

Analysing the Concept of Religious Truth in Kierkegaard's Existentialism

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Abstract

Religion has been a central aspect of human life and culture for millennia, providing moral frameworks, community, and a sense of meaning. However, it also presents a range of complex problems that have been the subject of extensive philosophical, sociological, and theological analysis. The truth of religion encompasses a wide range of dimensions, including objective claims about the divine, subjective experiences of faith, cultural and historical contexts, ethical implications, and the necessity for interfaith dialogue. Understanding religious truth requires a nuanced and multifaceted approach that acknowledges the diversity of religious experiences and perspectives. While religion continues to play a vital role in the lives of many individuals and societies, it also presents substantial problems that require ongoing critical examination and dialogue. Addressing these issues is crucial for promoting tolerance, ethical progress, and global peace. In this work, the thoughts of a foremost existentialist philosopher Søren Aabye Kierkegaard on the concept of religious truth will be examined while also highlighting various other schools of thought on the subject. This work hopes to emphasize the recognition of Subjectivism as the more important necessity for truth albeit acknowledging the contributions of various other epistemological schools of thought.

Introduction

"The crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die."

¹ This work, '*Analyzing the Concept of Religious Truth in Kierkegaard's Existentialism*' is a response to the modern-day approach to daily living which has exposed man to various varying interpretations as to which is the best way to live a wholesome life. Conventionally, truth is referred to as something humans all approve of, and aim, or should aim to achieve. But just what is it? In religious context where issues of morality and true belief often get mixed with the discussion about ethical dilemmas, religious diversity among others, the introduction of the concept of 'leap of faith' by Kierkegaard becomes particularly very relevant. His notion of existential choice emphasizes the importance of personal decision-making and authenticity which will require an individual to go beyond conventional beliefs to see the truth for oneself. This work aims to highlight that, the effort to objectify truth is, among other prevailing contemporary issues what makes man doubt his mental abilities, and this issue stands as threat to man's religious existence which has led to a gradual but steady slide of man into skepticism.

This research work aims to critically analyze the views of Aabye Søren Kierkegaard on the concept of truth while acknowledging it as the right approach to the confusion created by the subject matter; truth.

The Concept of Truth in Søren Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy is marked by a unique conception of Truth, encapsulated in the famous statement, "Subjectivity is Truth, and subjectivity is the highest Truth." The major point of Kierkegaard's philosophy is that truth is subjective. "What good is purely objective truth if it is not appropriated into the life of the knower?" A total commitment of the knower is necessary in any field in order to obtain truth.²

Kierkegaard makes a clear distinction between Objective and Subjective Truths. Objective truth refers to truths that are independent of personal views or interpretations and are universally valid. These truths encompass scientific, empirical, and rational knowledge and are commonly accepted as objective facts. In contrast, Subjective truth, as Kierkegaard conceives it, relates to the inner world of the individual subject. It involves personal beliefs, experiences, and interpretations. Subjective truths are subjective in nature but possess profound existential significance. They pertain to matters of faith, passion, and individual experience, often transcending the realm of objective knowledge. Kierkegaard famously asserts, "Subjectivity is truth, and subjectivity is the highest truth."³ This statement encapsulates the core of his philosophy and his concept of Truth.

The deep claim made by Søren Kierkegaard that "Subjectivity is Truth" captures a key idea in his philosophical approach by highlighting the crucial role played by the individuals' subjective experience in the pursuit of ultimate truth which casts doubt on conventional ideas of what constitutes truth.

Kierkegaard does not hold that there is no such thing as objective truth. He means to insist that there is a higher truth that is obtainable to individuals based off of a relationship between the knower and the object or premise. "To exist is to be 'in the truth', whether what is affirmed is 'objectively' true or not, and faith is thus justified by the truth subjectively 'in' the believer, not by grounds for believing that what is affirmed - the being of God - is actually the case."⁴ For Kierkegaard, the issue does not lie in whether or not the premise is true. The individual does not have to believe something that must be true. It is the relationship between the knower and the premise that puts the individual in the truth and creates a higher, subjective truth for that individual alone. The focus is not on the content; it is on the inwardness. "At its maximum this inward 'how' is the passion of the infinite and the passion of the infinite is the truth.

Prominent scholars have explored Kierkegaard's concept of Truth and its implications. C. Stephen Evans, in his work "Kierkegaard: An Introduction," provides substantial explanation for Kierkegaard's challenge to objective truth. Evans argues that Kierkegaard did not entirely reject objective truth but rather questions its adequacy in addressing profound existential concerns. Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity, according to Evans, serves as a corrective lens through which individuals can reevaluate their assumptions about Truth.⁵

Michael Weston, in "Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy: An Introduction," extends the discussion to Kierkegaard's relevance in contemporary philosophy. Weston highlights the alignment between Kierkegaard's skepticism toward Objective Truth and the tenets of existentialist and postmodern thought. Kierkegaard's emphasis on individual subjectivity and personal experience resonates with thinkers who prioritize the complexity of human existence over universal objectivity.⁶

Kierkegaard's concept of Truth, grounded in his existentialist philosophy and Christian faith, has generated substantial interest and debate in contemporary philosophy. Various criticisms have emerged, highlighting both the strengths and limitations of his ideas.

Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjective truth, rooted in personal experience and religious faith, has faced criticism from philosophers who advocate for more objective and universal conceptions of Truth. Some contemporary philosophers argue that Kierkegaard's focus on individual subjectivity makes it challenging to establish a shared framework for ethical and moral discourse. They contend that his rejection of objective truth leaves a void in solving critical ethical issues in a pluralistic society. Hannay contends that Kierkegaard's concept of truth was not firmly rooted in actuality.⁶ For a comprehensive understanding of the world, objective truths, such as those found in science and mathematics, are essential. He further argues that Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjective truths downplays the significance of objective knowledge in human existence.⁸

On the other hand, Kierkegaard's assertion that religious truths are paradoxical and outside the grasp of reason has been questioned. Contemporary philosophers have challenged the notion that rationality and faith are irreconcilable. They argue that Kierkegaard's insistence on the "leap of faith" may lead to anti-intellectualism, potentially discouraging critical inquiry and thoughtful reflection on religious matters. In contemporary multicultural societies, the privileging of Christian faith as a path to truth has been seen as exclusionary. Cooke argues that the framework of Kierkegaard's work may not address the needs and beliefs of individuals from various religious, agnostic, or atheistic backgrounds.⁹ Kierkegaard's writings are often criticized for their lack of systematic philosophy and clarity. Contemporary philosophers imply that the use of pseudonyms and indirect communication caused potential barriers to understanding his philosophical arguments. This lack of systematic structure can make it challenging to engage with Kierkegaard's ideas in a coherent and organized manner. Critics like Albert Camus have challenged Kierkegaard's notion of embracing religious faith in the face of life's absurdity.¹⁰ He argues that such a stance may lead to moral and existential complacency, as it offers a way to escape the existential questions and challenges presented by the absurdity of existence.¹¹

The issue of how people from many religious traditions can have meaningful interfaith discourse and understanding has grown in importance in a fast-globalizing society marked by religious plurality and pluralism. In light of this, some modern academics have criticized Søren Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjective faith, contending that it may make it more difficult to participate in fruitful interfaith dialogue. Important problems regarding whether Kierkegaard's religious epistemology can meet the requirements of religious diversity are raised by this criticism.

Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy is renowned for its emphasis on the individual's subjective experience, particularly in matters of faith and religious truth.¹² He contends that genuine faith is not merely a matter of objective knowledge or adherence to external beliefs but is deeply personal and subjective. Kierkegaard's notion

of subjective faith revolves around the individuals' existential engagement with religious questions, where faith involves a passionate and deeply felt commitment to one's religious beliefs.

Critics argue that Kierkegaard's stress on subjective faith can lead to relativism, where religious beliefs are considered valid solely based on individual experiences and convictions.¹³ In a pluralistic world, this subjectivism may inadvertently foster religious exclusivity, making it challenging for individuals from diverse traditions to engage in open and inclusive dialogue. Productive inter-faith dialogue often requires a degree of objectivity and willingness to engage with the beliefs and perspectives of others. Thus, Kierkegaard's focus on subjective faith may impede the ability of a person to step outside one's own faith perspective and empathetically understand opinions from individuals in different religious backgrounds. Effective inter-faith dialogue often seeks common ground or shared values among different religious traditions, and Kierkegaard's stance on the individual's subjectivity may discourage the search for commonalities, as it directs attention inward rather than toward shared principles or ethical concerns. It follows that Kierkegaard's philosophy may be seen as inherently skeptical about the possibility of objective religious knowledge. So, while this skepticism aligns with his critique of rationalistic religious proofs, it may inadvertently discourage individuals from different faith traditions from engaging in meaningful conversations about the foundations of their beliefs.

Proponents of Kierkegaard's philosophy argue that the critique may misinterpret his intentions. They contend that Kierkegaard's emphasis on Subjective faith is not necessarily exclusive or relativistic but is rooted in the idea that faith is deeply personal and transformative.¹⁴ Moreover, Kierkegaard's philosophy encourages individuals to take their faith seriously and engage with the uncertainties and doubts that arise within their own tradition.

An Analysis of Religious Truth by Soren Kierkegaard

There are higher truths that we live and die for. Reason only takes us so far and then you enter the irrational and take a leap of faith by accepting the absurdity of the higher truth because there is no proof for it. Subjective truth is "most influential in a person's life".¹⁵

Søren Kierkegaard's philosophical legacy remains a vibrant and influential force in contemporary thought. His exploration of subjects such as authenticity, faith, and religious truth continues to resonate with scholars and thinkers worldwide. Through an examination of key themes, critiques, and reinterpretations, we aim to provide a comprehensive view of Kierkegaard's place in today's philosophical discourse.

In the context of religious faith, Kierkegaard's concept of Truth takes on a particular significance. He argues that religious Truths, such as the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, cannot be rationally or objectively proven. Instead, they demand a Subjective leap of faith. Faith, for Kierkegaard, involves a passionate and paradoxical embrace of that which transcends reason and objectivity. It is in the Subjective act of faith that individuals may encounter profound religious Truths.

Kierkegaard's concept of faith as a personal and subjective experience also provides a lens through which to view individual and religious ideologies. In a world with diverse ethnic and religious groups, Kierkegaard's existentialism highlights the importance of personal conviction in navigating ideological conflicts. Faith, in Kierkegaard's sense, might be seen as a metaphor for deep-seated beliefs and values that guide individual actions and beliefs, pushing for an authenticity that transcends mere ideological adherence.

Kierkegaard's emphasis on the individual's subjective experience and the pursuit of authenticity remains highly relevant in contemporary times. In a world inundated with external influences and distractions, Kierkegaard's call to engage in self-reflection and make authentic choices speaks to the search for meaning and identity in the contemporary individual. The critique of Kierkegaard's subjectivism in light of religious pluralism underscores the ongoing importance of addressing the complexities of interfaith dialogue and understanding in our globalized world. His focus on the subjective dimension of faith encourages a deeper exploration of diverse religious experiences and perspectives.¹⁵ The feminist critique of Kierkegaard's philosophy challenges us to rectify historical gender biases and make room for women's voices and agency within existential and religious discourse. This critique resonates with contemporary efforts to dismantle patriarchal structures and promote gender equality. Kierkegaard's Eurocentric bias has been critiqued in light of the need for cross cultural philosophical dialogue in today's interconnected world. The call to engage with diverse philosophical traditions reflects a broader trend toward inclusivity and the recognition of non-Western voices in global philosophical conversations. While Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjective faith is relevant, it poses the challenge of potential relativism and

exclusivity. In contemporary times, striking a balance between subjective faith and open dialogue that respects differing beliefs remains a complex task.

Kierkegaard's view of faith sometimes appears detached from ethical and societal concerns. Contemporary challenges, such as social justice, environmental ethics, and human rights, demand ethical engagement alongside subjective faith, raising questions about the intersection of faith and social responsibility. The tension between Kierkegaard's Christian perspective and the diverse religious landscape of today's world continues to be a point of contention. His philosophy prompts us to consider how faith traditions can coexist and engage respectfully in a pluralistic society.

Contemporary scholars and thinkers have sought to reinterpret Kierkegaard's philosophy in ways that address these challenges and extend its relevance. They explore how Kierkegaard's insights can enrich discussions on topics such as multiculturalism, inter-sectionalism, and the role of faith in a secular age. Evaluating Kierkegaard's philosophy in contemporary times reveals its enduring significance and its capacity to inspire reflection and dialogue across a range of philosophical, ethical, and cultural dimensions. While Kierkegaard's ideas may require adaptation and critical engagement to meet the complexities of our age, they continue to contribute to the ongoing exploration of human existence and truth in the 21st century. Kierkegaard's philosophy serves as a bridge between the historical and the contemporary, inviting us to grapple with timeless questions in an ever-changing world.¹⁷

Conclusion

Søren Kierkegaard's views on religious truth revolve around the idea that religious truth is subjective and cannot be wholly grasped through objective reasoning or empirical evidence. Kierkegaard emphasizes that religious truth is deeply personal and subjective. It is not something that can be universally proven or logically demonstrated but is instead experienced individually. True faith requires a personal commitment and an inward journey.

Another one of Kierkegaard's unique concepts is the "leap of faith." He argues that reaching religious truth involves a leap beyond rationality and evidence. This leap is an act of will and passion, where one embraces faith despite the uncertainties and paradoxes. He suggests that the truths of religion can appear absurd to human reason, and yet it is in embracing this paradox that one finds genuine faith. For Kierkegaard, the core of religious truth is an individual's relationship with God. This relationship is direct and unmediated, transcending institutional or doctrinal frameworks. It involves a profound sense of devotion, humility, and trust in the divine.

Also, religious truth, according to Kierkegaard, demands a total existential commitment. It is not merely an intellectual assent to certain propositions but involves living out one's faith in every aspect of life. This commitment often entails suffering, sacrifice, and a constant striving to align oneself with God's will.

The summary of Kierkegaard's conclusion on religious truth is that it is a matter of personal and subjective experience that requires a leap of faith and an ongoing, deeply committed relationship with God. It is characterized by paradox and cannot be fully grasped by reason alone, and demands a profound existential commitment from the individual.

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