

An Evaluation of Søren Kierkegaard's notion of the Human Condition

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07062069606

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17084957>

Abstract

Søren Kierkegaard's exploration of the human condition, particularly his concepts of despair, anxiety and self-realization remain pivotal in existential philosophy. However, the universality of his ideas warrants a re-evaluation within a contemporary context marked by globalization, technological advancements, and shifting cultural paradigms. This paper therefore examines the applicability of Kierkegaard's phenomenological framework to diverse modern experiences, particularly those outside his predominantly Eurocentric and theistic worldview. By juxtaposing his ideas with contemporary challenges such as mental health crises, secularism, and the impact of digital identities amongst others, the paper hopes to contribute in ways that can make Kierkegaard's notions of despair and authenticity relevant as universal existential markers. Thus, it considers alternative cultural philosophies to question the exclusivity of Kierkegaard's human condition given that we are in more or less pluralistic world today. This re-examination aims to expand the discourse on existential philosophy to include more inclusive and adaptable perspectives.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Human Condition, Despair, Existential Philosophy, Contemporary Context

Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard's existential philosophy, particularly his analysis of despair and the human condition, has long been considered a cornerstone in the study of individual existence. In works such as *The Sickness Unto Death* (Kierkegaard 131), he explores despair as a misrelation within the self and identifies it as an integral part of human existence. Kierkegaard argues that despair arises from a failure to align with one's true self, which he views as inherently connected to a higher divine purpose. However, the universality of these ideas is increasingly debated in contemporary discourse, as cultural, technological, and sociopolitical shifts challenge the relevance of his Eurocentric and theistic assumptions (Evans 45).

The 21st century presents a globalized and pluralistic context that diverges significantly from Kierkegaard's 19th-century Denmark. With the rise of secularism, mental health awareness, and digital identities, new questions emerge about whether his framework can adequately address the complexities of modern life (Taylor 14). This paper therefore aims to critically evaluate Kierkegaard's notion of the human condition in light of contemporary challenges.

Despair in Kierkegaard's Philosophy

Søren Kierkegaard, often regarded as the father of existentialism, presents a profound exploration of despair in his seminal work, *The Sickness Unto Death*. For Kierkegaard, despair is not merely a fleeting emotional state but a fundamental aspect of the human condition. He defines it as a misrelation within the self, an existential struggle arising from the failure to align with one's true nature. This misalignment, according to Kierkegaard, occurs when an individual either denies or fails to embrace their dual existence as finite and infinite, temporal and eternal (Kierkegaard 13). Despair, thus, is a spiritual sickness that reflects an individual's alienation from their authentic self and, ultimately, from God.

Kierkegaard's concept of despair is intrinsically tied to his understanding of the self. He describes the self as a synthesis of opposites—finite and infinite, necessity and possibility—and asserts that true selfhood is achieved through the proper relation of these elements under the guidance of a higher power. When this synthesis is disrupted, despair arises (15). For example, an individual overly focused on their finite nature may succumb to despair over their limitations, while one excessively preoccupied with infinite possibilities may experience despair rooted in unattainable ideals. In either case, the self becomes disoriented, unable to reconcile the tension between its finite and infinite aspects.

Kierkegaard identifies three forms of despair: the despair of not being conscious of having a self, the despair of not willing to be oneself, and the despair of willing to be oneself. The first form, which Kierkegaard calls despair in ignorance, occurs when individuals fail to recognize their spiritual dimension and live shallow, unexamined lives. Such individuals may appear content outwardly but remain in a state of existential estrangement (Kierkegaard 30). The second form, the despair of not willing to be oneself, emerges when individuals are aware of their spiritual nature but reject it due to fear, insecurity, or societal pressures. Finally, the despair of willing to be oneself represents a defiant refusal to acknowledge one's dependence on God. In this state, individuals attempt to construct their identities independently, seeking self-sufficiency in finite pursuits, which ultimately proves unsustainable.

Central to Kierkegaard's philosophy is the belief that despair, while deeply unsettling, is also transformative. It forces individuals to confront their inadequacies and consider the possibility of authentic existence. According to Kierkegaard, the resolution to despair lies in faith, a "leap" into a relationship with God, where the self is reoriented and finds its true purpose (49). Through faith, individuals recognize their dependence on the divine and achieve a harmonious synthesis of their finite and infinite aspects.

Kierkegaard's analysis of despair offers valuable insights into the complexities of human existence. However, it also reflects the cultural and theological context of 19th-century Denmark, where Christianity played a central role in shaping philosophical discourse. Critics argue that Kierkegaard's emphasis on faith as the solution to despair limits the universality of his ideas, particularly in secular or non-Christian contexts (Evans 82). Nevertheless, his exploration of despair as a fundamental aspect of selfhood continues to resonate, inviting readers to grapple with questions of identity, purpose, and authenticity.

Undoubtedly, Kierkegaard's concept of despair is a profound examination of the human condition, emphasizing the tension between the finite and infinite aspects of selfhood. While deeply rooted

in Christian theology, his insights transcend religious boundaries, offering a framework for understanding the existential struggles that define human existence. As individuals navigate the complexities of modern life, Kierkegaard's analysis of despair remains a compelling guide to confronting the challenges of selfhood and authenticity.

Despair and Human Condition

Søren Kierkegaard's existential philosophy, particularly his understanding of despair and the human condition, has long been celebrated for its profound insights into selfhood and authenticity. However, the universality of his ideas faces significant challenges in the context of the modern, globalized world. Contemporary society, shaped by technological advancements, shifting cultural paradigms, and the erosion of traditional religious frameworks, raises questions about the relevance of Kierkegaard's largely Eurocentric and theistic perspective. These challenges demand a critical examination of his framework in light of modern developments and alternative philosophical perspectives.

One major challenge to Kierkegaard's universality lies in the rise of secularism and the declining influence of organized religion. Kierkegaard's philosophy is deeply rooted in Christian theology, particularly his emphasis on the relationship between the self and God as the foundation for authentic existence (Kierkegaard 49). He views faith as the ultimate resolution to despair, positioning it as a necessary step toward achieving true selfhood. However, in a world where many individuals identify as non-religious or adhere to non-theistic belief systems, this reliance on faith as a universal remedy is problematic. Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, argues that modern secularism has expanded the range of existential options available to individuals, making Kierkegaard's theocentric model appear overly narrow (Taylor 14). For many, meaning and authenticity can be found outside of religious frameworks, through personal relationships, creative pursuits, or social activism.

Another significant challenge comes from the impact of globalization and cultural pluralism. Kierkegaard's philosophy emerged in 19th-century Denmark, a largely homogenous society shaped by Protestant Christianity. His analysis of the human condition reflects this context, which limits its applicability to diverse cultural settings. Non-Western philosophies, such as Buddhism and Confucianism, offer alternative conceptions of selfhood and suffering that challenge Kierkegaard's framework. For instance, while Kierkegaard views despair as a mis-relation within the self, Buddhist philosophy interprets suffering as arising from attachment and the illusion of a fixed self (Batchelor 78). These differences underscore the need for a more inclusive understanding of existential experiences that accounts for cultural diversity.

The rise of digital technology and social media further complicates the universality of Kierkegaard's ideas. In an era where identities are increasingly constructed and performed in virtual spaces, the nature of selfhood has undergone a profound transformation. Kierkegaard's concept of the self as a synthesis of finite and infinite elements does not fully address the fragmented, mediated identities that characterize modern digital life (Turkle 21). Social media platforms often promote superficial connections and external validation, fostering a sense of alienation and inauthenticity that is distinct from Kierkegaard's understanding of despair. Additionally, the constant exposure to curated online personas can exacerbate feelings of

inadequacy and self-doubt, creating new forms of existential struggle that require updated philosophical frameworks.

Finally, the growing awareness of systemic and collective issues, such as climate change, social inequality, and political instability, poses a challenge to Kierkegaard's individualistic approach. His focus on personal despair and self-realization may appear insufficient in addressing these broader, interconnected problems. Contemporary existential thought increasingly emphasizes the interplay between individual and collective dimensions of existence, calling for solutions that go beyond personal faith or self-discovery (Svenungsson 102). This shift highlights the need to expand Kierkegaard's framework to include a more relational and communal understanding of the human condition.

While Kierkegaard's exploration of despair and selfhood offers valuable insights, its universality is limited by the cultural, technological, and philosophical developments of the modern era. The decline of religious authority, the rise of global pluralism, the impact of digital technology, and the recognition of collective challenges all necessitate a re-evaluation of Kierkegaard's ideas. By critically engaging with these challenges, contemporary philosophy can build on Kierkegaard's legacy while adapting it to the complexities of the present.

Despair and Modern Existential Experience

The rapid advancement of digital technology has profoundly transformed the way individuals interact with the world and perceive themselves. From social media platforms to virtual realities, technology has created new dimensions for constructing and expressing identity. While this digital evolution has provided unprecedented opportunities for connection and self-exploration, it has also introduced unique existential challenges. By altering the nature of selfhood, relationships, and authenticity, technology reshapes the human condition in ways that demand philosophical reflection.

Digital identities, constructed and performed in online spaces, represent a significant departure from traditional understandings of the self. Kierkegaard's notion of selfhood, rooted in the synthesis of finite and infinite aspects of existence, presupposes an intimate and reflective relationship with one's inner life (Kierkegaard 15). However, in the digital age, selfhood often becomes fragmented and externalized. Social media platforms, for instance, encourage individuals to curate idealized versions of themselves for public consumption. These curated identities prioritize appearance and social approval over authenticity, creating a disconnection between the digital self and the lived experience of the individual. As Sherry Turkle notes, "we are tempted to think that our online performances are our real selves, but in truth, they are shadows of what we hope to be" (Turkle 28).

This dissonance between digital and authentic selves can give rise to new forms of existential anxiety. Social media fosters constant comparison, amplifying feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. The pressure to present a flawless digital persona often leads to a sense of inauthenticity, where individuals feel alienated from their true selves. Kierkegaard's concept of despair, understood as a mis-relation within the self, resonates with this experience. In a world dominated by digital interactions, despair manifests as a struggle to reconcile the gap between the constructed online self and the deeper, authentic self that remains obscured (Kierkegaard 32).

Moreover, the ephemeral nature of digital interactions challenges the depth and meaning of human relationships. Technology enables constant connectivity, but this often comes at the expense of genuine emotional intimacy. Turkle argues that “we are alone together,” highlighting how digital communication creates an illusion of closeness while eroding face-to-face interactions (46). This phenomenon raises existential questions about the quality and authenticity of relationships in an age where meaningful connection is increasingly mediated by screens.

The ubiquity of digital technology also raises concerns about the loss of individuality. Algorithms and artificial intelligence increasingly influence personal choices, from what media to consume to whom to connect with online. These systems often prioritize engagement over autonomy, subtly shaping users’ identities and preferences. The resulting sense of being controlled by external forces echoes Kierkegaard’s notion of “the crowd,” where individuals lose their distinctiveness and become subsumed by collective influences (Kierkegaard 54). In the digital age, this crowd is not a physical assembly but a virtual one, where algorithms act as invisible hands guiding behavior.

In spite of these challenges, technology also offers opportunities for existential exploration and self-discovery. Online platforms provide spaces for marginalized voices to express their identities and connect with others who share similar experiences. Virtual communities can foster a sense of belonging and solidarity, offering individuals the chance to explore aspects of their identity that may be suppressed in offline settings. Additionally, the accessibility of information and resources through technology empowers individuals to engage with existential questions and seek personal growth.

Technology and digital identities have profoundly shaped modern existential experiences, presenting both challenges and opportunities. While digital platforms enable self-expression and connection, they also complicate the pursuit of authenticity and meaningful relationships. The tension between the curated digital self and the authentic self reflects Kierkegaard’s insights on despair and selfhood, adapted to the complexities of the digital age. As individuals navigate this technologically mediated existence, the need for reflection and authenticity becomes ever more urgent, calling for a reimagining of existential philosophy in the context of modern life.

Pluralistic Philosophical Perspectives on the Human Condition

The human condition, encompassing questions of existence, identity, and purpose, has long been a central concern of philosophy. While Søren Kierkegaard’s existentialist framework provides profound insights into despair and selfhood, its rootedness in Christian theology and a Eurocentric worldview limits its applicability across diverse cultural and philosophical contexts. In contrast, pluralistic perspectives embrace a multiplicity of traditions, beliefs, and experiences, offering a more inclusive understanding of the human condition. These perspectives integrate insights from non-Western philosophies, emphasizing interconnectedness, impermanence, and collective well-being, which complement and challenge the individualistic focus of Western existentialism.

Buddhist philosophy provides a compelling alternative to Kierkegaard’s view of despair. Rather than framing human suffering as a mis-relation within the self, Buddhism attributes it to *dukkha*, or the pervasive dissatisfaction arising from attachment and ignorance. The Buddhist concept of *anatta* (non-self) challenges the notion of a fixed, autonomous self, suggesting instead that identity is a dynamic interplay of impermanent processes (Rahula 52). This contrasts sharply with Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the self as a synthesis of finite and infinite aspects that must be

reconciled through faith (Kierkegaard 15). By advocating mindfulness and the cessation of craving, Buddhism offers a path to liberation that does not rely on theistic assumptions, making it a more universally accessible framework for addressing existential concerns.

African philosophies, such as Ubuntu, also provide valuable insights into the human condition. Ubuntu, encapsulated by the phrase “I am because we are,” emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals within a community (Mbiti 108). Unlike Kierkegaard’s focus on the solitary individual’s relationship with God, Ubuntu highlights the relational aspect of existence, where identity and purpose are derived from one’s role in the collective. This communal orientation challenges the individualism of Western existentialism, suggesting that authenticity and well-being are achieved through nurturing harmonious relationships and contributing to the greater good.

Similarly, Confucianism offers a relational understanding of selfhood rooted in ethical behaviour and social harmony. The Confucian concept of *ren* (humaneness) underscores the importance of cultivating virtue through interpersonal relationships and fulfilling societal roles (Confucius 78). While Kierkegaard’s philosophy emphasizes inner transformation through faith, Confucianism prioritizes outward action and the cultivation of moral character. This divergence highlights the cultural specificity of existential concerns, as well as the need for pluralistic approaches that accommodate diverse understandings of identity and purpose.

Postmodern philosophy further challenges the universality of Kierkegaard’s human condition by deconstructing grand narratives and embracing the multiplicity of experiences. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida argue that identity is not a pre-given essence but a construct shaped by historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts (Foucault 45; Derrida 67). This perspective undermines Kierkegaard’s foundationalist approach, which posits a universal human struggle with despair and a singular path to selfhood through faith. Instead, postmodernism invites a more fluid and contingent understanding of existence, where multiple paths to meaning coexist.

Pluralistic perspectives on the human condition expand the existential discourse beyond Kierkegaard’s theistic and Eurocentric framework. They emphasize relationality, impermanence, and cultural diversity, offering more inclusive and adaptable approaches to addressing the complexities of modern life. By engaging with these diverse traditions, contemporary philosophy can move toward a richer and more holistic understanding of what it means to be human.

Conclusion

The exploration of Kierkegaard’s human condition, while foundational in existential philosophy, reveals limitations when considered in the context of a pluralistic, globalized, and technologically mediated world. His emphasis on despair, selfhood, and faith provides profound insights into the struggles of individual existence, but its Eurocentric and theistic underpinnings necessitate re-evaluation in light of diverse cultural and philosophical perspectives. By engaging with alternative frameworks such as Buddhism, Ubuntu, Confucianism, and postmodernism, we uncover richer and more inclusive approaches to understanding the human condition that emphasize relationality, impermanence, and collective well-being.

Modern challenges, including the rise of secularism, the influence of technology on identity, and the complexity of globalized societies, demand an adaptation of existential thought. The

fragmentation of identity in digital spaces, the erosion of religious frameworks, and the emergence of new collective concerns require a shift from individualistic and theocentric paradigms to more holistic and adaptable perspectives. Pluralistic approaches enrich this discourse by broadening the scope of inquiry to include non-Western traditions and contemporary philosophical developments.

Ultimately, the dialogue between Kierkegaard's existentialism and these diverse perspectives deepens our understanding of what it means to be human. It underscores the necessity of a philosophy that is inclusive, dynamic, and responsive to the complexities of modern existence. By integrating insights from multiple traditions and addressing emerging challenges, contemporary philosophy can continue to illuminate the enduring and evolving questions of identity, meaning, and purpose.

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