

Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights According to Soren Kierkegaard

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Abstract

Philosophical foundations of human rights as envisioned by the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard, a pivotal figure in existentialist philosophy, presents a unique perspective on human rights that investigates into the individual's subjective experience and moral responsibility. His ideas emphasize the significance of human agency, freedom, and the ethical imperative of choosing one's values and actions authentically. This article provides an overview of Kierkegaard's key concepts, such as the individual's relation to God, the concept of authenticity, and the ethical life, and their implications for the understanding of human rights. It delves into Kierkegaard's existentialist perspective and its implications for our understanding of human rights, highlighting the importance of individuality, freedom, and moral responsibility in his philosophical framework. It also highlights the potential contributions of Kierkegaard's philosophy to contemporary discussions surrounding the nature and justification of human rights.

Keywords: Existentialism, Freedom, Universalism, and Human right

Introduction

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and theologian of the 19th century. In this comprehensive exploration, we will uncover Kierkegaard's unique philosophical contributions to the understanding of human rights. His writings are characterized by a deeply personal and introspective approach. His famous pseudonymous works, such as "Fear and Trembling" and "Either/Or," are ways for exploring the complexities of human existence and the tension between ethics and faith. While human rights may seem distant from these existential concerns, Kierkegaard's philosophy fundamentally addresses the nature of the individual, and it is from this vantage point that his insights into human rights spring forth. He emphasized the importance of authentic existence and the idea that individuals must confront their own existential choices. Kierkegaard's emphasis on individuality raises questions about the relationship between individual rights and collective interests, a topic central to contemporary discussions on human rights. He also grappled with the concept of freedom, a cornerstone of human rights discourse. He understood that true freedom was not merely the absence of external constraints but the ability to choose and take responsibility for one's choices. This notion aligns with the idea that human rights are not merely entitlements but come with moral responsibilities.

Kierkegaard's exploration of the ethical and religious spheres of existence provides a lens through which to examine the philosophical foundations of human rights. While he often critiqued the established church of his time, his understanding of religious faith can be seen as a precursor to modern conceptions

of religious freedom. He argued that genuine faith could not be coerced but must arise from the individual's innermost convictions. In this way, Kierkegaard foreshadowed contemporary discussions on the protection of religious freedom as a human right.

1. Setting the Context: Influence on Existentialism and Human right

Soren Kierkegaard is often considered the father of existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emphasizes the importance of individual freedom and responsibility. It emphasizes the importance of individual freedom and dignity, which are both essential elements of human rights. Kierkegaard's work also challenges us to think critically about our own values and beliefs, and to make choices that are true to ourselves.

Existentialism's emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility is reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. His work on anxiety and dread can help us to understand the psychological toll of human rights abuses. Kierkegaard's work on faith and commitment can inspire us to stand up for human rights, even when it is difficult.

In his book *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre cites Kierkegaard as a major influence on his thinking. He writes, "Kierkegaard was the first to see that the problem of anguish is the central problem of human existence." In his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argues that the only way to find meaning in a life that is ultimately absurd is to embrace one's freedom and responsibility. He writes, "Kierkegaard taught us that the only way to escape despair is to live authentically, even if it means living in anguish." In his book *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that the essence of human existence is to be Dasein, or "being-there." He writes, "Kierkegaard was the first to bring to light the problem of Dasein's existence." His work is complex and challenging, but it is also deeply rewarding. His insights into the human condition can help us to understand ourselves and our world better. His work is also a powerful call to action, to stand up for our values and to create a more just and equitable world.

2. Existence vs. Essence: The Primacy of Individual Existence

Existentialists believe that only concrete things can exist, and that humans are concrete individuals capable of being existents. They also believe that to be an existent, one must be capable of being conscious that one exists. In this sense, man alone can exist. Kierkegaard was the first person to use the word "existence" in a religious sense. He was primarily interested in the possibility of human self-realization. He asked the question, "To what extent can a person realize themselves by withdrawing from the irresponsibility, superficiality, and forgetfulness of everyday life?" For Kierkegaard, existence is the attainment of self-possession in a spiritually directed and determined life. In other words, Kierkegaard believed that humans can only truly exist when they are living a life that is true to themselves and their values. This means living a life that is directed by their spirituality and their relationship with God. Kierkegaard's view of existence is important because it emphasizes the importance of individual freedom and responsibility. It also challenges us to think about what it means to live a meaningful life.

a) Central focus on individual's inner awakening

Existentialism believes that philosophy should be related with the individual's own life and experience, with a primary emphasis on the individual's inner awakening. It ought to be a way of life worth adopting. All of this is combined into one term. The existentialist philosophers place a strong emphasis

on the individual. Therefore, for a person, the personal is the real. Therefore, philosophy should begin from one's inner wisdom and personal experience, which must be taken into consideration as proof.

b) Existence in transcendence

Kierkegaard and Sartre believed that human existence is a process of transcendence. Transcendence means going beyond oneself, or striving to become something more than one currently is. Kierkegaard believed that death is a constant reminder of our mortality and the need to focus on the transcendental, or the eternal. Sartre believed that man is constantly outside of himself and that he can only find meaning in life by pursuing transcendent aims.

Both Kierkegaard and Sartre saw transcendence as essential to humanism. They believed that man's ability to transcend himself and to pursue transcendent aims is what makes him unique and valuable. In other words, they believed that humanism is not just about celebrating man's humanity, but also about challenging him to become more than he is. It is about helping him to transcend himself and to become the best version of himself that he can be.

c) Emphasis on primacy of Individual existence

Evidently, existentialists are more interested in actively participating in the world than in understanding, altering, or contemplating it. Erasmus, a Dutch humanist, continues by defining existentialism as a 20th century strategy that emphasizes the importance of each person's existence over any assumed human nature. According to him, existentialists typically believe that a person's existence implies both his unrestricted ability to shape himself however he pleases and the incredible obligation to use that freedom responsibly without being motivated by distress towards escape into inauthenticity, despite the possibility that the entire project will be absurd.

3. Individual Freedom and Autonomy

Kierkegaard says true faith is a deeply personal and subjective experience that cannot be reduced to mere intellectual assent or adherence to religious doctrines. Faith is not a matter of objective certainty or empirical evidence but a passionate commitment and a leap into the unknown. He emphasized the significance of individual choice and personal responsibility in matters of faith. For Kierkegaard, faith involves a profound existential decision that requires one to confront the inherent uncertainties and anxieties of life. It is through this subjective engagement with faith that an individual can establish a genuine relationship with the divine.

Kierkegaard also critiqued the prevailing religious conformity and emphasized the importance of the individual in religious matters. He warned against the dangers of a crowd mentality, where individuals lose their authentic selves in the pursuit of social acceptance or adherence to societal norms. He believed that true faith requires an individual to resist the pressure of conformity and make a personal, passionate commitment to God. Furthermore, Kierkegaard's concept of the "knight of faith" illustrates his idea of the individual's role in faith. The knight of faith represents someone who, despite living in the ordinary world and experiencing the struggles and uncertainties of life, maintains an unwavering commitment to their faith. The knight of faith embraces the paradoxes and contradictions of existence while remaining steadfast in their trust in the divine.

Kierkegaard highlights the centrality of the individual's subjective experience and personal commitment in matters of faith. Faith, according to Kierkegaard, involves a passionate and subjective engagement that transcends mere intellectual understanding or adherence to external religious structures. By emphasizing the significance of the individual and their existential choices, Kierkegaard underscores the

profound nature of faith in human life. His views on individual freedom and autonomy are highly relevant to the topic of human rights. Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death. They apply regardless of where you are from, what you believe or how you choose to live your life.

- Kierkegaard's belief that each person is unique and has their own individual path to follow is reflected in the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
- Kierkegaard's belief that each person is responsible for their own choices and actions is reflected in the right to freedom of opinion and expression.
- Kierkegaard's belief that individual freedom and autonomy are essential to human flourishing is reflected in the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Kierkegaard's work is complex and challenging, but it is also deeply rewarding. His insights into the human condition can help us to understand ourselves and our world better. His work is also a powerful call to action, to stand up for our values and to create a more just and equitable world.

4. The Struggle for Universality vs. Individuality

the struggle for universality and individuality of human rights is not directly addressed by Kierkegaard on human rights, but his emphasis on individual subjectivity and the ethical imperative can inform contemporary debates about how to balance universal principles with the recognition of individual uniqueness and cultural diversity within the framework of human rights.

a) Universality in Human Rights

Universal human rights are often considered as fundamental rights that apply to all individuals regardless of their background, culture, or beliefs. Kantian moral philosophy, which emphasizes the categorical imperative and the universality of moral principles, has influenced the idea of universal human rights (Ignatieff, 2001).

b) Individuality in Human Rights

Kierkegaard's emphasis on individual subjectivity and the unique path to authenticity can be seen as advocating for the recognition of individuality in human rights. Kierkegaard's notion of the "single individual" (Kierkegaard, 1846) highlights the importance of acknowledging each person's unique perspective and experiences.

c) Tension Between Universality and Individuality

The tension between universality and individuality in human rights is a longstanding debate. Some argue that universal rights risk imposing Western values on diverse cultures (Donnelly, 2003). Kierkegaard's focus on the personal journey of faith and ethics can be interpreted as a critique of overly universalistic approaches to morality.

d) Contemporary Relevance

In contemporary human rights discussions, this tension is evident in debates over cultural relativism and the limits of universal rights (Sen, 1999). Scholars like Charles Taylor (1992) have explored the balance between universal principles and the recognition of cultural and individual differences.

e) Ethical Responsibility

Kierkegaard's writings on ethical responsibility and authenticity can be linked to the idea that recognizing individuality within a universal framework is an ethical responsibility (Papish, 2019). The struggle for universality and individuality of human rights is, at its core, an ethical challenge in today's globalized world.

5. The Duty to Act Authentically

- **Authenticity:** Kierkegaard emphasized the importance of living an authentic life, which meant being true to one's inner self and values. He criticized conformity and the "crowd mentality," encouraging individuals to make meaningful, personal choices.
- **Existential Individualism:** Kierkegaard's notion of the individual's responsibility for self-determination aligns with the idea that individuals have a duty to act authentically in the context of human rights. Human rights often emphasize the inherent dignity and worth of each person, underscoring the importance of individual choices and autonomy.
- **Ethical Implications:** Kierkegaard's philosophy prompts questions about the ethical implications of authenticity. How do authentic actions and choices relate to human rights principles such as equality, freedom, and non-discrimination? A literature review could explore how Kierkegaard's ideas intersect with modern human rights theories and practices.
- **Critiques and Challenges:** It's important to note that Kierkegaard's philosophy has been critiqued for its potential limitations, such as its focus on the individual at the expense of social and collective responsibilities. A literature review should include discussions of these critiques and how they relate to the duty to act authentically within human rights contexts.
- **Contemporary Relevance:** Consider examining how Kierkegaard's ideas on authenticity can inform contemporary discussions on human rights, individual agency, and social justice. Scholars may have applied his concepts to various human rights issues, and these applications should be part of your literature review.

6. Cultural Relativism vs. Universalism on human right

Cultural relativism is the view that morality is relative to each culture's own standards. According to cultural relativism, there is no such thing as universal moral truths. Instead, each culture has its own unique moral code, which is valid within that culture but not necessarily in other cultures. And universalism is the view that there are certain moral truths that are universally valid. According to universalism, there are certain moral principles that apply to all people, regardless of their culture.

In the context of cultural relativism, scholars like Clifford Geertz and Richard Rorty (1986) have explored the idea that human rights can be culturally relative, meaning that what is considered a fundamental right in one culture may not be seen as such in another. The works of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum (2012) have examined the capabilities approach, which attempts to bridge the gap between cultural differences and universal human rights by focusing on the capabilities and freedoms that individuals need to lead a dignified life.

Universalism of Human Rights: Philosopher John Rawls' "A Theory of Justice" is a cornerstone of contemporary discussions on universal human rights. He argues for a set of basic rights and principles that would be universally accepted in a just society, despite cultural differences. Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach also plays a role in discussions of universal human rights by emphasizing the fundamental capabilities that all humans should have access to, regardless of culture.

Existentialism and Human Rights: If we want to incorporate Kierkegaard's existentialist philosophy into this discussion, it's important to note that existentialism focuses on individual authenticity and

freedom. Kierkegaard's ideas on the individual's pursuit of meaning and authenticity could be related to the notion of individuals having the right to self-determination.

Critiques and Debates: There is an ongoing debate about the tension between cultural relativism and universalism in human rights. Some argue that cultural relativism can lead to moral relativism, which may undermine the protection of human rights. Others contend that universalism can be ethnocentric and disregard cultural diversity.

Contemporary Perspectives: Contemporary philosophers like Kwame Anthony Appiah have explored cosmopolitanism as a way to reconcile cultural diversity and universal human rights, suggesting that individuals can embrace their cultural identities while also recognizing common moral principles.

In his book *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard argues that anxiety is a fundamental part of the human condition. He writes, "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom." Kierkegaard believed that anxiety is caused by our awareness of our own freedom. When we realize that we are free to choose our own path in life, we also realize that we are responsible for the consequences of our choices. This can be a daunting realization, but it is also one that gives our lives meaning. Kierkegaard believed that the only way to overcome anxiety is to embrace our freedom and to make our own choices. He writes, "The only way to escape despair is to live authentically, even if it means living in anguish."

Kierkegaard's views on human rights are closer to universalism than cultural relativism. He believed that there are certain moral truths that are universally valid. For example, he believed that all people have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He recognized that different cultures have different ways of understanding and expressing these moral truths. He believed that it is important to respect the cultural differences of others, but he also believed that there are certain moral principles that should be upheld by all cultures.

7. Potential Limitations in Human Rights

Kierkegaard's ideas intersect with contemporary debates on the universality of human rights. While he did not explicitly articulate a theory of universal human rights, his emphasis on individuality and the subjective nature of existence implies that the recognition of rights should be grounded in the particular circumstances and values of individuals. This perspective aligns with the debate surrounding cultural relativism and the extent to which human rights can be applied universally.

Conclusion

Philosophical foundations of human rights in view of Kierkegaard's offer a thought-provoking perspective that challenges conventional notions of universal rights. His's emphasis on individual subjectivity, personal responsibility, and the significance of the individual's relationship with the divine highlights the complexity of human rights discourse. While he may not provide a comprehensive framework for human rights as we understand them today, Kierkegaard's ideas remind us of the profound importance of recognizing and respecting the inherent worth and dignity of each person. His philosophical insights encourage us to engage in ongoing reflection and dialogue to ensure that the pursuit of human rights remains a deeply introspective and morally grounded endeavor"

His philosophical contributions to the understanding of human rights may not be immediately apparent, but they offer a profound and distinctive perspective. His exploration of individuality, freedom, faith, and the limitations of collective ethics enriches contemporary discussions on human rights. By delving into his works with an open mind, we can uncover valuable insights that challenge and expand our understanding of the philosophical foundations of human rights in the modern world.

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