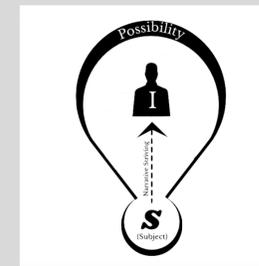


# They: Kierkegaard, the Crowd, and the Narrative Structure of Subjectivity

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## Background:

Søren Kierkegaard was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher whose work is best framed as a reactionary project against the moral philosophy of Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and Hegel. He is often deemed an “irrationalist” but this is to say the least a reduction.



Kierkegaard was both a radical Christian and radical defender of individual subjectivity who confronted head on the difficulty of finding absolute meaning and coherent identity in the modernizing world where value and social structure had gradually become independent of their historical institutions – in his case, the church. In particular, Kierkegaard foresaw the problem which postmodern philosophy would deal with a century later, namely whether or not truth can be an absolute value in and of itself or only a normative paradigm constrained by socio-historical circumstances.

Concerned by the first personal encounter with knowledge, Kierkegaard critiques claims of identity which become claims of objectivity and asserts that a concrete, reflective awareness of one’s own unique identity is essential for (1) interpreting truth and (2) involving oneself in ethical action within a social context. I turned to Kierkegaard’s theory of self, offering a narrative interpretation, in hopes of understanding how personal and intersubjective identity interplay to create the possibility for rich and/or hostile relationships between defined groups of people who are themselves responsible for these definitions.

## Methods:

My research utilized standard philosophical research methods including literary survey, critical analysis, textual exegesis, hermeneutics, and dialectical thought.

Additionally, I designed visual models of various concepts I dealt with in order to create a direct, concise, and appealing mode of communicating otherwise abstract philosophical ideas.

## Research Questions:

- (1) How does **Kierkegaard’s theory of subjectivity** inform an **ethical framework** with **normative criteria** for intersubjective action?
- (2) How does one’s self-understanding of **personal identity** contribute to or shape one’s sense of **group affiliation**?
- (3) How does the interplay between personal and group identity allow us to treat others as **objects of hostility**?

“Not one single soldier ... dared lay hands upon Caius Marius;” instead, it took the hands of “the crowd,” but this cannot be cries Kierkegaard, “For 'crowd' is an abstraction and has no hands ... they are the two hands of the individual”  
– Søren Kierkegaard

## Chapters:

- I. Subjective Realism
  - Situating Kierkegaard's thought within the Enlightenment project
  - Outlining Kierkegaard's ontology and epistemology
- II. Becoming Oneself
  - The "I" and existential choice as basis of Kierkegaard's ethics
  - Becoming oneself as his ethical telos
- III. Considering Narrativity
  - The merits and limits to reading the Kierkegaardian self through a Narrativist lens – contending with Alasdair MacIntyre
  - The Kierkegaardian "protagonist" in terms of *authenticity*, *volitional identification*, and coherence

## Chapters (Continued):

- IV. Intersubjectivity and "the Crowd"
  - Despair and inauthenticity
  - The *levelling* of "the crowd" though *object-ideals* – parallels to psychoanalytic theory
  - A Kierkegaardian theory of intersubjectivity

## Results:

Through the Narrativist approach I apply, Kierkegaard can be read to offer **two modes of intersubjectivity**. In each, one’s sense of group affiliation underlies and binds possible expressions of the self:

- (a) **authentic intersubjectivity** (*A-I*) demarks a radical individuality dictated by inwardly contrived subjectivity which treats others each as unique persons/subjects.
- (b) **inauthentic intersubjectivity** (*I-I*), which Kierkegaard sees as predominant, defines oneself and others on the basis of objectified criteria (titles, heritages, biological characteristics, “properties,” etc.), restricting subjective agency such that one is incapable of forming genuine personal identity and/or relationships

Those consumed by *I-I* are lacking a personal narrative framework necessary for genuine selfhood. *I-I* provides an account of selfhood resembling psychoanalytic thought. As such, enmity as well as hostility at large can be interpreted as a narcissistic reaction against a perceived threat to the narrativized, existential identity (in terms of “we” and “they” for instance) that grounds an individual’s interpretation of events and other persons.

**What one should take away from Kierkegaard** is that the simple yet demanding task of developing an integrated, narrative understanding of ourselves as unique individuals involved in our own particular circumstances may provide a meaningful identity which can authentically justify our ethical decisions and sustain our interpersonal relationships.

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