

Individuality of Man: Iqbal's "Mard-e-Momin" and Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith"

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Abstract

Muhammad Iqbal and Søren Kierkegaard, two existential philosophers and influential thinkers from the Islamic and Judeo-Christian traditions respectively, had challenged the dominant philosophical views of their times that emphasized the absolute authority of human reason. The article focuses on their perspectives on individuality, challenging the traditional reliance on "pure reason" in the exploration of the world, the Divine, and the interconnection between God, humanity, and the cosmos. Iqbal, a South Asian Muslim poet-philosopher, and Kierkegaard, the founder of existentialism, both emphasized the importance of subjective experiences and personal understanding in comprehending reality. They presented a similar three-stage model of existential development: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious stages for Kierkegaard and faith, thought, and discovery for Iqbal. They argued that reason alone is insufficient for understanding God or verifying religious truths and proposed a practical methodology for individuals to internalize truth, thereby enabling them to live in accordance with it. Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith" and Iqbal's "Mard-i-Momin" represent individuals on a spiritual journey. The Knight of Faith takes a leap beyond rational thought into absolute faith, while the Mard-i-Momin balances divine laws with free will. Both concepts highlight the transcendence of rational thought for a personal, subjective relationship with the divine. This paper aims to highlight the confluence in the thought of Muhammad Iqbal and Soren Kierkegaard, particularly in their concept of the individuality of man. An attempt has also been made to identify any areas where they might diverge in their philosophical framework.

Keywords: Iqbal, Kierkegaard, Existentialism, Individuality, Khudi

Until recent times, the prevailing direction within the Islamic speculative tradition, encompassing both philosophy and theology, had largely maintained an Aristotelian and Neoplatonic essence. This implies that they continued to embrace "pure reason" as the primary and dependable human faculty in their exploration of the world, the Divine, and the interconnection between God, humanity, and the cosmos (Fakhry, 2004). Within the realm of philosophy, during the last few centuries, especially following the Enlightenment and Kantian critique of reason, diverse perspectives have been introduced challenging the absolute authority of human reason while emphasizing the significance of human existence and other faculties beyond pure reason. These perspectives aimed to comprehend reality by beginning with and embracing human subjectivity (Critchley, 2009). Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) from the Islamic tradition

and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) from the Judeo-Christian tradition, are noteworthy in their existential approaches.

Several works have emerged with a specific focus on directly comparing the two influential thinkers. While some of them focused primarily on comparing the two (Sabir, 2003; Khan, 2011), others have employed a more sophisticated approach (Ozturk, 2018; Mirsadri & Nasiri, 2021). This paper aims to focus on the topic of individuality within the thoughts of two philosophers.

The Two Existential Philosophers

Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) was a South Asian Muslim poet-philosopher. His poetry in Persian and Urdu is considered to be one of the greatest in the 20th century. He completed his second bachelor's degree at Trinity College in England and his PhD at University of Munich in Germany. Growing up in a religious upbringing and having lived in the West, he was exposed to and was well-versed in both traditions.

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a Danish religious philosopher. He is considered the founder of existentialism. As a prolific writer, he focused on the consideration of the function of the individual human life, opposition of Hegelian philosophy, and delineation of Christianity in opposition to Danish secularism. Like other existentialists, Kierkegaard rejected objectivity, emphasizing human freedom in choice and action. Therefore, he focused on moving philosophy from rational process to one of passion, humanity, and faith (Haider, 2021).

The two thinkers attempted to cultivate an existential appropriation in human beings. Encouraging to foster or develop a deep and personal understanding, acceptance, and engagement with own existence, experiences, and choices and to embrace individuality, make authentic decisions, and take responsibility for their actions. According to Mirsadri & Nasiri (2021), both Iqbal and Kierkegaard's approaches can be summarized through the following:

- Giving prominence to the aspect of reality that surpasses the boundaries of reason.
- Arguing that reason alone is insufficient for comprehending God or verifying religious truths.
- Emphasizing the significance of a subjective approach to God and faith, rather than an objective one. This perspective views religion not as a collection of philosophical propositions, teachings, doctrines, or moral laws, but rather as a personal and existential connection with the Creator.
- Proposing a practical methodology to help individuals internalize the truth within themselves, thereby enabling them to live in accordance with that truth. This involves cultivating a subjective relationship with the Truth.

Despite belonging to different cultural and philosophical backgrounds, both Iqbal and Kierkegaard discuss the concept of individuality of a man and the development of one's self in their respective philosophies. Due to their theosophic approach, they share some common themes when it comes to the notion of individuality.

Both Iqbal and Kierkegaard have strongly criticized the modern reductionistic rationalism of Hegel where all aspects of reality are justified and rationalized. Kierkegaard distinguishes between three basic modes or "spheres" of existence: (1) the aesthetic, (2) the ethical, and (3) the religious. Iqbal describes these three stages of life as follows: (1) faith, (2) thought, and (3) discovery. In the framework proposed by Kierkegaard, the process involves transitioning from an aesthetic phase to an ethical phase, and ultimately taking a "leap of faith" into the highest religious stage. Contrarily, Iqbal suggests that by engaging in deep contemplation of nature and reality—deemed as an act of worship—an individual can attain the most advanced form of cognition, termed as "spiritual enlightenment." Therefore, for Iqbal, intuition is viewed as an elevated form of intellect (Iqbal, 2011).

According to both philosophers, through conscious navigation of these stages of existence, and by transcending objective reflection, an individual can practice embodying truth, living within it, thereby achieving a realization of self. As per Kierkegaard's terminology, it is when objective reflection is supplemented with subjective reflection that an individual truly evolves into a genuine self (Ozturk, 2018). In essence, both philosophers assert that the authentic pathway to understanding truth, God, or reality, is not through mere cognition, but through living it.

Methodology

In our exploration of the philosophical perspectives of Muhammad Iqbal and Søren Kierkegaard, we adopted a comparative analysis approach. Our primary objective was to discern the convergence and divergence in their thoughts, particularly concerning the concept of individuality and the journey towards connection with the Divine.

Primary texts from both philosophers were reviewed, focusing on their discussions about individuality, existential development, and their critiques of dominant philosophical views of their times. Key themes that emerged from their works were identified. For instance, both Iqbal and Kierkegaard presented a three-stage model of existential development: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious stages for Kierkegaard; and faith, thought, and discovery for Iqbal.

Using a comparative framework to juxtapose the philosophies of Iqbal and Kierkegaard, similarities and differences in their views on reason, intuition, and the role of faith in understanding the divine were identified. To further illustrate their philosophies, specific concepts such as Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith" and Iqbal's "Mard-i-Momin" were analyzed and discussed. Our analysis revealed that while there are points of convergence, there are also significant differences in their perspectives, particularly concerning the role of reason and intuition in the journey towards divine love and vicegerency.

Iqbal's *Khudī* and Mard-e-Momin

Although previous Muslims thinkers like Imam al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra have criticized reason and its place over religious experience, their criticism and approach did not initiate primarily from human existence (Mirsadri & Nasiri, 2021). Therefore, Muhammad Iqbal can arguably be considered as the first Muslim existentialist. Iqbal's Islamic existentialist approach

places human existence at the forefront. His philosophy and theology commence with the notion of ego/*Khudī*, which pertains to subjectivity, forming the central focus of his ideas. The ego/*khudī* embodies key attributes such as freedom, creativity, and self-determination, thereby emphasizing the significance of human subjectivity, autonomy, and free will. For this reason, Iqbal is rightly considered the first Muslim existentialist, as he developed his philosophy during the post-Kantian and Hegelian era. During this period, he recognized the limitations of human reason and understanding, thus refuting the absolutism of reason and embracing the impact of the subjective perspective (Azmi, 1992).

Iqbal has contributed to the modern world primarily as a philosopher and secondarily as a poet. His philosophical primary work is the *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Although he expresses many of his philosophical ideas through his poetry, it must be taken with the understanding that poetry is a form of expression and can yield many interpretations. Although there are many philosophical ideas present in his works, one that he is primarily known for is the concept of *Khudī*.

Khudī has been defined as “a life force, innate within the human existence, striving towards the achievement of its primordial goal of reuniting with its Ultimate Creator, cultivated through self-sufficiency, self-respect, self-confidence, self-preservation, even self-assertion in the cause of truth, justice, duty, and morality” (Khan & Malik, 2021, p. 3). It is important to recognize that *Khudī* is not just innate to human beings, rather all existence contains *Khudī* within itself.

For Iqbal, the individual is situated within a social context, with the ability to think rationally. However, rationality alone is not sufficient for a mystical inner experience. He says in his *Reconstruction*: “Truth, revealed through pure reason is incapable of bringing that fire of living conviction which personal revelation alone can bring” (Iqbal, 2011, p.142). Faith or *Imān*, per Iqbal, therefore has more to do with the relationship between man and God than rituals or rationality (Schimmel, 1989). Iqbal himself was deeply faithful to the obligatory acts within Islamic faith, however, he emphasized the emotional and spiritual roots of these acts. Thus, an individual who strives to connect with the divine through action, within their social context, and through the inner spiritual experiences (within or outside of the obligatory acts) is a true believer.

Iqbal proposed a dynamic concept of man, central to his thought is the *Mard-e-Momin*, an ideal figure who carries out Divine laws while not being confined to their destiny (like other creations of God). This being represents a balance between determinism and free will and was ever evolving. Iqbal’s figure is alive in the conflict of evil and virtue, embodying the Divine reality in thought and action. This tension between determinism and free will reflects the uniqueness of Iqbal's understanding of human nature (Azmi, 1992).

Iqbal's concepts about man diverged from the conventional Eastern and Western thought, offering a unique synthesis of values influenced by both. He championed the significance of intuition as an important mode of knowledge and perception alongside rationalization and analytical methods, which he criticized for often ignoring perception entirely. He also stressed the need for prophetic and mystic consciousness for the fulfillment of human destiny, proposing that

spirituality has to be rooted in human history and experience to be meaningful (Azmi, 1992). As such, he presented a revolutionary approach for the shaping of human destiny that went against the flow of the dominant religious metaphysics of his time.

Iqbal's concept of man also diverged from the common Western perception that regards man primarily as a subject or object of psycho-social studies. Instead, he perceived man as the life of the universe, a sentiment that carries on from the philosophical tradition of the likes of Plato and Aristotle. His unique perspective found a way to reconcile the views of different scholars, such as Julian Huxley who situated man in the context of evolution and scientific values (Huxley, 1943), Lamont who perceived man in terms of materialism (Sellars, 1965), and Kierkegaard and Sartre who placed man in the realm of existentialism (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.).

In sum, Iqbal's philosophy offered an innovative view of man's role in the universe, moving away from a materialistic perception to focus on the spiritual potential of man as a reflection of Divine reality. His conception of man as the Mard-i-Momin, the dynamic embodiment of the self, bridges the gap between human self and Absolute self. His views remain impactful today, emphasizing the importance of the individual's free will, intuition, spiritual connection, and position within the universe. His work provides an invaluable perspective in the ongoing philosophical discourse on human existence, adding depth to our understanding of the complex interplay between the individual, spirituality, and the world we inhabit.

In his *Reconstruction*, Iqbal proposes three broad phases or stages of religious life: faith, thought, and discovery (Iqbal, 2011). The faith period comprises following the obligatory commands without any rational understanding or purpose. The thought period consists of a logical understanding of the discipline and God as its ultimate source of authority. Finally, the discovery period consists of psychological experience of God instead of logical understanding of the Ultimate Reality where religious life develops the ambition to come into direct contact with the Ultimate Reality (Azmat, 2017).

According to Iqbal, in the third phase of discovery, science requires validation of human experience. Since religious experience, according to Iqbal, is beyond sensory experience, his question: "Is religion possible?" means whether experiencing God or the Ultimate Reality at some level is possible in this temporal and materialistic world and whether such experience can be validated. His answer to both questions is affirmative and it is this central question which his reconstruction of religion and religious thought deals with from an Islamic perspective (Azmat, 2017). Iqbal's three phases of faith, thought, and discovery from his *Reconstruction* are also analogous to the three stages of the development of Khudī he presents in his *Asrar-i-Khudi* where the individual moves through the three stages of development: Obedience (*Ita'at*), Self-Control (*Zabt-e-Nafs*), and Divine Vicegerency (*Niyabat-e-Ilahi*) (Khan & Malik, 2021).

Kierkegaard's Existentialist Philosophy

Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, theologian, and existentialist, presented a groundbreaking framework of human existence, often referred to as the "stages on life's way."

These stages, namely the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages, illustrate the evolving nature of individual consciousness and the journey towards self-realization.

The Aesthetic Stage

In the aesthetic stage, individuals prioritize the pursuit of pleasure, immediate gratification, and the avoidance of pain. This stage is marked by a hedonistic lifestyle, where individuals seek constant novelty and excitement in their experiences. Aesthetic individuals live in the realm of the senses, craving stimulation, and often succumbing to impulses without considering the consequences of their actions (Hannay, 2003).

This hedonistic approach to life can lead to a sense of emptiness and existential despair, as it lacks deeper meaning and purpose. Kierkegaard likens the aesthetic life to a life lived "in despair," as it avoids genuine commitment and engagement with life's responsibilities and challenges (Hong & Hong, 1983). It can be argued that the aesthetic stage marks the most primal or basal form of existence.

The Ethical Stage

The ethical stage represents a transition from the aesthetic, as individuals move towards a more responsible and principled mode of existence. In this stage, individuals recognize the importance of moral values, duty, and social norms. Ethical individuals strive to make ethical choices based on rational reflection and the universalization of moral principles (Westphal, 2010).

Kierkegaard emphasizes the significance of self-awareness and the willingness to embrace personal responsibility. The ethical stage involves a commitment to one's obligations and a willingness to sacrifice personal desires for the greater good. Through this, individuals can find a sense of purpose and fulfillment, transcending the existential despair prevalent in the aesthetic stage.

The ethical stage, from the lens of Iqbal's thought, would mark an adherence to the Divine Law. One could argue that this mode of being has existential similarities to the individual that is on their way to actualize their Khudi.

The Religious Stage

The religious stage, according to Kierkegaard, represents the highest form of existence. This stage involves an individual's deep engagement with faith and a personal relationship with the divine. For Kierkegaard, true religiosity requires a "leap of faith," a subjective and passionate commitment to the absolute (Ferreira, 2015).

In this stage, individuals confront the limits of reason and embrace the paradoxes of existence. They recognize the inherent uncertainty in life and surrender their will to the divine, finding solace in an absolute religious truth that transcends human understanding (McCombs, 2013).

Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith

The Knight of Faith is the archetypal hero in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. The Knight of Faith symbolizes the peak of human existence for Kierkegaard and is essentially the primary example of an individual that has traversed the stages of being - aesthetic, ethical and religious - and has reached the pinnacle of the religious stage.

The Knight of Faith, for Kierkegaard, is an individual that embraces the absurd. For Kierkegaard, the perfect example of a Knight of Faith was Prophet Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his own son as per God's commandment. His faith was of such magnitude, that he was willing to embrace a completely absurd proposition i.e. slaughtering his own son (Kierkegaard, 1843/1983).

Kierkegaard also highlights that this Knight of Faith must go through a stage of existential anxiety. That is, the predicament that he finds himself in, he must struggle through it, for only with struggling will he attain the heroism required to embrace the absurd (Marino, 2001). Then, once the Knight of Faith embraces the absurd, they temporarily suspend their notion of societal morality. That means that the Knight of Faith must perform actions that may be considered socially incorrect, such as the example of a father attempting to sacrifice his son (Perkins, 2018).

The Knight of Faith also relies on the bedrock of hope and love. It is the Knight's love for God that motivates him to attempt feats that defy empirical logic and it is his hope that enables him to push through trials and tribulation. (Westphal, 2010). Ultimately, it is the Knight of Faith's absolute trust in God and his unwavering belief that God will protect him, that enables him to completely embrace the absurd (Stewart, 2016).

Discussion

The comparative exploration of Muhammad Iqbal and Søren Kierkegaard, two seminal figures from the Islamic and Judeo-Christian existential traditions, offers profound insights into the spiritual and existential journey of the individual. Their philosophies, while rooted in distinct religious paradigms, converge on several key themes that have significant implications for believers and the broader understanding of individuality.

Having gone through a survey of their philosophical thought, a case can be built to isolate some convergence between the thoughts of Iqbal and Kierkegaard. Iqbal places emphasis on the process of actualizing the *Khudī*. As mentioned above, *Khudī* may refer to the individual ego that traverses the path of existentialism in three stages. These stages are hierarchical and they lead the human being to complete self-transformation, as per Iqbal. Parallels can be drawn between the stages of existence highlighted by the *Khudi* and the stages of existence that Kierkegaard charts out for the individual to follow. Just like the *Khudi*, the stages of existence presented by Kierkegaard are hierarchical and traversing them leads man from the aesthetic stage to the religious stage.

Another point of remarkable confluence between these two thinkers is the similarity between Iqbal's 'Mard-i-Momin' and Kierkegaard's 'Knight of Faith'. For Iqbal, the Mard-i-Momin is a prime example of an individual that has successfully traversed the many stages of *Khudī* and has fully actualized into a vicegerent of God. He also breaks the shackles of societal norms and transcends to a plane of higher moral existence. Similarly, the 'Knight of Faith' for Kierkegaard also goes through a teleological suspension of morals. That is, in its journey towards God and Self-actualization, the Knight of Faith transcends societal morals and norms and leaves the hedonistic mill of pain and pleasure behind him.

Escape from hedonism in an attempt to journey towards an ethical and eventually religious/spiritual existence, is a common theme between the works of Iqbal and Kierkegaard. Both the 'Mard-i-Momin' and the 'Knight of Faith' start off as normal individuals. It is important here to highlight the importance of individual choice in both of these models. Both the Knight of Faith and the Mard-e-Momin choose to struggle, in an attempt to actualize their potential and reach the pinnacle of human existence. In their initial stages, their ultimate struggle is with their hedonistic self.

While the points of convergence between Iqbal and Kierkegaard are many, there are also a few areas where their independent approaches may differ. One obvious area is the religious paradigm they were both operating from. Iqbal was a self-proclaimed traditionalist Muslim. He was adherent to the Islamic faith till the end of his life and his religious identity clearly played a major role in his philosophical thought. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, was a committed, trinitarian Christian. His philosophical works clearly highlight the importance he gives to Christian theology.

Another major point of divergence between Iqbal's Mard-e-Momin and Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith, is the varying importance of reason in both of these models. For Iqbal, the reason is a tool which the individual may utilize in an attempt to attain the heights of existential self-actualization. However, to Iqbal, reason is not the only metric of gauging the truth. In fact, Iqbal holds intuition on a higher epistemological level than reason.

For the Knight of Faith, however, reason must be entirely disregarded in an attempt to attain proximity with God. The Knight of Faith must totally and fully embrace the absurdity of life and disregard reason as a metric to attain self-actualization. One possible reason for this divergence could be that under Iqbal's Islamic model for Mard-i-Momin, reason does not have to entirely be disregarded to accept the doctrinal truths of the faith, namely the existence of a Singular Deity. Whereas, for Kierkegaard, the seemingly logically incoherent model of the trinity may never be logically comprehended, rather experientially tasted. However, this would be merely speculative.

Overall, an attempt has been made in this article to highlight the philosophical framework(s) that both Soren Kierkegaard and Muhammad Iqbal utilized, in their exposition of the individuality of man. The paper laid out certain general principles that define Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith and Iqbal's 'Mard-e-Momin'. In doing so, an effort was exerted to identify how these two models may converge in their understanding of man's individuality in his journey

towards Divinity. The points of divergence were also explicated in depth. The authors hope that this paper can be part of the diverse literature that makes up the comparative thought between these two giants of existentialism.

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