capacity of subjectivity and the task of philosophy is to rediscover this subjectivity for us.

## Concept Objectivity

Objectivity means independent existence of any object, its properties or its relation. In no way these depend on any mind or human being. There are different rules that govern both behavior and thought and objectivity itself shows the tendency to accept these rules. Whatever is bounded by rules of evidence or whatever that can be taught to others is within the reach of objectivity. If history is thought of as something that can definitely sort out or distinguish the true and false events then it is objective. If some propositions are rejected on the basis of general rules that can have evidence or accepted as plausible human behavior then it is objective. Both psychology and sociology attempt to give us general principles or explain the behaviour of individual or a group of individuals in accordance with scientific laws and thereby these are fully objective studies. There are moral principles which are called code of conductor set of rules and these have been passing from one generation to another and therefore morality is objective. There are certain written and rigid moral codes which are objective and many people lead their whole life by following these rules. Under the domination of these rules Kierkegaard himself lived a short part of his life. He says that the people who obey these moral codes are nothing but an observer and ultimately he becomes almost a ghost. He further says that an individual plays the role of an observer when there arises the ethical question in his life. In that case there are two different ways and one may opt any of them to treat the whole life he passes by and this is either as history or natural science. In this connection an obvious question may be raised by an observer. He

may ask about the category of natural laws which determine the human behavior. The same question he may raise about his own behavior. He may ask about the role that he has been plying or description about his own self and in that case he loses the spontaneity and inwardness of his life.

There is a scientific myth that everything of the world is causally determined. If we thoroughly observe and bear with trouble then in principle we will be able to provide a complete and objectively true account of the behavior of everything. Kierkegaard aims to destroy this scientific myth. Both ethical and religious life of man could be determined by this scientific myth and Kierkegaard saves his violent hostility due to this domination. He says, "An objective acceptance of Christianity (sit venia verbo) is paganism or thoughtlessness.....Christianity protests against every form of objectivity; it desires that the subject should be infinitely concerned about himself. It is with subjectivity that Christianity is concerned, and it is only in subjectivity that its truth exists, if it exists at all. Objectively, Christianity has absolutely no existence. If the truth happens to be only in a single subject it exists in him alone; and there is greater Christian joy in heaven over this one individual than over universal history or the system."<sup>1</sup>

The observer who accepts and discovers general laws is known as objectivity. Mary Warnock, in his book *Existentialism* admitted that to discard this objectivity is not an easy task. To achieve subjectivity is very hard because it is found sometimes paradoxical. It is true that we are individual beings and are capable to think for ourselves what to do and what not to do. But in spite of all these we find that identifying ourselves with a group or a class is an easier task for us and when identify ourselves with them we forget our own individuality and accepting their standards we begin to think their thoughts. When we amalgamate ourselves with the mass, our inclination towards them increases more and more and we think that all our contributions are absolutely for the mankind. This inclination compels us to lose ourselves as an existing individual and we become more and more impersonal.

### Concept of Subjectivity

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'. In psychology subjective knowledge means the knowledge of inner mental objects like memory images, imaginary construction etc. which is ordinarily called introspection. But Kierkegaard does not believe such type of subjectivity. He is of the opinion that introspection is not subjective but an objective attitude. Here in introspection we perceive objects, although these objects are internal. His concept of subject is very much different from that of ordinary concept. 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 simply 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 an objective onlooker."<sup>2</sup>

Mary Warnock points out that subjective knowledge possesses three essential features. These are-

1. Subjective knowledge cannot be transformed from one person to another. No researches even can add any new thing in it. This knowledge also cannot be taught to others.
2. Subjective knowledge is always paradoxical in nature and thereby it is identical with faith. No rational knowledge but faith is found to be paradoxical and there is every possibility on our part to be induced by it to accept the paradox. There is nothing intellectual in faith and as such it is full of emotional attributes. In this connection Kierkegaard says, "Christianity wishes to identify passion to the highest pitch; but passion is subjectivity, and does not exist objectively".<sup>3</sup>
3. Knowledge that are subjective are not abstract but concrete. As there is a necessary relation between a living individual, who is also an actual concrete existent and that of subjective knowledge and so it is concrete in nature.

<sup>1</sup> D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie (trans.): *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p-116.

<sup>2</sup> D.M. Datta: *Contemporary philosophy*, p-516

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*: p-117.

Kierkegaard holds the view that there is a possibility of proximity on the part of an individual to be united with subject and object. This can happen only in case of passion and as such this proximity is not permanent but momentary. In the case of metaphysical strivings, an individual is united with the object of passion. Here both temporal and eternal are united in passion. Kierkegaard holds that the highest pitch of subjectivity is passion itself. He also says that when existence is penetrated in reflection, which is the ultimate hope of an individual to achieve, generation of passion starts. Thus a true existence for Kierkegaard means existence with consciousness.

### Truth is Subjectivity

The Danish philosopher and theologian Kierkegaard holds the view that 'truth is subjectivity' and in determining the form of contemporary existentialism, the presumed meaning of this statement is very influential. Moreover, if the statement is viewed against the intellectual background of the time when he uttered the statement, it is found that the meaning of the statement is very clear and unambiguous. It is to be noted here that the time when Kierkegaard asserted this statement was dominated by the philosophical system of the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. Walter Lowrie in his classic study Kierkegaard indicated that at that time the intellectual youth of Copenhagen, where Kierkegaard was a member, were influenced by the philosophy of Hegel. Thus Hegel's notion of truth and subjectivity has great importance in order to understand Kierkegaard's statement that truth is subjectivity.

In explaining truth Hegel says, "In common life truth means the agreement of an object with our conception of it. We thus presuppose an object to which our conception must conform. In the philosophical sense of the word, on the other hand, truth may be described, in general abstract terms, as the agreement of a thought content with itself."<sup>4</sup>

Hegel's definition of truth is peculiar and it differs from that of modern conception of it. In modern philosophy Bertrand Russell holds the view that truth means correspondence between belief and fact. From Hegel's definition of truth it is clear that he does not ascribe it to any proposition or sentence or belief but to a thing and as such it is an ontological motion. He says that if the character of a thing agrees with its notions or essence or its functions then it is true. In this connection he cited an example of soldier. If a person exhibits all the virtues of a military man in his professional life then he is a *true* soldier, that is, he

<sup>4</sup>. Wallace (Trans.): *The Logic of Hegel*, pp-51-52.

is a soldier in the fullest sense of the term. There must be consistency between the essence of a soldier and the conduct of the person who is called a soldier. Thus the noun 'truth' is a transition from the adjective 'true'. When it is stated something about the *truth* of an individual, it means that the state of being is in accordance with the essence of individuality, that is the individual ought to show a particular feature.

Keeping in view Hegel's notion of truth, Kierkegaard's statement that truth is subjectivity is partially clarified by Fernando Molina as: "truth of the existing individual is in accordance with the notion of subjectivity"<sup>5</sup>.

Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity has a close relation with Hegel's views on the nature of self and so it is necessary to have an idea of it.

Hegel says that by the term 'I' he means himself and this I is singular in number and totally a determinate person. He openly admitted that not only he himself but every individual being is I or ego and therefore in respect of his own self he is not uttering anything peculiar to himself. But he says that when he calls himself as I, he also expresses a thorough universal. Thus by *I* he means mere being-for-self. He says, "it is as it were the ultimate and unanalysable point of consciousness, we may say [that] 'I' and thought are the same, or, more definitely (that) 'I' is thought as a thinker."<sup>6</sup>

Here a comparison can be made between Kierkegaard's approach to the problem of subjectivity and Hegel's conception of the self. Admitting Hegel's idea as systematic, Kierkegaard observes that he identifies both subject and object in his theory of self. In the same manner Hegel maintains the unity between thought and being. He does not maintain any separation of existence. Kierkegaard believes that existence is in no way thoughtless. In it both subject and object, thought and being are separated. He observes that Hegel's use of the term 'thought' is not the thought of someone but by it he means pure thought, it is thought in itself. In spite of all these, for Hegel self itself is the thought and this self is not any particular individual being but a universal thinker. Insisting on the primacy of subject Kierkegaard says that a subject, first of all, must exist. This existent subject may think or may not. "The existing subject .....is engaged in existing, which is indeed the case with every human being".<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>. Fernando Molina: *Existentialism As Philosophy*, p-6.

<sup>6</sup>. Wallace (Trans.): *The Logic of Hegel*, p-48.

<sup>7</sup>. S. Kierkegaard: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Swenson, p-112.

From the above analysis it is evident that in regard to truth and individual both Hegel and Kierkegaard are not unanimous.

### Cognitive and Aesthetic Subjectivity

Kierkegaard's subjectivity is different from both cognitive and aesthetic subject. His subjectivity totally abandoned the objective attitude, both inner and outer and ceased to be a mere cognitive subject. Rather it resides in the realization of ethical ideals of life. He says that like the cognitive subject, the aesthetic subject also possesses an objective outlook. The difference between them is that while the former tries to know the objects, the latter interested in enjoying. The objects on which both cognitive and aesthetic subject depend is not absolutely certain but only possible because these are beyond its control and as such this subject is precarious. The ethical subject is absolutely certain as it is independent of external activities. The will what it wills is his own. In this connection Kierkegaard says, "The only reality that exists for an existing individual is his own ethical reality."<sup>8</sup>

### Spiritual Subjectivity

Kierkegaard's ethical subjectivity is also known as spiritual subjectivity. He himself identifies this subjectivity with existence, truth and reality. But his use of truth and reality is very much different from ordinary objective cognition. The only thing Kierkegaard emphasizes is ethical and spiritual and as such he shows little interest in speculative philosophy. Thus in the concluding part of his book *Either-Or*, he pragmatically asserts "only the truth which *edifies* is truth *for you*."<sup>9</sup> He also says, "truth is inwardness, but please to note, existential inwardness, here qualified as ethical."<sup>10</sup>

Moral duties generally presuppose the existence of other persons. It also requires the existence of society which is called the postulate of morality. But question arises in connection with Kierkegaard's subjectivism- whether he believes the existence of other person or society. But Kierkegaard says that the only primary truth and reality which he emphasizes is one's own existence and this existence is absolutely certain and this certainty is understood inwardly. The existence of other people in the society is object of thought of the subject and as such not absolutely certain but possible only. The results of the acts performed by the subject are not within his own control and as such the subject cannot surely state

that the other persons will be benefitted by his acts. Kierkegaard suggests that as the only absolute certainty is individual's own existence of which he has control, so he should edify and develop himself. The first and foremost duty of a subject is towards himself. In western ethics we find that one should his duties towards others but Kierkegaard turns duties towards one's inward and thereby he really brings a Copernican revolution in ethics.

From the above analysis it seems that Kierkegaard's ethics is a selfish egoistic and atheistic. But Kierkegaard firmly believes that there is nothing egoism or atheism in it. He holds the view that although a subject cannot directly benefit others but he can do indirectly and it is possible only if he exclusively directs his attention towards his own interest and efforts to his own existence. He also says that one is fool and egoist if he believes that God cannot help others but it is he who can help others. He clearly states that by subjective deepening one can relate himself to God and keeping his faith upon Him, he will be able to resign everything, even welfare of others to the infinite care and providence of God. If a subject extends his respect to others, if he treats others as subjects and if he believes that others possess noble inward task and destiny as he himself possesses, only then he can do maximum benefit to others.

Kierkegaard's anti-intellectual philosophy has much affinity with that of Bergson who holds the view that the changing reality cannot be grasped with intellect. But unlike Bergson, Kierkegaard believes that reality cannot be known by means of intuition even. Moreover, in philosophy Kierkegaard's interest is not in theory but in practice and that is why he is called a spiritual or existentialist pragmatist. His emphasis is more on the will than on intellect or intuition.

In the nineteenth century Kierkegaard is regarded as Socrates' reborn as his philosophy has much similarity with Socrates. Because in criticizing Hegel's philosophy and Idealism his adopted technique is very much similar to Socratic method. As he himself admitted that it is only Socrates with whom his analogy can be done. Instead of nature he has drawn modern man's attention towards man, as Socrates did in the past. As against object he has drawn attention towards subject. Moreover, he extended his effort to shift interest and attention towards self knowledge instead of intellectual speculation, which, according to him, is fruitless. Like Socrates he holds the view that good men and the *summum bonum* of life is one and the same thing. Above all, Socrates' method of irony is also effectively used by Kierkegaard in finding out truth.

<sup>8</sup> . Ibid: p-280.

<sup>9</sup> . Ibid: p-226.

<sup>10</sup> . Ibid: p-227.

## Conclusion

From the above analysis it is clear that Kierkegaard's philosophy is anti-rationalist, anti-intellectualist and anti-objectivist. He denies the existence of others with certainty and says that all objective existence and others are only possible to a subject. Thus by making this assertion he makes his own theory only possible and not certain and his theory itself is true only to himself and possible to others.

Moreover, his assertion about truth is that it is subjective and it seems that the terminology he used is unfortunate because truth by definition is something objective. When we say that something is true it means that it is true for all, as the laws of science, scientific discoveries etc. and in no way it is associated with subjectivity.

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