



## Kierkegaardian Authenticity and the Question of African Identity Crisis

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### Abstract

Post-colonial Africa continues to grapple with a persistent identity crisis rooted in the historical experiences of slavery, colonialism, cultural erasure, systemic oppression, and the imposition of foreign values and institutions. These forces have produced a condition of psychological dividedness in which Africans are caught between their worldviews and Western paradigms, resulting in cultural dislocation, dependency, and loss of authentic self-definition. This work interrogates this African identity crisis through the lens of Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy of authentic existence. Drawing particularly on Kierkegaard's notions of subjectivity, choice, commitment, and responsibility, the work argues that authenticity offers a viable philosophical framework for reclaiming African selfhood. Kierkegaard's critique of rationalism, conformity, and "the crowd" is applied to the African context to expose the dangers of uncritical imitation, external validation, and ideological dependence. It contends that African revitalization requires critical self-reflection, contextualized decision-making, and the courage to assume responsibility for collective choices rather than reliance on imported models. By embracing subjective truth, Africans can resist Eurocentric narratives and internalized oppression, assert their right to self-definition, and reconstruct identity grounded in lived experience and indigenous values while remaining open to universal engagement.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaard, African Predicament, Identity, Development, Stages of Life

### Introduction

The constant search for meaning revolves around the anthropological question: *Who is man?* This question, as Battista Mondin noted, "is the interrogative of all interrogatives, the most pressing and piercing interrogative of all. It is an old interrogative, yet it is always new; it

is concrete, not abstract; personal not generic" (1). Thus, "for man, to know who he is, what his origin is, what his destiny is, what consistency his life and internal dimension has...all this cannot be an indifferent matter. Indifference can arise towards all others... but not towards ourselves. We must necessarily occupy and preoccupy ourselves with the sense of our life and the value of our existence" (Mondin, 1). It is for this preoccupation with human existence that Kierkegaard emerged in the nineteenth century to redirect the focus from the systematic rational explanation of human nature from objectivity to subjectivity. However, "the nineteenth century was not yet ready to give up the notion that a scientific or rational analysis of human nature can tell us everything we need to know about ourselves, including how to conduct our lives" (Lawhead, 399). Consequently, with the coming on board of Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century, the aim changed, not to focus on presenting abstract philosophical arguments that tend to picture the state of man and his world, but Kierkegaard concerned himself with presenting existential possibilities that leave one with choices to be or not to be. Kierkegaard focused on the concrete situation of man against the Hegelian explanation of the world. Kierkegaard believed that the Western Tradition's focus on rationalism contributed significantly to dehumanization. He argued that Greek rationalism, the basis of Western thought, was overly reliant on mathematics and abstract theories, thereby neglecting the realities of living. For him, the main goal of philosophy was to help individuals understand and face existential issues. Philosophy should help people see themselves as unique selves and subjects, which would, in turn, reshape their perspective on the world and the essence of existence.

Nevertheless, the anthropological and existential issues raised by Kierkegaard's philosophy gain significant importance in the context of post-colonial Africa. Just as Kierkegaard diagnosed modern humanity's loss of self through excessive rationalism, conformity, and external determinations, the African search for identity in today's post-colonial setting is rooted in psychological dividedness which is as a result of traumatic experiences of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, cultural erasure, systemic oppression, distorted self-perception, the clash of conflicting ideologies, and imposed value systems. Consequently, the contemporary African is caught between two cultural worlds: that of Africa and that of the West, resulting in an inner conflict over who he truly is and what he genuinely seeks to become. This condition mirrors Kierkegaard's notion of inauthentic existence, in which individuals live according to external standards rather than their own convictions. Hence, there is a persistent tendency to seek external validation and to live according to others' perceptions and expectations. In light of this ongoing identity crisis, Africa "needs to find and establish a foundation for what and who they are, what they believe in, and the values they hold and live for. This is necessary if they are to orient themselves in a world becoming ever more global" (Kiarie, in Makumba, 11). Hence, this work aims to interrogate the African identity crisis through the lens of Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy of authentic existence, drawing particularly on Kierkegaard's notions of subjectivity, choice, commitment, and responsibility.

### **Søren Kierkegaard on Stages of Life's ways**

Kierkegaard argues that the individual progresses through three stages of life. These stages are: the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage and the religious stage. These three stages can be regarded as views of life or existential categories. One may ask how Kierkegaard arrived at these stages and if they are original to him. According to Ogbonna, "the manner in which Kierkegaard applied the theory of the stages is very original and this originality in the existential application of the theory has placed Kierkegaard on the eagle's wings" (60). Writing further on how Kierkegaard arrived at the stages, Ogbonna further noted that:

This whole idea seems rather to have been forced on him by reflection upon his own experiences and he also sought the leading principles under which he could organize his literary studies, his extensive observation of human character as well as the lessons of his own life. The stages have a deep significance, for they are concerned with the fundamental commitments and organizing ideals available to man (61).

This movement of existence in Kierkegaard's thought does not take place in historical or cultural patterns; it is a movement that is made as a result of an individual's passionate choice. The movement is to overcome despair and integrate into authentic existence. This progression is not a cognitive one but an existential one. As Law head noted, "the movement from one stage of existence to another cannot be based on logical reasons, but is based on existential reasons, rooted in one's personal life story. Choosing to live out of any one of the existence-spheres is a value choice because the choice is based on the answer to questions such as what shall I become? Is this a way of life I can make my own?" (407). The movement from one stage to another is a sign of the inadequacy of one stage of existence. However, "it is important to remember that when Kierkegaard writes on each of these stages or spheres, he is dealing with a unique and distinct lifestyles, each of which is complete in itself and incompatible moreover with any of the other lifestyles" (Ogbonna, 62-63). Given this, Kierkegaard certainly recognizes that the world is filled with as many personalities as there are individuals, but the values guiding their lives are fewer. Kierkegaard believes that as we progress through each stage, we move towards becoming a fully developed self, which can be realized at the religious stage. These stages of existence are as follows:

#### **(a) The Aesthetic Stage**

The aesthetic stage is the first sphere of existence in which a person lives through the senses and emotions. The aesthetic stage represents a fundamental aspect of human existence and self-awareness. It is a phase in which individuals prioritize pleasure, beauty, and immediate gratification over other considerations, such as commitment and responsibility. At its core, the Aesthetic Stage embodies a pursuit of sensory experiences and hedonistic pleasures. Individuals in this stage are captivated by the allure of novelty and excitement, constantly seeking new sensations to stimulate their senses and satiate their desires. Whether through indulging in sensory delights like food, exquisite art, or thrilling adventures, they prioritize the immediate gratification derived from these experiences. Central to the aesthetic stage is the

emphasis on beauty. This extends beyond mere physical attractiveness to encompass the aesthetic appreciation of art, music, literature, and nature. Beauty serves as a guiding principle, which influences individuals' choices and preferences as they seek out experiences that evoke a sense of aesthetic pleasure and fulfilment. The pursuit of beauty in all its forms becomes a primary driving force that shapes their interactions with the world around them. For a person of the aesthetic stage, life is an incessant search for gratifying moments. As Lawhead noted:

The aesthetic category covers a wide range of personality types that includes the raw hedonist who wallows in base, sensual pleasures, as well as the romantic who revels in the enjoyment of art and literature, and even the intellectual who enjoys ideas as though they are fine wines, but without committing his life to any of them. For the aesthetic person, the only two categories that matter are boring and interesting. Life is a frantic attempt to avoid boredom by filling one's plate with ever-new interesting experiences. Whereas Descartes said, *cogito ego sum*, the aesthete says, *I have interesting moments, therefore I am* (408).

According to Kierkegaard, an individual who chooses a life of the aesthetic stage is not bothered by self-control, duty, or responsibility, as all he strives for is his immediate satisfactions, thereby not considering the bad or good of moral principles. A man of aesthetic stage can experience fulfilment and dissatisfaction, ecstasy and despair and happiness and sufferings. The man of the aesthetic stage lives a life of romantic immediacy and always craves the satisfaction of pleasure or pleasurable goods, which can be of good health, honour, beauty, food, talent or wealth. However, the aesthetic life is often threatened by the constant prospect of pain, suffering and boredom and it is this search for escape that the man of aesthetic life is always in search of new pleasure. For the aesthetic person, as Kierkegaard noted, "boredom is the root of all evil" (*Either/Or*, 281) and it has two weapons in its arsenal, as Lawhead noted:

First, boredom is a threat because of the transitory nature of all experiences. Just when the aesthetic person thinks her life is full of pleasure, the beautiful flower fades, the concrete comes to an end, or the moment of passion passes and she is left once again with the inner emptiness. The second weapon of boredom is repetition. Too much of any pleasure eventually becomes tiresome, stale, and dissatisfying. To overcome this problem, one is driven to a frantic search for new experiences (408).

While the Aesthetic stage may seem enticing with its promise of pleasure and excitement, it is also characterized by a reluctance to confront the challenges of commitment and responsibility. Individuals in this stage often shy away from long-term commitments and obligations, preferring the freedom and spontaneity that come with avoiding such burdens. Rather than embracing the demands of relationships, careers, or societal expectations, they prioritize their own immediate desires and whims. This aversion to commitment stems from a fear of constraint and a desire to maintain autonomy and independence. By eschewing

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responsibilities, individuals in the Aesthetic stage preserve their freedom to pursue pleasure without the encumbrance of obligations that may limit their choices or impede their enjoyment. They prioritize the pursuit of personal fulfilment over the demands of social or moral obligations.

The Aesthetic stage of existence is characterized by a certain superficiality and transience in relationships and experiences. Individuals may flit from one fleeting pleasure to another, never fully immersing themselves in meaningful connections or long-lasting endeavours. This transient nature of their pursuits prevents them from experiencing deeper levels of satisfaction or fulfilment, as they remain fixated on the ephemeral allure of the next novel experience. Despite its allure, the aesthetic stage is not without its limitations and pitfalls. Individuals who become entrenched in this lifestyle may find themselves trapped in a cycle of fleeting pleasures and superficial pursuits, ultimately leading to a sense of emptiness or disillusionment. The pursuit of immediate gratification can result in a lack of fulfilment and a perpetual yearning for something more substantial and meaningful. Moreover, the relentless pursuit of pleasure and beauty can blind individuals to the deeper complexities and challenges of life. By prioritizing sensory experiences over intellectual or emotional growth, they may neglect opportunities for self-reflection, personal development, and genuine human connection.

The aesthetic stage represents a form of escapism, wherein individuals seek refuge from the complexities and uncertainties of life through the pursuit of pleasure and beauty. The aesthetic person does not have a self; his choices and decisions are influenced by the pleasure of the moment and the environment. However, there is a "natural, dialectical tendency to seek more, to seek some unified core of values, to seek one's life, a restless urge to find something stable to be committed to. If a person answers this call, he or she will make the leap up to the ethical stage of existence" (Lawhead, 409).

### **(b) The Ethical Stage**

The Ethical stage represents a fundamental phase in human development characterized by a profound recognition of duty, morality, and responsibility. Within this stage, individuals transcend the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure inherent in the Aesthetic stage, in its place embracing ethical principles and societal norms as guiding forces in their lives. At the ethical stage of existence individual make choices and consider the morality of one's choice. "To exist at this stage does not mean the person suddenly makes all the right moral choices...In the ethical stage, the world is divided into the dichotomy of good-bad. Although the decision to live in the ethical sphere is not based on reason, once a person decides to be moral she can derive moral principles naturally, just as Kant claimed we could (Lawhead, 409).

The ethical stage revolves around the acknowledgement of moral imperatives and the obligations they entail. Individuals in this stage recognize the inherent value of ethical principles such as honesty, integrity, justice, and compassion, understanding that adherence to these principles is essential for leading a virtuous and meaningful life. Unlike those in the aesthetic stage who prioritize personal pleasure and gratification, individuals in the ethical stage prioritize the greater good and the welfare of others, placing a higher value on commitment and duty over immediate self-indulgence. At the ethical stage is the cultivation of a strong sense of duty and responsibility towards oneself and others. Individuals in this stage

understand that their actions have consequences not only for themselves but also for others. They strive to fulfil their obligations and commitments, whether in personal relationships, professional endeavours, or societal roles, recognizing that their conduct has ethical implications that extend beyond their own interests. Moreover, individuals in the ethical stage are guided by a moral compass that informs their decision-making and behaviour. They seek to live in accordance with ethical principles and societal norms, striving to uphold integrity and moral integrity in all aspects of their lives. This commitment to moral values serves as a guiding force, shaping their actions and choices as they navigate the complexities of human existence. According to Lawhead, "The ethical person is characterized by passion. However, this does not refer to the whimsical desires of the aesthetic person. To have passion is to care about something with all one's being, to embrace the motivating values that one uses consciously to guide one's life. The qualities of caring deeply about something, self-reflection, and principled choice are not possible for the aesthetic person" (410). Unlike the transient pleasures pursued in the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage offers a deeper sense of fulfilment and purpose derived from living a life grounded in moral principles. Individuals find meaning and satisfaction in fulfilling their duties and obligations, experiencing a sense of fulfilment that transcends mere hedonistic pleasures. The pursuit of ethical excellence becomes a source of personal fulfilment and self-realization, fostering a sense of integrity and moral integrity that enriches their lives. Though the ethical person is far ahead of the aesthetic person, the former has not become a self. The ethical person is serving a universal moral principle but not a self-aware individual. For an individual on the ethical stage, Kierkegaard describes: "Outwardly he is completely a real man.' He is a university man, husband and father, an uncommonly competent civil functionary even, a respectable father, very gentle to his wife and carefulness itself with respect to his children. And, is he a Christian? Well, yes, he is that too after a sort" (*The Sickness unto Death*, 197).

Unlike the person of the aesthetic stage, the individual of the ethical stage has gone far enough that he thinks of choice and responsibility. However, the person has social cloth over him, which has made him not to achieve self-fulfilment. The ethical person in this existential-sphere does not have any connection with God, but rather good moral conduct, of which moral failure or sin is seen as a result of human weakness that can be overcome with proper understanding of moral laws and strength. Since at the ethical stage one is inadequate, does not have that fulfilment and there is no authentic self, it implies that there is need to leap to another existential sphere.

### **(c) The Religious Stage**

The Religious stage represents the pinnacle of human existence, wherein individuals transcend the mundane and embrace the transcendent realm of faith and spirituality. In this stage, individuals seek meaning and purpose beyond the material world, finding solace and fulfilment in their relationship with the divine. This commitment to religious beliefs and the cultivation of a deep understanding of one's relationship with the divine shape the essence of the religious stage. The religious stage embodies a sense of faith and spirituality, wherein individuals seek to establish a meaningful connection with the divine. In *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard noted: "But the self acquires a new quality or qualification in the fact that it is self

directly in the sight of God...And what an infinite reality this self acquires by being before God" (210). This connection serves as a source of guidance, inspiration, and solace, offering individuals a sense of purpose and direction in the midst of life's uncertainties and challenges. Unlike the aesthetic and ethical stages which prioritize pleasure or moral duty, the religious stage transcends these earthly concerns by directing individuals towards a higher plane of existence governed by spiritual truths and divine principles. According to Ogbonna, "while the other two stages, aesthetic and ethical, express only the immanent and indwelling of components of man, the religious stage explores the relationship between these immanent factors and those which are independent of and transcendent to man. It is in this stage that man becomes spirit" (98).

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard highlights the sharp dissimilarity between the ethical stage and the religious stage using the Old Testament story of Abraham. In this story, Abraham is instructed by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. In making decision on what to do, Abraham cannot fall back on ethical or universal norms because normally he is supposed to love his son. In this case he is caught between falling back to ethical demands or to the order of God. It is within this circumstance that we will realize what Kierkegaard calls a "teleological suspension of the ethical" (*Fear and Trembling*, 77). "That is, his relationship to what is universal must be suspended for the sake of a higher goal, namely his individual relationship to God" (Lawhead, 411). For this, Kierkegaard noted that "the more conception of God, the more self; the more self, the more the conception of God" (*The Sickness unto Death*, 211).

The religious stage entails commitment to living a life guided by spiritual principles and moral values. Individuals within this stage understand that their faith necessitates a transformative journey towards moral integrity, compassion, and selflessness. They strive to embody the virtues espoused by their religious traditions, such as love, forgiveness, humility, and service to others, in all aspects of their lives. By aligning their actions with spiritual ideals, they seek to cultivate a life of meaning and purpose that reflects their devotion to the divine. The Religious stage involves a deep sense of awe, wonder, and reverence towards the mysteries of existence and the divine presence in the world. Individuals within this stage experience a sense of transcendence and connection with the divine.

However, it should be noted that African tradition and culture do not experience the above stages as isolated existential phases but integrate aesthetic vitality, ethical responsibility, and religious consciousness into a unified mode of life. Accordingly, African traditional life exhibits clear aesthetic dimensions through its expressions of music, dance, festivals, art, and appreciation of beauty and nature; however, unlike Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage, which is marked by individualistic pleasure-seeking and avoidance of responsibility, African aesthetics are fundamentally communal and meaning-oriented. The ethical stage finds its strongest correspondence in African moral life, which is rooted in communal responsibility, social obligation, justice, respect for elders, and the prioritization of harmony over individual autonomy. In this sense, African culture embodies an ethical worldview in which the individual exists primarily as a moral agent within the community. Yet, as in Kierkegaard's ethical stage, there is the risk that communal norms may overshadow individual self-reflection and personal authenticity. The religious stage, however, aligns with the African spiritual worldview, which recognizes and holds to the primacy of the transcendent through belief in God, ancestors,

spiritual forces, and moral accountability beyond the visible world. African religion, like Kierkegaard's religious stage, affirms commitment, sacrifice, and reverence before the sacred, though it expresses this relationship predominantly in communal rather than strictly individual terms.

### **Kierkegaard on Authentic Existence**

When Søren Kierkegaard made the statement of finding: "a truth that is true for me...the idea for which I can live or die" (*Journals and Papers*, 44), he was laying the foundation of his idea of authentic existence. Søren Kierkegaard delved deeply into the concept of authentic existence, which he saw as fundamental for individuals to find true fulfilment and meaning in life. His idea of authenticity revolves around living in accordance with one's true self, embracing personal responsibility, and confronting the existential challenges of freedom, choice, and anxiety. At the centre of Kierkegaard's philosophy is the recognition of the inherent tension between the individual and society, freedom and responsibility, and the temporal and the eternal.

Kierkegaard saw the modern individual as existing in a state of existential despair, torn between the demands of the external world and the longing for authenticity and self-fulfilment. For Kierkegaard, authentic existence entails breaking free from the conformity and alienation of *collective* modern life and embracing the existential challenges of personal choice, commitment, and self-discovery. A means to understand authentic existence in Kierkegaard's philosophy is the concept of subjective truth. Unlike objective truth, which is universal and absolute, subjective truth is deeply personal and contingent upon individual experience and interpretation. As Oguji noted, "Kierkegaard employs the concept of subjectivity to invoke a <sup>1</sup>rst-personal point of view especially with regard to ethical matters bearing singularly on the individual. The contrast (objectivity) is third personal points of view that bear on everyone and no one in particular. Subjectivity refers to an actor's (or su<sup>2</sup>erer's) standpoint rather than a detached observer's perspective" (95). Thus, Kierkegaard's idea of "Subjectivity is Truth" implies that truth is connected to the individual subject rather than an external object; this should not be misinterpreted as individualism. Subjectivity involves active engagement by the individual, even to the point of risking one's life. In contrast, subjectivism refers to a personal perspective that isn't validated publicly. Subjectivity is a key part of personhood, enabling individuals to act responsibly. According to Kierkegaard, 'Subjectivity is Truth' because it compels individuals to stand by their decisions and commitments to the truth, rather than passively accepting an abstract, value-neutral objectivity based solely on intellect.

For Kierkegaard, authentic existence involves a persistent pursuit of subjective truth, an ongoing process of self-discovery and self-actualization in which individuals attempt to bring into line their beliefs, values, and actions with their innermost desires and aspirations. The idea of subjective truth implies, in Kierkegaard, understanding that which relates to the subject. The subjective is that which relates to the individual's needs or values. It should be noted that Kierkegaard had no issue with objective truth when it has to do with logic and mathematics and moreover, subjectivity does not mean allowing oneself not to see things correctly. Subjectivity for Kierkegaard implies existing as an individual based on choice and responsibility. According to Kierkegaard, existence as a word was designed for the individual being. To exist, therefore,

would mean to be a kind of person who is active, chooses, decides and makes commitments. To exist is to be active, act and be involved in life and not being inactive. Authenticity is becoming what one chooses to be rather than being an object. As Kierkegaard proposes, "the self is a relation to itself." This relation is in a constant project of unfolding, of which we make use of what we see in the world to create meaning and chart our course. Authentic existence for Kierkegaard is characterized by freedom, choice and responsibility.

Against authenticity is inauthenticity. Inauthenticity infers the repudiation of one's freedom, choice, responsibility and functioning as an ordinary being that is being controlled by daily happenings. It is being blind to one's subjectivity, freedom, choices and responsibility. Authenticity and inauthenticity are judged based on living out of choice and responsibility. A central basis to Kierkegaard's conception of authentic existence is the notion of choice and commitment. According to Evans:

Kierkegaard didn't merely define choice as any kind of decisive action, however. People make decisions all the time, yet most allow circumstances or impulses to make these decisions for them. Man must first become reflective, aware that true existence means authentic personal choice. Yet, the true self isn't merely reflective, for one can spend an eternity weighing the options of choice. The true self must have a passion and a care that pushes it to a choice beyond reflection, a leap of faith (21).

Authentic individuals are those who take responsibility for their choices and commitments, embrace the inherent uncertainty and anxiety that accompany genuine freedom. Rather than passively conforming to external expectations or societal norms, they actively engage with the world, making conscious decisions that reflect their deepest convictions and values. Moreover, authentic existence requires a willingness to confront the existential challenges of human existence, including the inevitability of suffering, the absurdity of existence, and the inevitability of death. As Strumpf states: "to exist implies being a certain kind of individual, an individual who strives, who considers alternatives, who chooses, who decides, and who, above all, commits himself" (455). Rather than succumbing to despair or nihilism, authentic individuals embrace the inherent ambiguity and uncertainty of life, finding meaning and purpose amidst the existential void.

In his discussion of the nature of man, Kierkegaard places much of his emphasis not on what man *is*, as much as what it means to *become* a true self. In other words, being is becoming. Self is something one is by nature, but also something one becomes by choice (Bartholomew & Goheen, 159). As Kierkegaard states in *Postscript*, "Every human being must be assumed in essential possession of what essentially belongs to being a man [...] the case of the subjective thinker is to transform himself into an instrument that clearly and definitely expresses in existence whatever is essentially human" (Kierkegaard in Stumpf, 461). Thus, as one comes into being, one does not exist fully because existence requires individual participation to shape one's life. To this Evans noted that "human beings exist (*existere*) in the sense that they form themselves through a process in which their own choices play an important role" (Evans, 32). As Kierkegaard pointed out in *Philosophical Fragments*, human existence is a "coming into

existence within its own coming into existence" (Evans, 32). Kierkegaard recognizes that the pursuit of authenticity entails confronting the existential anxieties and uncertainties that accompany genuine freedom. Authentic individuals must grapple with the paradox of choice, the fear of rejection, and the existential dread of facing the unknown. Yet, it is precisely through this confrontation with existential angst that individuals can transcend the limitations of the self and embrace the fullness of their existence.

### **The African Identity Crisis**

The concept of identity is a central question in philosophical discourse, which touches on various aspects of existence, selfhood, and personal continuity. Different philosophers have discussed identity from multiple perspectives, ranging from metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical dimensions. The metaphysical concept of identity concerns the nature of objects and entities, what it means for something to be the same thing over time. One of the foundational principles in metaphysics is the principle of identity, often expressed as "A is A," meaning an entity is identical to itself. In other words, "anything is that which it is and as such is different from another" (Nwadinihu, 2021, 12). However, the more challenging aspect of identity concerns how entities maintain their identity over time, particularly when they undergo change.

The philosophical discussion of identity is particularly complex when it concerns personal identity, the question of what makes a person the same individual over time. In the course of discussing identity, theories and perspectives have emerged, of which one of them is psychological continuity theory, which is one of the most influential theories of personal identity and is associated with John Locke. Locke argued that personal identity is based on psychological continuity, specifically the continuity of consciousness. According to this view, a person at one time is the same person as someone at a later time if they are psychologically connected through memories and consciousness. Outside the psychological continuity theory is the bundle theory of the self, which is in contrast to Locke's. David Hume argues that the self is not a single continuous entity but rather a bundle of experiences and psychological states. This view suggests that the self is constituted by its experiences rather than being an enduring, unified entity. Another perspective of identity is the Biological theory, which identifies personal identity with the continuity of the biological organism. From this viewpoint, a person is the same individual as long as the same biological organism persists, regardless of changes in psychological states or memories. On the other hand, the narrative identity theory suggests that personal identity is constructed through the narratives we create about our lives. Individuals form their identity by weaving their experiences into a coherent story, and continuity is achieved through this narrative construction.

To talk of African identity is to raise the question if Africa has a unified single identity. As Onyeocha opines, "it is not easy to talk of African identity without raising eyebrows about meaning and context" (*Africa: the country*, 88). The concept of African identity is not confined in the metaphysical debate of what makes a person a being that is different from the other. The idea of African identity is not confined to the debate of René Descartes's argument of the self as a thinking thing, the *ego – I* or John Locke's continuity of consciousness or David Hume's bundle theory of the self. The idea of African identity in its usage is subjectively contextual. The

question of African identity is normative, which is concerned with the question if the African is what it should be or a being that is living the identity of another. African identity rests on the question of self-definition, what is African, personal definition as against collective narratives of the West, colour reductionism and totalization of the human person. African identity has to do with self-definition, social-cultural life, appearance, experience, goals and genetic make-up of the African. The African identity encompasses the struggle of African to reclaim and redefine their sense of identity and cultural heritage in the face of historical trauma and ongoing socio-economic challenges. It is a "critical investigation into the ontological standing of the human person in the continent" (Amaku, 2) as it regards her identity/personality, especially in the world of today that is fast caught in the circumference of continuous change.

The question of the African identity crisis holds that Africans are the ones "to say the name with which they are to be known and identified. They are to say what is, and what is not African. They are to establish or recognize what are the pointers, redefine the frames of reference, re-examine the different interpretations, to reflect on them with a view of correcting what notions of the African are false" (Onyeocha, *Africa: the country*, 97). African self-identity crisis, as a complex phenomenon, manifests in the form of cultural disintegration and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Historically, Africa has been a subject of exploitation, domination, and cultural subjugation by colonial powers and internal forces. The experience of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism has deeply damaged the collective psyche of African peoples, which has eroded the sense of self-worth, dignity, worldview and cultural pride. The imposition of Western values, systems, languages, and institutions without contextual adaptation has contributed to a sense of cultural dislocation and alienation among many Africans. The transatlantic slave trade and the colonization of Africa, which resulted in the forced displacement and dislocation of millions of Africans from their roots, affect the psyche of a typical African on the street. This traumatic experience disconnected individuals from their cultural roots, familial ties, and traditions, thereby contributing to a profound sense of identity loss and alienation.

As a result of the experience of slavery, colonialism, colour reductionism, education of dominance and negative stereotypes, the African person is more of a divided entity. He is neither fully here nor there. His mode of existence is divided and as a result "is insecure in all of the aspects of his or her life, and often has to look for external endorsement about how he or she looks, what he or she does and how he or she thinks. In other words, he or she still remains a kind of slave even in his or her own home" (Onyeocha, *Africa: The Question of Identity*, 94-95). Hence, the African person "is caught between belonging to the West or being an African, copying the white or developing his own model, being globalized or stock to his culture, speaking his language or learning the white man's language" (Nwadinihu, 2024, 81). William Abraham expresses the dividedness of the self when he noted that that the African is a "truly displaced man. His mastery of the new culture is never complete, but is rather self-conscious, and is generally in conflict with the mores into which he was born, and which he has never truly expunged from his system no matter how much he had tried" (89). For the African, as Onyeocha noted:

This crisis haunts him or her on the associations he or she keeps, the political framework in which he or she operates, the ideological position he or she is to espouse, the psychological element in his or her disposition and operations. It haunts him or her in the beliefs he or she eats, the language he or she speaks, the way he or she worships, and the way he or she rules or is ruled. It haunts him or her even in his or her judgements and preferences" (Onyeocha, *Africa: The Question of Identity*, 94-95).

Obviously, contemporary manifestations of the African self-identity crisis are evident in various aspects of African society, including conflict of culture, preference, political model, linguistic disintegration, the erosion of values and negative stereotypes. Thus, "the African of today is faced with the burden to prove his identity" (Nwadinihu, 2024, 80).

### **Kierkegaard's Authentic Existence and the African Identity Crisis**

Africa's persistent reliance on Western validation and models reflects a deeper existential failure to assume responsibility for its own historical situation and choices. A look into the African system of living and operation reveals an apparent division inherent in almost everything an African does. The way he runs his affairs politically, religiously and economically. At most, the West must validate or be copied. It is worrisome that "the antithesis still remains in the fact that in spite of the end of colonial domination and the attainment of political independence, Africa remains culturally, economically, and ideologically bonded to Europe and the industrialized nations" (Onyeocha, *Africa: the country*, 53), with almost no model of its own. This shows that Africa has not made any meaningful and notable move to free itself, nor has it developed any alternative model for its liberation. This seems only to leave Africa at the foundation of development. While the newly introduced mode of living lacks contextualization, the African man neither fits into his own mode nor into the mode of the white man. Hence, he is neither fully there nor fully here. It is this contradiction that necessitated recourse to Kierkegaard. Hence, there is need to examine Africa's post-colonial identity crisis through Kierkegaard's existential emphasis on subjectivity, choice, responsibility, and commitment, in order to demonstrate that Africa's divided condition, being *neither fully here nor fully there*, is a form of inauthentic existence analogous to Kierkegaard's notion of losing the self to *the crowd*. Though Kierkegaard's ideas were formulated within the context of 19th-century Europe, their application to the African context suggests potential pathways to address this identity crisis and adopt an irrepressible sense of self among Africans.

At the heart of Kierkegaard's philosophy of authentic existence is the notion of subjective truth, which emphasizes the importance of individual self-discovery, personal responsibility, and existential courage. In the context of the African identity crisis, the notion of subjective truth offers a framework for Africans to repossess authority over their own narratives and to resist external forms of cultural, political, economic, and religious impositions and oppressions. This implies that Africans must discover their distinct reality and take responsibility for the choices they make. The choice must not be based on the perimeter of the West in order to please them, but one made out of contextualized needs, and not just to follow the crowd. As is evident, many African states today face a situation in which they look

externally for models, imitate others, and discuss global policies that often have little relevance to their own contexts. This reliance on outside influences stifles their ability to make independent choices, fostering a culture of dependency. By constantly seeking approval and acting based on what others do, rather than their own decisions, people lose their sense of individuality within the community. This mindset renders political, economic, and social systems inauthentic, as decisions are driven more by what is seen as acceptable than by thoughtful personal reflection. Consequently, individuals tend to avoid making responsible choices of their own. Kierkegaard's philosophy of subjectivity offers a solution; by pursuing personal subjectivity, Africans can accept responsibility for their life choices. This path allows personhood to develop, as it enables individuals to respond to life's challenges authentically. As Kierkegaard contends, the greatest danger to subjectivity and individuation arises from what he calls the *crowd*. The crowd represents not just a group of people, but a mentality, an attitude of thinking and living, that contradicts the truth of individual existence and true selfhood. Embracing the crowd results in losing the self, since the fear of standing apart from others is so intense that many would prefer death over meaningful differentiation. As Kierkegaard explains, this intense fear makes true individuality difficult to attain. The crowd always craves ease, as Kierkegaard holds.

In the context of Africa, there is a prevalent culture of dependency and paternalism that underpins corruption, dictatorship, and abuses of political and economic power. As Kierkegaard notes, it is easier to be part of the crowd, but choosing this path comes with a cost. Whether driven by fear or a desire for ease, individuals often relinquish responsibility for their choices, yielding to the crowd's influence. However, it is precisely this act of taking responsibility that defines and creates the self. It isolates us and enables genuine relationships with others. For Kierkegaard, embracing responsibility is what characterizes the unique human condition. Thus, Africa must be distinct in its choices and bear the responsibility. This does not mean being different or isolated, but making contextualized, reasoned choices for its identity.

Furthermore, Africans must assert themselves and appreciate their uniqueness. The idea of colour or racial identity, which is derogatory and a means of identity, should serve as a force to boldly face existential issues. Though the African self is divided between being oneself and fitting into the Western picture, it must be noted that each person is unique and there is no absolute universal culture or system that could be used to determine for the whole of humanity what the ideal identity should be. The African should therefore make the choice of being who he/she is and not force oneself to fit into another's circle, which Frantz Fanon terms black skin, white mask. It is a challenge for Africans to discover that truth which is true to them, live by it and die for it. The constant search for approval from the West is a form of constant dependency and expression of erasure of self-opinion. It is true that the realities of slavery, colonialism, imperialism and negative stereotypes have resulted in the erasure, distortion, and marginalization of African cultures, languages, and histories. However, a leap from Kierkegaard's authentic existence offers the basis to assert the right to self-definition, to reclaim and revitalize ideals, models and practices as sources of strength and identity. No language captures reality in its absoluteness, no culture is supreme and no nation has the moral absolute right to determine for others what is best for them, hence, there is need for African revitalization

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through the kind of choice and commitment it makes. Hence, Kierkegaard's emphasis on choice and commitment provides a basis to confront the existential challenges of freedom and responsibility in the context of post-colonial Africa. By assuming responsibility for its choices and commitments, Africans need to confront the systems that sustain identity crises while also advocating for social justice, economic empowerment, and political self-determination.

Similarly, one reality that is prevalent is the high level of hatred, division and ethnic consciousness among African states. As a continent with shared experience of economic and political harassment and intimidation, Africa must enshrine justice, love and build relationships among themselves as to develop and challenge the structures of oppressions and chart a new course for self-assertion and development. However, it is a fact that achieving authentic existence in the African context cannot work without challenges because of structural barriers like ethnic consciousness, poverty, inequality, political instability, injustice, and conflicts caused by both external and internal factors. Moreover, the pervasive influence of the West, which is also flaunting what they hold to be the ideal and always wanting to dictate to others what should be done, can undermine efforts to reclaim African identity. However, Africa must engage in critical self-reflection and collective action. It must interrogate antithetical structures that are at the root cause of the African identity crisis and identify strategies for decolonizing the African minds, institutions, and societies.

## **Conclusion**

At the heart of Kierkegaard's philosophy is the notion of subjective truth, choice and responsibility, which emphasizes the importance of individual self-discovery and personal responsibility in the quest for authenticity. However, when situated within the African context, where personhood is fundamentally relational and community-oriented, subjective truth does not imply radical individualism or isolation from the community. Rather, it underscores the responsibility of the individual to become a morally conscious and self-aware participant within the communal whole. In African thought, the self is realized through relationships, obligations, and shared values; authentic existence entails making responsible choices that sustain communal harmony while preserving personal integrity. Consequently, Kierkegaard's philosophical insights on authentic existence provide a structure to address the issue of the African identity crisis. In the context of the African identity crisis, subjective truth encourages Africans to reclaim their own narratives, resist external forms of imposition and oppression, and embrace the diversity and richness of their being. Africans are to engage in critical self-reflection and revitalization. They can challenge the dominant narratives of Eurocentrism and internal forces, thereby asserting their right to self-definition. Hence, it should be noted that Africa does not belong to the primitive, to the world of jungles, to no man's land, nor an observer in the world field, but a rightful participant. So, Africa, with the philosophy of authentic existence embedded with choice, can overcome and cross the ocean of underdevelopment in which it is caught. However, Africa must not continue to cry over spilt milk that cannot be gathered. The era of slavery and colonialism is over. Africa should face the challenge of choice and responsibility that authenticity implies to escape the shackles of identity crisis. However, Africa must not look different in all things to be authentic or to be truly African. The African should not be locked up as a prisoner of the particularity of his culture

without global identification. Hence, while the African defines what he is, he must be in communion with the universal Other without losing his identity.

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