

“THE JOURNEY OF THE SELF FROM DESPAIR TO FAITH: REFLECTIONS ON THE EXISTENTIALISM OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD”



Dr. Hayat Mechat*¹, Dr. Hadda Banoun *²

¹ Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University Akli
Mohand Oulhadj Bouira Algeria

Laboratory “Multidisciplinary Laboratory in Human, Environmental and Social Sciences”
(Algeria). Email: h.mechat@univ-bouira.dz

² Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,

Laboratory: “Local History, Collective Memory and New Approaches” (Algeria).

h.banoun@univ-bouira.dz

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Abstract:

Existential philosophy is grounded in liberating the human being from the domination of most external forces—society, the state, and dictatorial powers. It seeks to restore the individual’s humanity, which has become alienated and lost in a world of countless false truths. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) divides existence into two types: inauthentic existence, which he associates with the crowd wherever it may be, and authentic existence, which he attributes to the singular individual—isolated, courageous, and willing to bear responsibility and the burden of freedom. It should not be understood that existentialism attempts to sever the individual’s ties with fellow human beings; rather, it is a philosophy that calls for the realization of the self’s potential, since the essence of the human being is inseparable from freedom.

Keywords: Existentialism – Authentic existence – Inauthentic existence – Categories of existence – Stages of existence.

Introduction:

Existential philosophy focuses on the anxiety arising from human existence in the world and on how individuals can realize their potential under various conditions while overcoming forms of inauthentic existence such as alienated relationships and false love. It does not sever the individual’s ties with others; rather, it seeks the realization of the self’s authentic existence and the reestablishment of relations with others after achieving freedom and spontaneity.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) is considered the founder of this philosophical approach, as his ideas were rooted in lived experience, which he saw as the source of philosophical thought. He is known for the statement: “My philosophy is my life.”

This paper examines Kierkegaard's distinction between two forms of existence: authentic existence and inauthentic existence. The latter refers to the life of the crowd—in the church, marketplace, or street—and reflects an escape from responsibility. Authentic existence, in contrast, is individual, isolated, courageous, and capable of bearing responsibility and the burden of freedom.

Existentialism aims to free individuals from the control of external forces—society, the state, and authoritarian powers—and to restore human authenticity lost in a world of false truths. It represents a form of resistance against the distortion of human nature. This raises key questions: What is the meaning of being human? And what distinguishes authentic from inauthentic existence?

The importance of this topic lies in addressing human existence in a world dominated by inauthenticity, superficial values, and relationships based on interest and exploitation, leading to anxiety and boredom in a materialistic age. Existentialism emphasizes that preserving human dignity requires solitude and self-reflection—an ability often weakened in a technologically dominated society.

This study adopts an analytical-critical method and examines the self's journey, marked by risk and challenge, in its search for the Absolute.

1. Stages of Human Existence in Kierkegaard's Thought:

Kierkegaard identifies three main stages of human existence.

a. The Aesthetic Stage:

This stage represents a rejection of religious constraints, particularly those that oppose sensual pleasure. The aesthetic individual seeks enjoyment, variety, and the avoidance of boredom.

Kierkegaard illustrates this through the figure of Don Juan, a seducer who pursues pleasure without commitment. Such a person is characterized by deception, lack of awareness, and unstable relationships. Love here is sensual and temporary, disappearing with the end of pleasure.

Kierkegaard also associates Don Juan with the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, considering music the most effective medium for expressing sensual desire without the use of language.

b. The Ethical Stage:

According to Søren Kierkegaard, the ethical individual lives to fulfill duty and is integrated with others in both professional and family life. Although he rejects the notion of the crowd and affirms individuality, he does not deny marriage, as it is based on love, which is the foundation of individuality since its object is unique. Likewise, in practical life, each individual freely chooses a profession based on inner will rather than external imposition; this choice is a form of the self choosing itself and discovering itself. Time, for the ethical individual, is continuous because work requires sustained engagement.

Choice is a central category for the ethical person, unlike the aesthetic individual who does not truly know it. It is necessary for the transition from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage, and from the ethical to the religious stage. Thus, the ethical stage occupies a *الوسط* position in Kierkegaard's thought. It

represents a higher level of human existence, yet it raises a key question: is it governed by the standards of good and evil?

For Kierkegaard, good and evil are subjective values determined by the individual. A choice is right when it arises from the inner self. Hence, he states: “Whoever chooses the ethical sphere has chosen the good.” The concept of good corresponds to freedom and will. Good exists because the self wills it, and if it willed evil, evil would exist—this expresses freedom. “The good is that which exists in and for itself; it is freedom.” The highest level of existence—freedom—leads to a direct relation with the Absolute.

Existential freedom, according to Kierkegaard, is grounded in sincerity, deep feeling, and firm will. It requires independence from external authority, making the self the sole source of decision. Through this, ethical action is realized. The ethical stage also introduces key existential categories such as anxiety, despair, sin, and death.

c. The Religious Stage:

Kierkegaard holds that the individual must rise from the ethical to the religious stage, dedicating effort, determination, and emotion to faith. Religious life becomes a duty freely chosen. He states: “Faith is an original sphere.”

Romantic thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Friedrich Schelling viewed faith as a source of joy combining art and religion. Kierkegaard opposed this view, arguing that faith is not mere joy but a goal requiring infinite effort and strong commitment. One becomes a believer through a difficult path—the path of freedom and will.

Kierkegaard also opposed Hegelian philosophy, represented by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, warning against its tendency to rationalize everything, which may lead to atheism. He described God as unknowable and emphasized the difference between the finite self and the infinite, preparing the ground for faith in revelation and Christian doctrine.

Faith, for Kierkegaard, is an infinite commitment in which the individual risks everything. This “leap” is true faith. It is a profound risk that justifies itself through its depth and meaning, affirming the immortality of the soul and the truth of Christianity. Faith involves believing in what transcends ordinary understanding, as in the example of Mary, who believed she was both virgin and mother.

The individual senses the divine presence inwardly; it does not require logical language but is grasped through silence and feeling. Hence, Kierkegaard rejected excessive religious discourse, criticizing what he called “religious decline” caused by empty talk, as words can corrupt genuine feeling. People learn to speak, but silence is learned from the divine.

His philosophy thus seeks to unite knowledge and love, similar to mystical traditions. According to Kierkegaard, one reaches faith through isolation, weakness, anxiety, despair, and suffering. A person becomes truly religious only after undergoing these experiences, ultimately attaining a higher spiritual state.

Having outlined the stages of existence, we now turn to the categories of human existence.

2. Categories of Human Existence:

a. Subjectivity:

Søren Kierkegaard argues that the self is an independent and autonomous unity, possessing its own being and relating to others through action. Therefore, action is essential to the self. He states: “Each individual is, in himself, a world, possessing an inner sanctuary into which no external force can enter.”

Kierkegaard maintains that subjective emotional values are what make the individual truly human, and that deep feelings return the person to their authentic self, distinguishing them from the external world. He emphasizes that theoretical thought is objective, yet objectivity does not provide absolute truth; it only offers approximations. When thought becomes purely abstract, it undermines existence itself.

He also asserts that any attempt to prove the existence of God through rational arguments is bound to fail, since knowledge of God is subjective rather than objective. God cannot be treated as an object of inquiry. Truth, therefore, is inward, grounded in the individual’s lived experience—particularly experiences of anxiety, tension, and inner conflict. Through such experiences, the individual comes to know and love God, who becomes the ultimate source of salvation from suffering.

Existence, in this philosophy, is the self’s struggle to determine its destiny. It is choice, becoming, individuality, and an infinite inward concern with the self, accompanied by a sense of sin and existence before God. This understanding of truth aligns with faith, which is based on objective uncertainty and therefore appears non-rational, since what is believed cannot be fully demonstrated through objective inquiry.

Human existence is not a universal abstraction but a concrete individual reality. Kierkegaard rejects the notion of the crowd, arguing that it obscures truth by dissolving individuality. Truth belongs only to the individual, particularly in its religious dimension. The crowd deprives the individual of freedom, making them dependent on collective decisions and incapable of authentic self-determination.

Thus, Kierkegaard elevates subjectivity or individuality as something sacred, while the crowd profanes it. Truth originates from God, who relates to the individual rather than to the masses.

b. Sin:

In Kierkegaard’s philosophy, sin represents another dimension of the ethical stage. It leads the individual toward a life of isolation in relation to God, becoming a personal bond between the individual and the divine. He states: “Sin is the subject of the discourse addressed to the solitary individual in complete isolation.”

Sin is always accompanied by secrecy; it is a deeply personal matter concerning the individual’s relationship with God. Kierkegaard argues that the sinful self possesses the potential for faith, making the sinner capable of becoming a profound believer. However, if sin does not guide the individual toward faith, it results in self-enclosure and separation from the infinite.

c. Anxiety:

Anxiety, according to Kierkegaard, precedes sin and is closely linked to possibility and freedom. It gives existence its distinctive character and reveals the individual's being. Human existence emerges through the act of choice.

Kierkegaard attributes anxiety to ignorance—specifically ignorance of moral values such as good and evil. This ignorance places the individual in a state of confusion, unable to grasp truth. Although the self possesses vast potential, it remains unaware of it, which generates anxiety.

In this sense, innocence is ignorance of good and evil. When ignorance disappears, innocence is replaced by knowledge, and anxiety emerges. The example of Adam illustrates this: when he was tempted to approach the tree of knowledge, he faced the uncertainty of choice—whether to obey or to refuse. His awareness of freedom produced anxiety before the act, which intensified after carrying it out.

d. Despair:

Despair is a condition of human existence that arises from error or sin, since the individual is constantly compelled to choose their actions. Every choice involves risk, and when it concerns existential contradiction, it becomes a risk of totality. When a person commits sin, they experience spiritual collapse accompanied by anxiety.

Søren Kierkegaard considers that the true source of despair is the self. To clarify this, he gives the example of a man who aspires to become a Caesar but fails to achieve it. According to Kierkegaard, this man does not despair because he cannot become Caesar, but because his self is not what he wished it to be. The self thus becomes a heavy burden, from which the individual despairs of being completely freed, yet cannot eliminate it.

Before presenting the types of despair, Kierkegaard explains its causes. He concludes that despair originates in human weakness and in the inability of the self to realize itself except through God. The individual despairs both of themselves in comparison with God and of their distance from God. The human self is composed of opposing elements: the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, necessity and freedom. These contradictions lead the self into despair.

e. Nothingness (Death):

Kierkegaard discusses the concept of nothingness in the sense of death as a category of individual existence. He states: “If the task of life is to become subjective, then the idea of death is not a general matter for the individual self, but a real act.”

Death, for him, is an event that can occur at any moment. However, human beings tend to evade it by treating it as a general occurrence affecting all living beings. Kierkegaard argues that although others die and disappear, my own disappearance is fundamentally different. Death affects the individual in their deepest being, and therefore it should not be understood as a generalized empirical event, but as an individual task or act.

For this reason, Kierkegaard defines human existence through individuality, becoming, temporality, and death. However, his discussion of death is not intended to lead the individual into despair, but to moral

awakening. By reflecting on death, the individual becomes aware that existence is oriented toward it, and thus assumes responsibility for their actions and adopts ethical conduct. The ethically acting individual, in confronting life, chooses the self authentically—this being the ultimate aim of Kierkegaard's philosophy.

Critique of Existential Philosophy:

Through an evaluation of existentialist ideas derived from Søren Kierkegaard, it can be concluded that existentialism focused mainly on interpreting the inner life of the human being and the psychological states associated with it—such as anxiety, despair, and nausea—rather than providing practical solutions to human life problems. For this reason, personalism later emerged to play this role. Personalism is a set of attitudes and inward orientations adopted by individuals in relation to the modern world. In this regard, Emmanuel Mounier states: “We did not intend in our research to study the human being only, but also to fight for him.”

Existential philosophy sought to present humanity as a superior reality that derives its existence from itself, making the human being the only entity that determines its existence and destiny independently of others. The individual chooses himself in complete freedom while being surrounded by risks, since he consults no one and believes only in what his inner self dictates. This leads to anxiety, despair, and disturbance.

Personalism, however, offered another view of the human being. As Jean Lacroix states: “If we consider the human being from a psychological perspective, we find that the person is neither in isolated introversion nor in social extroversion, but in a balanced tension between these two movements.” Thus, personalism aims to provide answers to the problems of the individual that existential philosophy merely described. As Lacroix adds: “Beyond thinking, feeling, and emotion, there is the human being who thinks, who wills, and we must look toward him in order to understand all intellectual and emotional reactions.”

Existential philosophy, according to some critics, seduced its followers by granting them a quasi-divine status, while failing to provide them with divine-like power to organize and create their lives. It was also described as a philosophy of passivity, due to the human being's despair upon realizing that death may threaten life at any moment.

However, Jean-Paul Sartre responded by stating: “The melancholy we refer to does not in any way lead to laziness, passivity, or withdrawal from action.” In other words, when a person experiences sadness, they strive to overcome it through action rather than inaction; thus, it becomes a motivating force.

Perhaps the most important criticism directed at existentialism is that it studied only the sad, melancholic human being. It narrowed the scope of human existence by focusing exclusively on suffering and tragedy while neglecting other emotions such as joy. Even existential thinkers themselves later realized that existential analysis does not lead to a complete truth, since everything is understood through lived experience, which is personal and incommunicable. It is a form of direct awareness of the eternal moment, and through this awareness alone, the individual is freed from internal contradictions and reaches a truth that cannot be expressed in words. As Kierkegaard states: “The individual who truly finds himself remains silent, even with himself.”

However, existential philosophy should not be judged in this way unless it is studied comprehensively, taking into account the historical conditions in which it emerged and the psychological experiences of its founders. Historically, Kierkegaard's country, Denmark, experienced political and economic decline; England bombarded the Danish fleet in 1807, and Denmark later entered a six-year war with France.

Existential philosophy addressed themes such as guilt, despair, anxiety, fear, and boredom. In doing so, it paved the way for the emergence of psychology and also influenced structuralism, which focused on the notion of "relation" rather than "being," the central concern of existentialism.

Conclusion:

Through his existential philosophy, Kierkegaard sought to reconnect the human being with the Absolute (God) through individual existence, placing the individual in a direct relationship with the Creator, away from false forms of worship. This relationship is expressed through the three stages of existence: the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the religious stage—phases through which the individual passes in life to ultimately transcend inauthentic existence.

For Kierkegaard, faith requires patience and endurance of suffering; it is a lived experience, not a set of slogans repeated by individuals. He therefore criticized Christian theology as it appeared in his time, believing it had distorted authentic Christianity.

Kierkegaard contributed to restoring the emotional dimension of the human being, which had been neglected by Western modernity dominated by rationalism since René Descartes. This rationalism later led to positivism, which focused only on the exploitation of nature for human benefit. Although it had certain advantages, it privileged reason and neglected emotional and spiritual dimensions.

Existentialism—whether in Kierkegaard or later thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger—sought to delve into the depths of the human being, revealing inner suffering and internal fragmentation, in contrast to rationalist philosophy, which reduced human beings to consciousness or reason alone.

Kierkegaard is considered one of the earliest existential philosophers who focused on human existence, being, and destiny. He paved the way for later thinkers, especially Martin Heidegger, who explored technology and existence and, following Kierkegaard's critical approach, warned of the danger of modern technology to human being.

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