

# Is Kierkegaard a fundamentalist? :

## Can he become an advocate of terrorism? (Part I)

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### Abstract

This article aims at exploring – in a hypothetical manner- into the depth of Human existence, and to lay bare the conditions of the possibility of human existence that drive the individual – to the minimum extent - towards fancying or embracing a fundamentalist ideology or stance towards other beings. It is a common knowledge that most terrorists have the inclination to take the fundamentalist stance based upon faith-based religious moral high ground – that for the most parts seem to be in contradiction to our common senses. In doing so, Soren Kierkegaard’s approach to the problems of human existence might seem to work wonder in this kind of narrative; e.g., the existential analysis in to the fundamentalist existence. This kind of analysis needs some extensive space to put the comprehensive argument across. So I decided to split this article into two parts: the first part I would precede with the argument on the existential back ground of the emergence of the fundamen-

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talist, and I would end up unfinished with Kierkegaard's view on the existence.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Fundamentalism, Terrorism, Faith, Authenticity

## บทคัดย่อ

**คำสำคัญ:** อัตติภานิยม, ลักษณะเดิม, ลักษณะร้าย, ศรัทธา, ความเป็นของแท้

## 1. Hypothetical existential analysis of the background of the emergence of modern fundamentalism

At the very present, in the popular narrative, what we call “fundamentalism” is almost synonymous with “terrorism.” Undeniably, most terrorists who venture into the sea of conflict today are those who are inclined to have a fundamentalist attitude without compromising on the veracity of stiffed and (most often) religious worldview. Fundamentalism, by definition, and if [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) is to be regarded as providing the standard definition of the word, is “a religious movement characterized by a strict belief in the literal interpretation of religious texts, especially within American Protestantism and Islam” (Fundamentalism, n.d: online). According to this wildly-held definition, it is a religious movement or doctrine alone responsible for the emergence and existence of fundamentalism, and, *prima facie*, it is understandably so because – as prevalent on mainstream media-most of the inhumane terrorist acts and brutalities, be they suicide bombing, beheading of hostages, random mass stabbing, or anything most savagely violent human beings could have imagined<sup>2</sup>, are from terrorist organizations, groups , or

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<sup>2</sup>According to the report from the website: <http://www.independent.co.uk> dated January3, 2017: “The worst Isis (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, a terrorist organization) attack in 2016 occurred in July, when a massive suicide bombing in a bustling market area in central Baghdad killed almost 300 people. The incident was the single deadliest attack in the capital in the 13 years since US forces invaded the country to remove Saddam Hussein

individuals often described as religious extremists or fundamentalists. There are quite a few significant approaches to understanding “terrorism-also known as “the reign of terror,” for example, politically; it is a doctrine applied to the struggle for dominance – hegemony-between “the oppressor” and “the oppressed.” Socially, it could be perceived as the implicit idea behind the class struggle, in which, the dominant class employ “the tactics of fear” to suppress the dissent, and, conversely, the outcast apply the same to intimidate the establishment. Another important narrative to unearth the formation of the reign of terror is from the economic angle, according to which, terrorists are viewed as the poor and the uneducated being rejected by and excluded from a dominant economic system – in the present context it is the neoliberal economic system. Objectively speaking, when combining the above three narratives together, we can obtain a relatively comprehensive view on the objective or factual aspect of terrorism. However, perceiving terrorism merely from the objective point of view fails to address the issue adequately, it needs to be supplemented by the other side of perspective, namely, that of subjective. Seen in this light, this paper is an attempt to comprehend terrorism through the formation of terroristic subject basing his/her idea of self upon, political correctness aside, his/her religious faith. . Seen in this way, the individual is higher than the universal. If any individual embraces the full force of faith in the formation of his/her self, he or she is

all ready to violate any objective moral rules upon receiving the call from his/her religious faith. Seen in this way, superficially speaking, Kierkegaard could be perceived as a fundamentalist and a source of inspiration for terrorists. However, upon closer analysis, this might not be the case.

This essay is an attempt to hypothetically analyze the emergence of phenomenon of terrorism/fundamentalism through existential point of view. The analysis is hypothetical because it suspends most of the facts and external factors necessary to the factual and objective analysis of the true state of affairs concerning fundamentalism and terrorism. Instead, the existential analysis is an attempt to lay bare and build up the factors and narratives that are internal to human existence. In doing so, I employ Soren Kierkegaard's takes on faith to explore the nature of faith. For Kierkegaard, through the interpretation of the story of Abraham under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, faith is higher and stands outside the realm of ethics, which is universal. Seen in this way, the individual is higher than the universal. If any individual embraces the full force of faith in the formation of his/her self, he or she is all ready to violate any objective moral rules upon receiving the call from his/her religious faith.

Before I move forward with the proposed analysis mentioned in the last paragraph, to put the analysis in context, the (hypothetical) existential background shall be provided in order to make the analysis much more intelligible. Having conventionally been depicted as a religious fundamentalist, a terrorist views her or himself as

“the warrior of God” who performs “the sacred mission” designated on her or him by God by waging on his behalf war on “the infidel.” There is a sense of exception or extra-ordinariness on the individual who sincerely believes, is deluded or brainwashed into believing that s/he has a personal call to holy duty from God. Religious fundamentalism (RF) for many has long been associated with the feature of aggression (Williamson and Hood Jr., 2014, p. 520), which often leads to “acts of violence.” How does s/he gain this sense of exception? What is the source of her or his utmost confidence in the holiness or unquestionable authority – despite all rational or empirical refutations- of the Supreme Being – be it God, prophet, or scripture, etc.? It is not “reason” that the believer stubbornly and unquestionably clings onto in the presence of all the paradoxes and contraries - randomly massacring unarmed innocent people might not be reasonably sound for the rational agent and thinking animal like most of us. Wholeheartedly and firmly hold onto a belief or a set of beliefs unquestionably without appealing to reason is a matter of “faith,” and, philosophically, a person who is religiously faithful is called a “fideist.” A fideist rejects all modes of apologetic arguments, that is to say, all kinds of philosophical reasoning aimed at legitimizing one’s faith, and maintain, in contrast, that faith does not need the support of reason, and should not seek it (Penelhum, 1999, p. 376). Put it simply, for a fideist, the religious life cannot be rationally justified, therefore, it requires the individual to simply unquestionably have faith in what he or she believes to be the Supreme Being—or in the case of the scripture

,”the Supreme Instruction.” Reason has long been used, at least since the advent of the Age of Enlightenment in the 17th Century; the ultimate source of judgement in world affairs, and human’s rational faculty has been revered ever since as the liberating and redeeming factor endowed to all mankind. It is believed that all humans possess the faculty of reasoning – each one of us is a rational being, therefore, if we reason hard enough, it is possible that we be able to liberate and redeem ourselves. This sense of optimism is echoed in the essay titled “What is Enlightenment?” by Immanuel Kant as saying:

“Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! “Have courage to use your own reason!”- that is the motto of enlightenment” ( Kant, 1784: online)

Reasoning is human’s attempt to prove one’s truth(s) or belief(s) on an objective ground, that is to say, a person who claims that one’s belief is to must be able to provide the evidence that is objectively verified by all rational beings. Seen in this light, the objectivity of one’s belief is dependent on the universality of one’s evidence. Universal truth (s) must be universally accessible to all rational beings, and reasoning must be independent of all subjective elements – faith, personal prejudices, emotions, feelings, etc. In the spirit of the enlightenment, what is perceived as a hindrance to

freedom is the self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is said to take place when the reason bows down to the outside authority apart from itself.

The outside authority comes in many forms – pure forces, politics, traditions, societies, customs, or even religions. All the forms mentioned above are said to have something in common, “fear.” When Kant said that “Self-incurred is tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another,” (Kant, 1784: online) it can be interpreted that due to the fear of backlash from the outside authority, the rational being, despite possesses and never in a second lacks reason, allows the outside authority to dictate – to make it more dramatic, to terrorize – her or his use of reason. In this way, it could be perceived that the subjective order – which came in the form of religious order in the medieval age before the advent of the enlightenment age- terrorizes the rational agent to the extent that he or she is reluctant to use reason in a straightforward manner and the reason itself fails to be the guiding light for the mind enmeshed in the darkness inside.

As has been argued above, reason or the rational faculty is regarded highly as the liberating and redemptive element given to mankind, and each one of us is considered to have possessed this faculty. By appealing to one’s reason, one can the guiding light leading one out of the darkness of the soul and, what’s more important is that when one has the courage to use one’s reason, one could be redeemed and liberated from fear, which is the oppressor

of reason.

At the turn of the 17th Century, the subjective order – the religious order- had gradually been overthrown by the steady rise of the objective order with the aid of reason. Optimism prevailed as if human had taken power of judgement back from the author that had oppressed her or his freedom for half a millennium. Human being who prided themselves of the faculty of reason ventured into the unknown territory. Having reason in their repository, man had their destiny in their control. Having delivered from the oppression of the Supreme Being, man created their own order of things without fear. Along came liberal order based upon the idea of secularism, which upholds the supremacy of the separation between the church and the state. It is the ideology which holds that the church, which is the upholder of faith, should not make it way into the world affairs, and the state should rule on the principle of rationality – to put it more bluntly, humans should govern themselves by the use of reason without the intervention of faith perceived as a prejudice. Some people are of the belief that, ultimately, reason is the sole unifying force that cut across all the differences in the world: Since it is objective, it is opened for all to prove, and since it is universal, it is applicable and accessible to all. Objectivity and universality are the mantras for the success of reason. On the contrary, the rise of reason means the fall of faith, especially faith in God. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) captured the prevalent mood profoundly when he proclaimed “the death of God:” I will tell you, the madman says,

“We have killed him- you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who give us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (Kaufmann, trans., 1974, p.125).

Paradoxically, the rise of reason that brought about the death of God (faith) left humans with the big void. Reason might be able to empower humans to control the world of objects with its objective knowledge because objective reasons enable humans to gain access to the governing laws behind natural phenomena. When we possess the knowledge, aided by reason, of the necessity of the laws of nature, we can control our environments. When we are in control of the environments, we can control our destiny. *Prima facie*, there is nothing wrong with the death of God because at the end of the day, his demise means our fate is in our own hands. We all killed God with our own hand and the murder weapon is reason. However, the demise of God means the loss of the sense of purpose – telos. Reason traps us in the realm of necessity, it only tells us

what necessarily is, not what should be. The passing away of God left us without any directions. Two hundred years before Nietzsche's time, one French genius, Blaise Pascal (1623 - 1662), had expressed the same concern as follow:

“What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself” (Krailsheimer, trans., 1966, P.75)

Reason together with sciences have stripped us of the sense of purpose, humans are thrown into the infinite abyss without ever being able to find the way back to light, had it not been with the grace of God. The objectivity and universality of reason, together with the decline of faith due to the death of God come at a cost. The dominance of objectivity means the retreat of subjectivity, which, in turn, means the lack of the sense of self. The universality brings about the sense of impersonality, which, in turn, uproots man's sense of belonging and obliterates the significance of the individual. Without the sense of belonging and meaning, man is left in limbo. Angst or anxiety is the very mood that reflects this humans' state of being. From existential point of view, angst is the most fundamental state of being of human existence. Angst is the mood that reflects the indeterminate state of human being. According to

Jean-Paul Sartre, humans find themselves exist first before they come up finding themselves having to choose their essences- “existence precedes essence,” He said. He moves on to explain: “We means that man first of all exist , encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards (Macquarrie, 1973, p. 15). Without having any fixed nature in the first place, we always find ourselves thrown into existence without any definite directions. With the freedom in our own hand, if we are to live our life, we are obliged – Sartre would say condemned- take action and become something. Never in a second are we spared from having to choose one way or another- to exist is to become something. With the death of God, we are left without any definite telos – only sheer possibilities. With the departure of God, the ultimate goal and origin also disappear. In the end there is no ultimate reason why we should choose something over another. Universality of meaning means everything is equally true since ultimately there is no such a thing as real differences – anything goes! Seen in this light, life becomes absurd. If we consider that the modern in which we are dwelling now is shaped by the overpowering force of reason, it might be safe to say that what have become the plights of the modern man is not the result of the lack of knowledge, but “passion.” Soren Kierkegaard in his youth had his commentary on this situation as follows:

“What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know, except in so far as certain knowledge must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do: the thing is to find a truth

which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die. ... I certainly do not deny that I still recognize an imperative of knowledge and that through it one can work upon men, but it must be taken up into my life, and that is what I now recognize as the most important thing.”(Kierkegaard, n.d., online)

The plights of modern man do not come from the lack of objective knowledges; conversely, with the help of reason, in the 17th century, human beings witnessed the glory of industry revolution which, we have to admit, wealth in the scale, up until that point, that humans had never witnessed before. The profusion of wealth lifted up the standard of man’s material well-being. Outward looking always craves for the universality of order in the field of politics. However, what has become of modern man is the sense of rootlessness. Sense of belonging has been uprooted from the soul of human beings. Modern man has become No One; s/he is no longer someone in the indefinite space of universality. Devoid of the real sense of meaning, man has become empty. Emptiness, which is the locus of human being, fills existence with the mood “angst.” The absurdity of life leaves angst at the core of human existence. Without the real sense of telos, man becomes desperate. In the end, despair is the very fate of all mankind. The very sense of despair is captured graphically well by Kierkegaard in the book “Either/or” through the synonym “A”:

“Marry, and you will regret it; don’t marry, you will also regret it; marry or don’t marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the world’s foolishness, you will regret it; weep over it, you will

regret that too; laugh at the world's foolishness or weep over it, you will regret both. Believe a woman, you will regret it; believe her not, you will also regret it... Hang yourself, you will regret it; do not hang yourself, and you will regret that too; hang yourself or don't hang yourself, you'll regret it either way; whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret both. This, gentlemen, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life." (Howard and Edna Hong, trans., 1987, pp. 38-39)

There are three modes of attitudes that modern men have adopted to tackle this type of ordeal, namely; apathy, antipathy, and sympathy. My hypothesis is that most people, with their conformist nature, adopt the apathetic attitude toward life, in so doing, they just conform to the universal and objective order to live a comfortable life, and for fear of losing the sense of security. However, living such a kind of life, people just live life as a matter of course – without passion. Nietzsche branded this type of attitude toward life "herd mentality." Herd mentality is the development of the original slave morality which inherits most of its content, including a reinterpretation of various traits: impotence becomes goodness of heart, craven for becomes humility, submission becomes obedience, cowardice and being forced to wait becomes patience, the inability to take revenge becomes forgiveness, a hatred of enemy becomes a hatred of injustice." (Nietzsche, n.d., online)

Average modern men lose themselves in the business of everyday world shaped by rational and universal orders. Conformism is their zeitgeist, modern men build up their relations toward

others in an impersonal manners- the individuals themselves treat others and themselves formally as one object among others. Sense of personal worth has been burned to ashes. Thrown into the meaningless and absurd universe, individuals adopt the apathetic attitude towards life and their surroundings. The diminished individuals – with the sense of self-deprecatory- are cynical and indifferent to what occurs to their lives, to others, and to the world around them – the individuals totally lack the will to live a passionate life. If “conformism” and “the herd” are the order of the day, and the total lack of passion to live an extraordinary life is the paragon of the modern attitudes towards all lives. I see no reason why I could not interpret that such phenomena trigger some individuals, who think and feel differently, to adopt the radical and fundamental stance as an anti-thesis towards modern mode of apathetic, and bring “faith” back to the core of their existence. The point here is “Is it possible that, in order to bring back the (passionate) spirit of individuals, some fundamentalists choose to have faith based upon antipathy, and some upon sympathy? If it is possible, my observation would be that if the fundamentalists choose to adopt the former, they are inclined to resort to terrorism, which turns them into becoming a “terrorist.” Up until this point, I have tried to show that the faithful individual is the kind of individual who takes up the fundamental stance towards life. Soren Kierkegaard also considers “faith” as the ultimate purpose of life. It is, therefore, not counter-intuitive to conclude that he is a fundamentalist. But does he an advocate of terrorism? I don’t think it is the case for the

reasons that I would propose in the arguments of the following section.

## 2. The case for Soren Kierkegaard

For Kierkegaard, authenticity is the highest form of being as the individual can achieve. Kierkegaard saw the true self only occurs through the continual effort of the spirit.

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself ... the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between the two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self (Hannay, trans., 1989, p.127)

As the existent, a human being has to become something other than itself. In order to exist as itself, the spirit has to synthesize the opposing or competing elements given as default settings, namely; the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. Seen in this way each one of us does not have the essence of our own because our way of existing is in the relation, and any relation must rely on the opposites in order to come into existence. Any particular self cannot exist or stand on its own; a self always relies upon the relation with other selves or

something else. A human being cannot become a self without the action of holding or maintaining the balance of the opposing forces in relation to her or himself. Without the constant exertion of the spirit, genuine self cannot be maintained, and the effort required holding together the self is accompanied by constant and intense anxiety (Watts, 2007, p. 175). In the process of becoming a self, a human being finds her or himself in an extremely tricky situation. To genuinely and authentically exist, s/he has to take a fundamental stance and make a decisive choice. In so doing, s/he must anxiously but resolutely carve out the self out of the opposing and competing components. In every act of existing, a human being finds oneself in a relation that s/he does not create but participate in it. Be it a relation to something else, others, or her surroundings. Never in a minute is a human being able to fully own herself since she is always in a relation, which she does not create- in other word, she is not the creator of her own life. A human being might be able to create herself of a relation, but she will never be able to create a relation by herself – to put it in a Heideggerian sense, “we are all thrown into a relation.” According to Kierkegaard, any attempts on the part of human beings to escape from becoming a self, to purposefully or not, ignore the fact that we are all thrown into becoming a self in a relation, or, worst of all, to defiantly create our own selves from the ground up are acts of despair. We all are a participant in a relation that shapes up our sense of a self, to make it more comprehensible, “We cannot choose to be ourselves, but we can choose to become ourselves.” Kierkegaard clearly states that

if we want to really become a self without despair:

“This then is the formula which describes the state of the self when despair is completely eradicated: in relating to itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it.” (Hannay, p.43)

A human being, fully equipped with reason, might be in control of some situations or relations she is facing, but she, upon the closer look, she might not be able to fully choose or prevent some situations or relations from happening in the first place. That is why, for Kierkegaard, in order to become the authentic self; the individual must place her belief on “faith” rather than “reason.” To fully become a self, the individual must ground herself on the power that established it (God).

### Conclusion

As far as the argument goes for the first part of the article, I have pointed out that the rise of reason after the age of enlightenment. On the positive note reason brings the power back to the individual who the enlightenment thinkers believe to have possessed. However, on the flip side, the reason it self – due to its thirst for objectivity and universality – wipes out the sense of telos as well as the sense of self, and leaves the individual in limbo. Consequently, the individual is left alone, without a clue, with her own devices. Left on her own in the gripping hands of despair, most people tend to adopt apathetic attitudes towards all – including herself- beings. Unwillingness to surrender to the fateful nihilism, some people passionately throw themselves into the fundamen-

talist stance towards the apathetic mass, snubbing the impersonal voice of reason, and embrace “faith.” Seen in this light, since Kierkegaard argues that the core of our existence is faith, not at all reason, as shown in the second section of the article, it is possible to interpret him as sympathetic to the fundamentalist, therefore he’s a fundamentalist. But is it the case that, since he is a fundamentalist, he is also an advocate for terrorism? My answer is categorically “no.” And I would put up my arguments for the answer in the part two of the article.

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