



## THE SINGLE INDIVIDUAL AND IDENTITY POLITICS OF KIERKEGAARD IN MODERN ERA

<sup>1</sup>Albert Amalraj. M, <sup>2</sup>Imkumaro

<sup>1</sup>Researcher, St. Joseph University, <sup>2</sup>Professor, St. Joseph University

<sup>1</sup>Department of Philosophy,

<sup>1</sup>St. Joseph University, Chümoukedima, India

**Abstract:** Kierkegaard's writings are often criticized for being so intensely individualistic that social theory finds little application for them. In this essay, however, I contend that Kierkegaard's concept of "the single individual" really provides crucially significant resources for a number of modern identity politics issues. By carefully examining the two notes that make up the brief essay "The Individual," I propose that, contrary to popular belief, Kierkegaard does not reject embodied historical existence; rather, he merely rejects the notion that moral dignity can be reduced to or determined by such embodied differentiation. Rather, Kierkegaard's writings reject the quantifiable assessment of "the crowd" in favor of the qualitative neighborly love of community. I argue that we can develop a Kierkegaardian identity theory consistent with some aspects of Patricia Hill Collins's and Kimberle Crenshaw's standpoint and intersectionality theory, given Kierkegaard's claim that true human equality is only possible in the specifically religious category of the single individual. While Kierkegaard operates at a theological level and Collins and Crenshaw operate at a structural level, they all provide crucial reminders to one another regarding the stakes of meaningful lives in light of the embodied job of social justice.

**Index Terms - Kierkegaard, community, politics, social theory, identity theory.**

### I. INTRODUCTION

Soren Kierkegaard's writings are unlikely to produce a viable public policy vision, even after close consideration. Though I acknowledge the extensive scholarship that has attempted to apply his ideas to political existence, as well as the passages in his work that emphasize the separation of his thought from political life, I believe that there has generally been a missed opportunity to see the idea of "the single individual" (hiin Enkelte) as potentially compatible with some aspects of contemporary identity politics. To be more precise, an identity theory that is Kierkegaardian (as opposed to Kierkegaard's) would not center on embodied diversity as having to lose oneself in a group or social category what he refers to as an "alliance" instead focusing on what it means for God to know each of us as unique individuals and knowing us "by name" (Kierkegaard 1962, pp. 111–12). According to Kierkegaard, the setting in which we can view ourselves as irreducible to what he refers to as "the crowd" rather than our social position determines our ethico-religious dignity. In light of the research of authors like Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberle Crenshaw, I will argue that a Kierkegaardian account of this kind has significant resonances with perspective and intersectionality theory. Individual identity is a structural reality, as Collins and Crenshaw will understand it, and a religious reality, as Kierkegaard will. However, they are all committed to the idea that, in the name of human equality, selfhood is irreducible to the mechanisms of power that threaten to reduce us to anonymous members of some quantitative calculus arising from an abstract unity: the species, the public, the they, the crowd, etc.

They can argue that despite his strong desire to make Christianity accessible to all, his concerns regarding this matter are unrelated to current issues like gender theory, systematic racism, and the queering of social spaces. Having said that, the following is not intended to be a definitive rejection of these interpretation possibilities, which Kierkegaard's writings undoubtedly leave somewhat open. Even if we acknowledge that trying to force Kierkegaard to address every issue we wish he had (or that he may have addressed in inadequate or problematic ways) is an unsatisfactory approach, we should nevertheless be open to applying a constructive Kierkegaardian perspective to our current understanding of the world. I've tried to do that in this essay. The Kierkegaard identity theory that I present here is presented as both a potential reading of Kierkegaard's writings and a reasonable method for viewing them as requiring positive actions before going beyond them.

## II. RADICAL INDIVIDUALISM VS. THE SINGLE INDIVIDUAL

Presumably, the most prevalent critical misinterpretation of Soren Kierkegaard's complex authorship is the notion that he is a radical individualist who lacks profound empathy for the material reality of others, a charge of irrationalism linked to "the leap of faith" (a phrase that does not appear in Kierkegaard's work). On this front, accusations vary from "moral nihilism" (Blanshard 1969, 1975) and "acosmism" (Mackey 1962) to "inhumane" (Garff 2005) and even "misanthropic" (Adorno 1939, 1989) assertions about Kierkegaard. These accusations of radical individualism are powerful and persistent, despite the fact that many academics have defended Kierkegaard against them in a variety of ways. This is because Kierkegaard regularly uses language that can appear to support these interpretations. Throughout his writings, Kierkegaard reiterates the idea that religion is a prerequisite for human equality or, to put it another way, that human equality is a religious concept. This assertion is particularly evident in his later discourses, where he clearly defines Christian spirituality (see Evans 2019). Therefore, a lot hinges on what Kierkegaard means by "political," even if he has publicly rejected the political realm as having of any relevance to his philosophy. It's crucial to avoid pushing Kierkegaard too far into a role that we would wish he had held.<sup>6</sup> When Kierkegaard criticizes politics, he does not minimize actual, embodied historical human experience; rather, he only points to a specific authority the crowd as the source of meaning for such existence.

## III. FROM CROWD TO COMMUNITY

Understanding how Kierkegaard's rejection of "politics" is not a rejection of historical determinacy requires paying attention to the role that finite existence and the perspectival epistemology that follows plays in his thinking. It is actually the exact opposite. Because politics frequently undermines the uniqueness of our lived existence itself, Kierkegaard criticizes politics for not being vital to human existence. He believes that politics replaces a concern for qualitative singularity with the quantitative anonymity of the crowd, rather than providing a space for who we are and urging us into the difficult job of "becoming a self." Throughout his writing career, Kierkegaard has emphasized the necessity of "existence" as the prerequisite for meaning, value, knowledge, and agency, both under his own name and a number of aliases. The idea that existence is defined by finitude, limitation, and ultimately death is central to Kierkegaard's concepts of "becoming a self," the appropriation that characterizes truth as "subjectivity," the passionate interiority of "faith," and even the definitional assertion that humans are "spirit."

Refusal of oneself and Be humble; these qualities, which we may refer to as the virtues of variety and inclusion, serve as a reminder that one's identity is never formed by minimizing or disregarding the identity of another. Thirteen Rather, we become singularized when we accept everyone else as our "neighbor." The crowd promotes the minimization of people who are different from you, as opposed to patiently showing hospitality to the neighbor in light of one's own self-denial. According to Kierkegaard (1962, p. 118), the mob is "the way to material power, the way to temporal and earthly advantages of all sorts, and at the same time, it is the untruth." It is false because it incorrectly prioritizes one's material condition as a determinant of one's identity. Being wealthy is not the same as becoming oneself. One does not minimize others in order to become oneself. According to Kierkegaard's identity theory, becoming a self involves overcoming the desire for worldly privilege in order to have a personal relationship with a God who commands you to love all other people, including most likely a good number of non-human ones (see Kierkegaard 1962, p. 118).

## IV. TWO CRITICAL OBJECTIONS

I want to address two criticisms before considering a case study from the Bible that supports this Kierkegaardian identity theory and before going to intersectionality theorists to put this Kierkegaardian perspective into dialogue with the current discussions. These two valid criticisms are based on Kierkegaard's own writings and are both very serious and sensible. His perspective may be indicative of identity blindness, which is the first issue. His criticism of "alliances" in Works of Love is the second, and it puts him at war with the idea of identity politics in general.

### 4.1 Identity Blindness Objection

At the outset of the first "note" in "The Individual," Kierkegaard appears to be inviting something close to a Rawlsian veil of ignorance, or at least a form of identity blindness. If this is what he is doing, then it would appear that there are very few resources in his thinking for modern identity politics. Now pay attention to what he says there: "I pray that you accept this homage, my dear." I make it, so to speak, blindfolded yet sincere, unaffected by regard for people. I have no idea who you are, where you live, or what your name is. Even yet, you are my pride, my delight, and my hope; even though you are unknown to me, you are an honor (Kierkegaard 1962, p. 109).

It would seem that Kierkegaard's later assertion that the crowd is a question of affirming "the distinctions of human life" is consistent with reading this line as an endorsement of identification blindness (Kierkegaard 1962, p. 119). Given these texts, it would seem that the reading I am trying to provide is up against some significant challenges. Kierkegaard appears to openly dismiss any concern about embodied distinctions, even if he is not a radical individualist. This allows him to address his reader, the single individual, without even knowing that person's name.

### 4.2 Alliances as Self-Love Objection

Works of Love contains what is likely Kierkegaard's most thorough and in-depth analysis of Christian social norms. Kierkegaard draws a difference between the political attitude toward temporality and the theological orientation toward eternity in that passage. According to Kierkegaard (1995), who locates neighbor-love as firmly defined by the "perfections of eternity," this distinction explains why neighbor-love is so fundamentally at odds with the goals and concerns of political life. Kierkegaard makes frequent references to the "dissimilarities of earthly life," even going so far as to claim that social division brought about by these differences is a form of "paganism" and "depravity" (Kierkegaard 1995, p. 69).

While Kierkegaard addressed some textual criticisms of both his identity theory and Kierkegaardian identity theory, he never offered specific examples to support the perspective that embodied difference matters. Nonetheless, one could argue that Kierkegaard left room for a concern for embodied difference. Indeed, it has to be admitted that the foregoing, somewhat sporadic examples have been largely hypothetical. Indeed, this is a valid issue, and it does seem to me that we need to go elsewhere for a concrete illustration of how a one-person approach could also pay attention to and acknowledge embodied realities such as gender, sexuality, and

ethnicity. I think it helpful to utilize the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4.1, a biblical story that Kierkegaard was likely familiar with, for such an analogy.

## V. Conclusions

To sum up, I would like to emphasize that the Kierkegaardian account I have given here is risky speculation if it isn't supported by research that more clearly understands the relationship between a person's religious status as an individual and the structural realities that constitute the environment in which that person lives out their life in finitude. It is important to place Kierkegaard in the precise intersections that his own writing so deftly recognizes but frequently neglects to fully embrace. While not exempt from embodied historical realities, Kierkegaard's concept of the lone individual is also not characterized by them. I have argued that a generic identity theory that resonates with some elements of intersectionality theory and modern viewpoints is nested in Kierkegaard's explanation of the solitary individual. However, prudence is advised. We must continue to recognize that Kierkegaard's writings alone cannot bring about the abolition of all historical injustice, and that his authorship is still a complex source for the purposes for which I am trying to use it here, as the objections pertaining to identity blindness and alliance as self-love have shown. However, recognizing the Kierkegaardian perspective that seeing ourselves and others as solitary individuals is a prerequisite for genuine equality and neighbourly affection aids in providing a clearer grasp of the reasons why fighting injustice is important in the first place.

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