

The Notion of Subjectivity: A Comparative study between Søren Kierkegaard and K.C. Bhattacharya

Papori Boruah

Guest Faculty Department of Philosophy Kumar Bhaskar Varma Sanskrit & Ancient Studies University, Nalbari, India

Abstract

Subjectivity is a philosophical concept related to individual being who possesses conscious experiences, such as feeling, beliefs, desires etc. The concept of subjectivity is contrasted to the concept of objectivity. It can be regarded as the true nature of human being. Different philosophers have described the notion of subjectivity and agreed with the point that subjectivity is opposed to objectivity. Philosophers like, Søren Kierkegaard, K.C. Bhattacharya have given details explanation regarding the concept of subjectivity which is the central point of these two thinkers' philosophy. According to Kierkegaard, subjectivity means inwardness. It is the essence of spiritual life. By subjectivity, he is referring to active involvement that is manifested by passionate self-commitment to one's innermost moral or spiritual commitments. On the other hand, K.C. Bhattacharya makes a distinction between subject and object for clarifying the concept of subjectivity. The realization of subjectivity involves a negative realization with the objective. It is only when the subject realizes its distinction from the objective that it is on its way to the realization of complete subjectivity.

KEYWORDS: Subjectivity, Objectivity, passionate, spiritual commitment.

Introduction:

Generally, the word 'subjectivity' means the cult of the subject. It means the opposite of what we call objective. Conceptually, subjectivity is a mode where an individual makes free himself from the mode of objectivity. From the very beginning, in philosophy (Indian or Western) there is a controversy regarding the description as well as understanding of the notion of subjectivity. Philosophers, theologians have been trying to describe the concept of subjectivity from different point of view. Though their views are different, but they all have stated that the concept of subjectivity can be understood only by knowing what objectivity is. Søren Kierkegaard is an existentialist (Western) philosopher who describes the notion of subjectivity as the essence of human being. On the other hand, K.C. Bhattacharya is a Contemporary Indian Philosopher according to whom subjectivity is an awareness of the distinction between subject and object. He said, "Subjectivity is cult of the subject, as it might be called, takes various forms, but they all involve a feeling of disassociation of the subject from the object, an awareness of the subject as what the object is not"¹.

Objectives and Methodology:

The main objective of this paper is to discuss the notion of subjectivity as well as make a comparative study of the views of Søren Kierkegaard and K. C. Bhattacharya on nature of subjectivity. Here, I have followed descriptive method.

Kierkegaard on Subjectivity:

Kierkegaard investigated the term subjectivity with a new meaning which is different from the classical or Aristotelian tradition. It is basically an idealistic or noetic subjectivism. For him, subjectivity is the essence of the spiritual life. It is a state of freedom and moral responsibility. Subjectivity refers to the process by which the individual approaches what she/he thinks and so brings the truth into existence. The true nature of human being is subjectivity. The subject is an existent being as interacting with other persons and things.

According to Kierkegaard, man is free to choose. Her/his choice is not suppressed. Thus, freedom of choice makes man responsible for her/his decisions. When she/he chooses, she/he knows the risks and feels the dread of responsibility. The essential characteristic of subjectivity is unfettered freedom of making decisions and choosing the good against the evil. If this unfettered freedom is once denied the spirit of man then man becomes completely objective, which is conditional and governed by the Laws that are not of her/his own chosen. The point is that if the self is governed by its own nature and by its own laws it cannot live genuine moral life which is the authentic life. Here, the phrase, 'its own nature' does not mean anything objective, external or universal since each person is unique in one's own self and this uniqueness of a person is her/his subjectivity. Kierkegaard regards subjective truth as the highest subjective truth available to mankind. He is referring to the subjective experience of being, or living within the truth which is an inward activity of experientially exploring and discovering truth of one's own self in the process of existing. It is a process of becoming, a direct personal involvement in the living moment- by- moment process of unfolding reality. This is why subjective truth is sometimes called existential truth because it is essentially related to one's actual existence. Existential truth cannot be grasped thematically. It is the disclosure of the very being of the individual. Truth lies not in 'what' but in 'how'. The 'what' implies theoretical enquiry and a conceptualization and 'how' implies infinite striving by the individual. As Kierkegaard puts it, "The objective accent falls on WHAT is said, the subjective accent on HOW it is said....At its maximum this inward 'how' is the passion of the infinite, and the passion of the infinite, is the truth. But the passion of the infinite is precisely subjectivity, and thus subjectivity becomes the truth"².

Objective truth is concerned with the facts of our being, whereas subjective truth is about our way of being. For whom we are, our way of being and the significance our existence has for us can only be understood within the context of the unfolding process of our life in terms of our values that determine the choices and decisions we make. And it is impossible to experience this objectivity for the reason that the 'existing individual', who is the basis of the subjective truth, cannot be separate from herself/himself and observe her/his existence from an outside vantage point. According to Kierkegaard, only God has access to objective truths about my existence.

So, it is impossible for us to analyze our own existence in any deeply meaningful way. Unlike objective truths which are final or finished conclusions, truth of my existence is a living, subjective experience that is always in the process of becoming. So it defies all conceptual accounts. Any attempt to make one's own existence, the object of her/his thinking would result only in a conceptualization of her/his experience. Kierkegaard says, "the subjective thinker is continually in the process of becoming. The objective thinker has already arrived"³. The process of existence is a never ending process that cannot be

contained in a conceptual framework. But when it is eventually completed by 'death' then it is no longer existence. Therefore, from the viewpoint of the rational and the human process of existence is an elusive phenomenon, a complete paradox. Kierkegaard writes, "When subjectivity, inwardness, is truth, objectively defined, is a paradox, and that truth is objectively a paradox shows precisely that subjectivity is truth...The paradox is the objective uncertainty that is the expression for the passion of inwardness that is truth. The eternal, essential truth, that is, the truth that is related essentially to the existing person by pertaining essentially what it means to exist is a paradox"⁴.

By subjectivity or inwardness, Kierkegaard does not mean something introspective reflection on our own mental and emotional states which is merely the mode of detached contemplation. Instead, by subjectivity he is referring to active involvement that is manifested by passionate self- commitment to one's innermost moral or spiritual commitments. Passion is the utmost idiom of subjectivity. According to Kierkegaard, "the highest form of subjective knowing is passion. At this highest, inwardness in an existing subject is passion, the passion of the infinite is the highest truth"⁵.

Even though Kierkegaard gives absolute priority to subjective truth for dealing with matters of moral and spiritual or religious truth, but he is not denying the existence of 'objectively' true moral and spiritual truths. He points out that these truths can only be truly known and are only of use when they have once become inwardly appropriated through subjective experience. An objectively moral truth is merely an approximation and a possibility of a reality that has no concrete existence. Its 'being only comes into existence when it is expressed through the passionate commitment of inwardness. In other words, understanding only takes place during the actual process of experiencing, not through an intellectual knowing. This experience of inwardness arises out of the state of deep silence. Alexander Dru argues that "only someone who knows how to remain essentially silent can really talk- and truly act" Silence is the essence of inwardness, of the inner life"⁶.

As we have seen that truth and reality must be discovered in subjectivity. Here the question of how we can become subjective is raised. When we come to the point of becoming subjective, it raises another creative question for man's authentic existence. For Kierkegaard, any attempt to plunge oneself in collectivity is a flight into inauthentic existence which is a state of 'being outside oneself'. The collectivity represents crowd mentality and forces the individual to sink into general mediocrity. Kierkegaard holds that, "The submergence of the individual in the mass is by the 'leveling process'. The 'leveling- process' is done through the collective power which emphasizes the abstract over the concrete, the public over the individual. It is an abstract mathematical exercise in which a certain number of people are taken to equal one point"⁷.

Becoming subjective is to become authentic. The authentic combat is waged by the single individual. When we call someone authentic, it does not mean to play role that is expected from her/him in definite capacities to fulfill the demands made on her/him as a student or a teacher or whatever she/he may be. Actually by authenticity, we mean that the individual is ceaseless in rising above dogmatism or conformity to an abstract formulation of rules and obligations. It is characterized by 'my- ownness'. That means the individual seeks to become oneself and works out a life of her/his own. Acts demands of me by external norms are not mine. Hence they are inauthentic.

The term authenticity cannot be analyzed as an epistemological concept. It is striving to become oneself without categories which are often false. Therefore, it cannot be exemplified. Any attempt to know authenticity is to commit an 'ontological error'. The error lies in mixing up a descriptive quality with a mode of striving. Authenticity is not a descriptive notion. It is not an attribute or property of the individual. The notion of authenticity can be used in a non- ideological way. It is not a code of conduct, but a way of life.

The meaning of authenticity becomes more explicit if we analyze it with reference to Kierkegaard's three stages in the development of life, aesthetic, ethical and religious. These three stages are progressive steps from the aesthetic to ethical and through the ethical into religious. Actually when Kierkegaard talks about existence it could properly be only in these three spheres. For him, man does not exist 'metaphysically'. Kierkegaard put it as follows, "These three existence- spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical, the religious. The metaphysical is abstraction; there is no man who exists metaphysically. The metaphysical, ontology, is but does not exist, for whom it exist it is in the aesthetic, in the ethical, in the religious...."⁸.

K.C. Bhattacharya on Subjectivity:

K.C. Bhattacharya makes a distinction between subject and object for clarifying the concept of subjectivity. According to him, object is "what is meant". Whenever we know an object, we become aware of a meaning content. But, the awareness of the subjective does not involve such an awareness of a meaning. It does not mean that subject is a meaningless word, but it does not have a meaning content. Here, Bhattacharya claimed that actually subjective is not meanable, it may at best be a significant speakable. For explaining "what is object" and "what is subject", Bhattacharya uses the words like 'this' to mean the object and 'I' to mean the subject. For him, meaning is general in character. Whatever a speaker means by a word must be capable of being meant by every hearer if he uses that word. The object has a meaning content in this general sense. Here, he uses the word 'this' which denotes a particular object and everybody uses the word 'this' to mean the same. But the subject cannot be denoted by the meaning of the word. For example, when I use the word 'I' then I use it for myself and when the hearer uses it he uses it not for me but for himself. It is to be noteworthy here that the word 'I' has a uniqueness because it is neither singular nor general. In this sense, it is both singular and general. It is general because everybody can use it; it is singular because everybody uses it for himself only.

K.C. Bhattacharya admits that the subject can be objectified. For example 'I am a mother', 'I am a father'. Here, the subject is referred to 'this' or 'that', but the subject does not become the object. So objectification cannot be a determinant of the subject which signifies the distinction between subject and object. So, Bhattacharya says that the subject cannot be known except through the denial of the object. In this regard, he states "we know the self not as object but in knowing the distinction of the object from it, or in knowing the object as distinct from it"⁹.

According to Bhattacharya, the initial step towards the realization of subjectivity involves a negative realization with the objective. It is only when the subject realizes its distinction from the objective that it is on its way to the realization of complete subjectivity. He

describes the stages of subjectivity through which he tries to represent a proper understanding of the concept of subjectivity. The first stage is bodily subjectivity. According to it, the process of subjectivity starts in body-awareness. Things are considered as external and objective in relation to the body which shows that the awareness of the body is also a kind of subjectivity. But Bhattacharya argues that subjectivity involves an awareness of the distinction from the body. Body awareness is sensuous, but subjectivity cannot be apprehended through the senses. Because body cannot be identified with the 'I', because the 'I-consciousness' itself involves an awareness of the distinction between 'I' and the 'body'. The second stage is the psychic subjectivity. When an object is known, felt or perceived, there is an awareness of feltness or knownness which is named by K.C. Bhattacharya as Psychic Subjectivity. Psychic facts include images and thoughts and the awareness of these is Psychic Subjectivity. But this stage fails to give any proper description of subjectivity. The next stage is spiritual subjectivity which involves feeling and introspection. Feeling has an advantage over images or thoughts because feeling is completely free from the meaning content. But according to K.C. Bhattacharya, subjectivity must transcend feeling-awareness also; because although it is free from meaning-awareness or from the objective, it still has the awareness that it is unmeaning must be transcended¹⁰. This leads to Introspection which represents subjectivity in a pure form. Introspection is awareness of the subject through the spoken word 'I'. K.C. Bhattacharya says that the subject can be best expressed by the word 'I'. Although like 'I' word, the other words 'you' and 'he' also denote subjects, but they are not as unique as 'I'. For example, the word 'he' can be used for the same person by a number of speakers. Likewise, when I address somebody as 'you', I become aware of him through his body. If I am not aware of a body before me, I cannot address him as 'you'. But it is not same with the word 'I' because I become aware of 'I' not through my body. Therefore, K.C. Bhattacharya feels that the proper subjectivity is the awareness of the subject as 'I' is 'I-consciousnesses'. This I-consciousness is not understanding the meaning of the word 'I', it is the enjoying understanding of the subject as 'I'.

So for him, subjectivity is complete uniqueness. It is inwardness and any attempt to express it would disturb its uniqueness. Moreover, when the subject is expressed as 'I', even though symbolically, a relation with 'others' is established which cannot determine the uniqueness of subjectivity. Therefore K.C. Bhattacharya says that true subjectivity would consist in a going beyond the 'I' - in a denial of 'I'. In other words, we can say subjectivity proper is what even 'I' is not. That is the realm of the Indefinite- the Absolute according to K.C. Bhattacharya.

Overview:

We have seen that there are some points of distinction as well as similarity in the views of Kierkegaard and K. C. Bhattacharya regarding the notion of subjectivity. Both have agreed with the point that subjectivity is the uniqueness of human being through which he can realize his inner self. According to Kierkegaard, subjectivity is the actual existence of human being which can be named as 'living - process' within the being. He has described three levels of subjectivity- aesthetic, ethical and religious. Among them religious level or stage is the highest level where an individual becomes able to realize his inwardness or subjectivity. This stage is regarded as the highest level of subjectivity. On the other hand,

K. C. Bhattacharya has described the notion of subjectivity as an awareness of the subject from the object. Firstly, he describes this awareness as bodily awareness, but after that he realizes that bodily awareness cannot be alone regarded as a kind of subjectivity. He has introduced three stages of subjectivity- bodily, psychic and spiritual. Spiritual stage is regarded as the highest where the subject, that is (I), becomes aware of the subject as "I". It is a kind of awareness where this awareness itself proves the awareness of its own (subjectivity). According to Bhattacharya, it is the purest form of subjectivity which is not expressible and beyond introspection. So, where K. C. Bhattacharya describes subjectivity as 'I – consciousness', Søren Kierkegaard describes it as inwardness or self-realization.

Notes and References:

¹ K.C. Bhattacharya. *The Subject as Freedom*. Amalner: Indian Institute of Philosophy, 1930. 29.

² Indu Sarin. *Kierkegaard: A Turning Point*. New Delhi: Renaissance Publishing House, 1996. 38.

³ S. Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Trans. D. F. Swenson. United States of America: Princeton University Press, First Edition, 1944. 73.

⁴ Ibid. 171.

⁵ Ibid. 166-169

⁶ Alexander D. and Walter L. *The Present Age*. London: Oxford University Press, 1991. 49.

⁷ S. Kierkegaard. *The Present Age in Kierkegaard's Anthology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945. 260-261.

⁸ S. Kierkegaard. *Stages on Life's Way*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945. 430.

⁹ K.C. Bhattacharya. *Studies in Philosophy*. Vol. I. Edited by Gopinath Bhattacharya. Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1956. 151.

¹⁰ B. K. Lal. *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1973. 246-247.