



Kierkegaard's Subjectivity as Authentic Existence: An Existential Challenge to Contemporary African Communitarianism

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Abstract

The quest for authentic existence is at the root of every man's craving. But the how to achieve it remains a philosophical enquiry. Kierkegaard postulated that subjective existence is a pathway to authentic life. His notion of subjectivity is embedded in his conviction about the being of man and his own personal life experiences. Together with many other existentialists, he holds that man was thrown into the raw world without being consulted. This thrownness of man naturally disposes him to freely and subjectively define his essence in relation to the existing world in which he finds himself. Again, his personal world-view which involves solitary actions that were seasoned in conscious choices realized in freedom of decisions and responsibility taught him that greater developmental feats are achieved from the inward (subjective) to the outward (objective). This paper investigates Kierkegaard's subjectivity as authentic way of being and a challenge to contemporary African communitarianism. Scanning through the history of human development, it reveals that subjectivity of life permits individual development as well as that of the larger society for the fact that subjective existence avails conscious self-creation and innovations that do not disrupt social peace rather it respects individual freedom, self-expression and responsible control of one's destiny. The paper also noted that heightened scientific advancement and civilization are connected with subjective life of individuals which manifested during the 20th century when existentialism exhibited its influence on the people. Further, it demonstrated how contemporary African communitarianism is challenged by Kierkegaard's subjectivity considering the level of her collective development. The paper, concluded that a certain degree of healthy patriotic individual existence is needed to take significant leaps towards authentic existence. It therefore recommends that a healthy balance of objective-subjective existence is necessary for wholesome human development and that of the society at large.

Key Words: Kierkegaard, subjectivity, authentic existence, existential challenge, African communitarianism.



Introduction

Every reasonable human being yearns for authentic existence. But what is actually *authentic* about human existence? It is one of the major themes of philosophical discourse especially with existentialism. It refers generally to a strong sense of perception of one's being. It depicts a lifestyle and actions which demonstrate that one is in touch with one's true self regarding one's values, desires, beliefs, thoughts, actions, etc. as one relates to others in the society, provided they do not disturb the social peace.

In other words, authenticity is individual's original representation of himself that truly individuates him and distinguishes him from others even as he relates with them. As Varga & Guignon (2020, spring) highlight,

To say that something is authentic is to say that it is what it professes to be, or what it is reputed to be, in origin or authorship...when discussing authenticity as a characteristic attributed to human beings...the question arises: What is it to be oneself, at one with oneself, or truly representing one's self?..The moral advice to be authentic recommended that one should be true to oneself *in order thereby* to be true to others. Thus, being true to oneself is seen as a *means* to the end of successful social relations.

Authentic existence has been a lively discourse among philosophers. Aristotle argued that an authentic individual is a social and political being. This is implicit in his assertion, "one who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god" (Aristotle, 1998, pp. 1253a2-30). Opposed to Aristotelian classical submission were the postulations of the existentialists who generally believe that self-knowledge (discovery) which is chiefly realized in subjective existence is a prerequisite for authenticity of life. This can be understood within the context of famous Socratic dictum- "man know thy self." Socrates hints that truth is a lived experience. In other words, it is subjective (Socrates (2019, November 17). Authentic existence appeared often in the treatise of Kierkegaard (1962) as the measure of concrete actualization of human being as against the 'crowd' (p.59). Like many other existential thinkers, he advocates for man's realization of his own unique being and identity expressed in freedom of thoughts and actions which stand in opposition to mass actions that often depict man as just a 'number' and not as an individual. He considered this as the tragedy and alienation of human life. He then submits that man should withdraw inwardly to subjective existence for better human growth. Analyzing Kierkegaardian view of subjective existence, Purissima (2007) established that it goes beyond Socratic self-discovery. So, she comments (p. vii),

For Kierkegaard however, this call to self-awareness is not yet enough for an authentic existence. Kierkegaard as an existentialist and in the cloth of a modern Socrates would then insist that man



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should not only know himself, but must also choose what he wishes to become.

Hence, Kierkegaard would mean that the noblest activity of man is conscious discovery of himself through constant 'will to choose' which is the propelling force for finding meaning in life. According to him, the more the consciousness of the individual, the more the 'will' and the more the will, the more the self. Heidegger also emphasized subjective existence as a prerequisite for authentic existence which he considers ordinary in man's daily activities. Thus, (Anowai & Chukwujekwu, 2019 p. 4), "being authentic does not require some exceptional effort or discipline, like meditation. Rather, it entails a kind of shift in attention and engagement, a reclaiming of oneself, from the way we typically fall into our everyday ways of being. It is about how we approach the world in our daily activities."

This paper was motivated by the current reality on ground with regard to human life and existence in Africa. Today's experiences of contemporary Africans manifest a clear transvaluation of the highly cherished communal solidarity and security of life which were embedded in traditional communitarian life of the people. It therefore sets to defend a thesis that the spirit of passive communitarianism of the contemporary Africans which has alienated them from the true spirit of their father land that laid primacy on the active brotherhood community over the individuals is a catalyst for the inhuman activities and the consequent slow pace of development in Africa. At this point, based on the clarifications above, the expectation from this paper is that selfish individualism should be replaced with beneficence and non-maleficence subjective existence that cares for the good of the 'other' in the spirit of brotherliness, solidarity and patriotism for the well-being and optimal development of the individuals as well as the larger society.

This paper will adopt philosophical conceptual analysis and clarifications to critically evaluate the Contemporary African communitarianism in the light of Kierkegaard's subjectivity as it challenges it.

Man's *Thrownness* as Basis of Subjective Experience in Kierkegaard

A good understanding of man in the thought of the Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard is very necessary for grasping his notion of subjectivity. The conviction that man was thrown into the world without being consulted formed the basis of his thesis that truth is subjective. This is what he and many other early champions of existentialism as Heidegger, Sartre, etc. refer to as man's *thrownness*. Quoting Kierkegaard, Lavine (1984, p. 322) states,

I stick my finger into existence- it smells of nothing. Where am I?
What is this thing called the world? Who is it who has lured me into
the thing, and now leaves me here? Who am I? How did I come into
the world? Why was I not consulted?

Within this context of thought, the existentialist established that man must personally actualize his essence as he pursues his own destiny through freedom and responsibility of actions. Egbekpalu (2019, pp. 93-94) captures it thus,



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It is the feeling of thrownness that spurred the existentialist to believe that existence is subjective, where each individual struggles for himself. For him, the achievement of an authentic selfhood is possible in so far as man lives for himself alone. Infected with a high degree of individualism, Kierkegaard rejects almost all forms of social life and co-existence of individuals, while insisting on existence as a personal adventure.

To life therefore, one must be *response-able*. Hence, he (Kierkegaard, 1974, p. 356) establishes that “the only truth which edifies is truth for you.” To this end, truth is subjective. On this note, Kierkegaard defined truth “as an objective uncertainty held in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual.” With this, he clearly distinguished between mere knowledge of truth and subjective concrete human actions based on the known truth. He gave an analysis of this using Christian life experiences. According to him,

If one who lives in the midst of Christendom goes up to the house of God, the house of true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge and prays, but prays in a false spirit; and one who lives in idolatrous community prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol; where is there most truth? The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol, the other prays false to the God, and hence worships in fact an idol.

With the above understanding, there is a clear distinction between knowing the objective truth and subjectively acting in the truth. In furtherance of this analysis of objectively known truth and subjectively lived truth, (Onwuatuegwu, 2020 p. 3) explained that,

A person could intellectually embrace a very elevated moral theory, but in actual practice be a scoundrel. On the other vein, a person might espouse a degenerated moral theory and still be more morally sensitive in practice than his theory allows...it is not the what, it is not the dogma that constitute truth, it is my attitude towards the dogma.

It goes to suggest that to exist subjectively is to live in the truth such that one is not overwhelmed by the society and be swallowed up in the humongous crowd. This made the existentialist (Purissima, 2007 p. 19) to shift completely from rational to subjective affirmation of reality that culminates in absurdity of faith. Consequently, he vehemently rejected all abstract theories of his time especially those of German Idealism and Hegel’s metaphysical idealism in particular. In fact, he seemed to have turned Hegel upside down for as Purissima (2007, p. 88) observes, “what constitutes the summit of Hegel’s journey to selfhood forms only the starting point of Kierkegaard and vice versa.” By so doing, he underscored that reason alone could not guarantee authenticity of actions. At this point, it is necessary to highlight that the Danish existentialist delineates the importance of human emotions and passions in life’s journey. In other words, (Purissima, 2007 p. 22), “existence cannot be reduced to mere intellectual exercises...one could uphold that



Kierkegaard prefers expression to reflection, passion to thought, faith to reason and so on.” Kierkegaard’s notion of subjectivity submits that individual’s realization of his being is a singular affair realized in full responsibility of actions towards authenticity of life.

Kierkegaard’s Subjectivity as Authentic Existence

It was said earlier that authenticity implies genuineness. Existentially, authentic existence refers to keen awareness of true sense of self that is shrouded in values that promote genuine self and personal identity. Hence, Kierkegaard’s concept of authentic existence relates to subjective experiences of life. His idea of subjectivity stemmed from his own personal exposures to life which is embedded in the thesis that man is thrown into the world and left to define himself alone. His bitter experiences in life and academic engagements taught him to distance himself from the social milieu and commit himself to certain moral principles for more fruitful, fulfilling and meaningful existence. As Oguji (2016 p. 32) states,

Since Kierkegaard came to fulfilling and productive life out of subjective choices not prodded by the father or Kant’s social imperatives, he thus came to the conclusion that authentic existence is subjectively chosen...He found truth not in the theories of his time but in personal struggle to realize himself in the three stages of life he went through, the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious.

Kierkegaard’s conviction that man was thrown into the world necessitated his understanding that man should individually confront his own life and its challenges head-on. He should subjectively pursue his unique identity in radical freedom of decision and choice-making. Therefore, to fully and authentically exist, he must be a subjective being who alone defines his essence based on his daily dainty choices and responsibility of actions. He must feel it in his marrow and act upon the premise that he is created individually and that his existence precedes his essence. Subjectivity connotes autonomy of existence. Analyzing the concept of autonomy, Varga & Guignon (2020, spring) state,

The idea of autonomy—the view that each individual must decide how to act based on his or her own rational deliberations about the best course of action—has in many ways paved the way for the idea of authenticity. The idea of autonomy emphasizes the individual’s self-governing abilities, the independence of one’s deliberation from manipulation and the capacity to decide for oneself. It is connected to the view that moral principles and the legitimacy of political authority should be grounded in the self-governing individual who is free from diverse cultural and social pressures. According to the ethic of autonomy, each individual should follow those norms he or she can will on the basis of rational reflective endorsement. To some extent, authenticity and autonomy agree in supposing that one should strive to lead one’s life according to one’s own reasons and motives, relying on one’s capacity to follow *self-imposed* guidelines. In both cases, it is



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crucial that one has the ability to put one's own behavior under reflexive scrutiny and make it dependent on self-determined goals.

Autonomy plays a very key role in Kierkegaard's subjective existence. Only an individual who perceives himself autonomous can freely and uniquely control his destiny by mastering his actions in freedom and responsibility.

Social Support as the Foundation of African Communitarianism

Indeed, African existence has always been one of communitarianism such that life is made more meaningful in the community with and among the 'others'. The community experience is so valued that even the dead, in this case referred as the 'living dead' also partake in the communal life of African existence. This African practice is informed by the people's perception of their being. Unlike most Western existentialists, Africans believe that they are created by a Supreme Being-God, who continues to care for them. The conviction that they came from one and the same creative source binds them together in fraternal love and support. African collective existence and mutual fraternal care and support are actually informed by this strong notion. Therefore, African communitarianism is such that was founded on extended family-hood and brotherhood with the guiding principle of solidarity. Based on this cultural background, many African philosophers argue that man is a communitarian being. The Igbo-African man for example maintains a triangular relationship of *we-existence* (the individual, the community and the creator). Within this context, Mbiti (1981, p. 108) asserts, "I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am." Upholding similar position, Okolo (1993) argues that the essential feature of an African is his 'being-with others', So he states (p. 1),

As a matter of fact, individuals become real only in relationship with others, in a community or group. It is the community which makes the individuals, to the extent that without the community the individual has no existence. Consequently, the African is not just a being but a being-with, a being-with-others or as I said elsewhere the African self is defined in terms of 'we existence' just as much as 'we' in 'I' existence through social interactions.

Analyzing Okolo's African existence of 'being-with-others', Ukwuoma, Abah & Ugwu (2022, pp. 149-150) explained that,

Being-with' is a socio-ontological essential characteristic of communal sharing inherent in the African traditional community...the African being is a being-in-community; he becomes what he is because of the community. Outside of the web of socio-ontological relationships, the African lacks humanness or existence...Thus, a man is a man because of others.



In another sense, Ugwu, Ozoemena & Ngwoke (2022, p. 70) reiterate that “this perspective of value-system presupposes that the concept of community expressed in communitarianism is primary to the concept of individual expressed in individuality. The implication therefore is that community (connoting the idea of ‘social-self’) then becomes the determinant of the individuality (connoting the idea of ‘individual-self’).” They further illustrate (p. 75),

African worldview has always been perceived in terms of the ‘other’. Existence is existence-in-and-among-and-with-others-in-and-within-communities. No being is existentially conceived in isolation from the other; and drawing from that, existential *quiddity* is enshrined in the ‘community’ where every member-being lives and fulfils its destiny and aspirations. Thus, the value and essence of ‘community’ places a high influence on the African experience; hence the position that communality best describes the African personality. This ‘communality-phenomenon’ has been designated with some terms by some African scholars like Senghor and his ‘Negritude’, Nyerere and his ‘Ujamaa’, Nkrumah and his ‘Consciencism’, Azikiwe and his ‘Eclecticism’, Mbiti and his ‘I-and-We Existential mantra’, Okolo and his ‘Being-with’, Asouzu and his ‘Ibuanidanda-Complimentarity’, Ozumba and Chimakonam and their ‘Njikoka-AmakaIntegrative-Humanism’, Nze and his ‘Communalistic-Brotherhood’, Edeh and his ‘EPTAISM of Mma-di-in-Closeness-not-Closedness.

In all, one establishes that African communitarian existence is a cord that promotes solidarity and human growth. Africans cherish their lives in relationship with others. Reflecting on the intrinsic worth of this community life, Achebe cogitates (Achebe, 1959, p. 55), “We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.”

Kierkegaard’s Radical Subjectivity as a Challenge to Contemporary African Communitarianism

Kierkegaard’s subjectivity as a call to genuine self -discovery and appropriate action responses to it challenges contemporary African communal living. Most of his writings highlight ‘crowd’ and by extension the society, the community or organized religion such as Christianity as the greatest obstacle to man’s realization of his authentic existence. According to him (Kierkegaard, 1974 p. 45), “it reduces the individual next to nothing through its production of the false idol of public ethos.” It is on this ground that he recommended a transition from the ethical stage where observance of universal ethical norms is paramount for in his understanding, such ethical life deprives an individual of subjective existence. In his words (Kierkegaard, 1968 p. 197), “outwardly, he is completely ‘a real man.’ He is a university man, husband and father, an uncommonly competent civil functionary, a respectable father, very gentle to his wife and carefulness itself with respect to his children.” Buttressing this, he (Brethall, 1946 p. 429) declared’



“the man who can really stand alone in the world, only taking counsel from his conscience- that man is a hero...”

A critical insight into and extensive analysis of Kierkegaard’s writings reveal that his notion of subjectivity as autonomy of personal expressions does not endanger the peace of the society, rather it enhances responsibility and healthy development of the individual that eventually extends to the larger society. This is clearly evidenced in the fact that the recognized fast developed societies were those that their citizens acknowledge that their individual creative abilities lie in their hands. This helped them to have so much control over their destinies and by implication developed their communities. These are traceable back to the modern period which housed the period of existentialism and as such points to the period of heightened subjective existence.

Responding to subjectivity as a challenge to African communitarianism, Oguji highlighted that subjective existence is a healthy development to contemporary challenges of life. On this note, he (Oguji, 2016 p. 36) contends,

It is a common fact of history that human achievement- spiritual, cultural, scientific, technological in the 20th century alone- far surpasses that of the preceding centuries put together...If we look through the annals of time, we see that most great accomplishments came about because someone was willing to go subjective, to stand alone. Whether it be inventors... or social reformers...they made their marks because they were ready to go alone...they manifest individualistic tendencies; they risk unpopularity and question the *status quo*...they try something new; they listen to their own feelings, they assume responsibility and work hard at whatever they do.

Having acknowledged that most great achievers in history who impacted significantly on human development went obviously subjective. However, subscribing to a healthier and more balanced subjective existence, the middle point between Kierkegaard’s radical subjectivity and African extreme communitarianism, he (Oguji, 2016pp. 37-38) further endorses,

If we will survive the present challenges of our contemporary world, subjective existence should be allowed in the sense of personal initiative. People should not be imprisoned in the traditional systems because traditional solutions are no longer enough to tackle the contemporary challenges...The most rewarding existential option today is to radically provide accommodation for new ideas within socially certified useful inputs. This should be done by creating an environment where the necessary social freedom that will protect the subjectivity of the individual is in place. To base existential options in the hands of the individual alone or the society will backfire for it is impossible to clap with one hand.



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With the above discussions, one swiftly speculates that development is not unconnected with individual responsible behaviours and the courage to take reasonable leaps for more meaningful developments. To this effect, one admits quickly that one of the major factors that clog the wheel of development in Africa is excessive communitarianism that could make one somehow passive and unconcerned about the common good which could as well breed in laissez-faire attitudes and irresponsibility. This notion could also be filtered from Kierkegaard's *Postscript* (1974, p. 173) where he accentuating that truth is subjectivity, illustrates;

The way of objective reflection makes the subject accidental, and thereby transforms existence into something indifferent, something vanishing. Away from the subject the objective way of reflection leads to the objective truth, and while the subject and his subjectivity become indifferent, the truth also becomes indifferent, and this indifference is precisely its objective validity: for all interest, like all decisiveness, is rooted in subjectivity. The way of objective reflection leads to abstract thought, to mathematics, to historical knowledge of different kinds; and always it leads away from the subject, whose existence or non-existence, and from the objective point of view quite rightly, becomes infinitely indifferent.

This automatically calls for objective-subjective synthesis of actions to achieve more developmental feats towards authentic existence. This goes to buttress Aristotelian position that virtue lies in the middle.

The major critique against Kierkegaard's subjective existence is that it could bring about self-centredness and anti-social behaviours that may even worsen the developmental pace of the society. This may be the case only when authenticity of life is understood within the context of the individual only which leads to self-absorption, egositic and selfish behaviours. Contrary to this, Varga & Guignon (2020, spring) contends, "by turning inward and accessing the "true" self, one is simultaneously led towards a deeper engagement with the social world." Man is an integral being who swings between objective and subjective existence. Challenged with this oscillation in life, Taylor (1989, pp. 419–455) illustrates that true subjective existence goes "inward and upward". Corroborating this position, Anowai & Chukwujekwu (2019, p. 3) postulate,

The idea of authentic wishes to liberate the individuals from the constraints of their own socio-historical limitations; and to establish being as limitless potential, where we are free to be whatever we want, unconstrained by the values of instrumental or calculative thought prized by social exigencies and ideologies. It means that we have to use our potentialities as free Beings to overcome unfavourable circumstances, fight against, or protest against the ugly situation, but as 'authentic-being, we at the same time 'inherit and choose' our own possibilities.



At this point, it become obvious that the contemporary African community experience should be subjected to critical evaluation in order to sieve out of it the best practice for the challenge of the time. Although Kierkegaard must have over-emphasized subjective existence but at the same time, its stance has given it a due challenge that questions its enduring value for the current lifestyle.

Conclusion

The above discussions give the understanding that African communitarianism, though well cherished needs to be re-examined for proper growth and sustenance of the expected development in Africa. Following the wisdom of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, virtue lies in the middle. Therefore, authentic existence as virtuous disposition of man should keep him on a healthy balance between subjective and communal life experiences for proper actions and desired developments. It is the submission of this paper that when the egoistic self and the humongous community demands are overcome, development in Africa will get to its peak for well-being of Africans.

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