

For M.A;Semester-3
Contemporary Western Philosophy
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Soren Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), considered to be the first existentialist philosopher, was of Danish nationality. He was also a theologian, poet, social critic and religious author. Accordingly, his work crosses the boundaries of philosophy, theology, psychology, literary criticism, devotional literature and fiction. He made many original conceptual contributions to each of the disciplines he employed. He was a great supporter of freedom and values of human individual. The main philosophical themes and principal conceptions of Kierkegaard's philosophy are truth, freedom, choice, and God. For him, human beings stand out as responsible individuals who must make free choices.

Kierkegaard was born on May 5, 1813 in Copenhagen, Denmark. He studied Theology and Philosophy from Copenhagen University . Kierkegaard lived the majority of his life alone. He left his native Copenhagen only three or four times, each time to visit Berlin , and never married, though he was engaged for a short time.

Kierkegaard is known for his critiques of Hegel, for his fervent analysis of the Christian faith, and for being an early precursor to the existentialists. He is known as the “father of existentialism”. Kierkegaard is generally considered to have been the first existentialist philosopher, though he did not use the term existentialism. He proposed that each individual , not society or religion, is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately and sincerely, or authentically.

Kierkegaard is said to have inaugurated modern existentialism in the early 19th century, while Jean-Paul Sartre is said to have been the last great existentialist thinker in the 20th century. The former was a devoted Christian and the latter a committed atheist, yet both are considered existentialists, which suggests a

rather broad concept. Existentialism is not so much a school of thought as an inexact label for different philosophies that share themes about the uniqueness of each human being, the centrality of choice, and the individual's response to what seems to be an indifferent, absurd universe. Unconcerned with most traditional topics in metaphysics (apart from ontology) and science, existentialism is generally concerned with the individual's choices about how to be.

Kierkegaard's books:

Kierkegaard's work focused mostly on Christian ethics, the institution of the Church, and the differences between logic and the attempt to find factual, objective proofs of Christianity. A strong advocate of the view that religious belief is an act of faith, not reason (fideism), Kierkegaard wrote his philosophical works (under various pseudonyms) as a means to lead his reader to this view. In his more directly religious works, Kierkegaard accuses society (the crowd) of crushing individuals, diluting their personal identity, and replacing them with people who have forgotten how to live an authentic life. In other words, they lose contact with their subjectivity; they become impersonal, almost anonymous. His works are designed to deepen the reader's subjective passionate engagement with ultimate existent issues. Much of his work deals with defining or having Christian love. Among the essential works of Kierkegaard, the Danish existentialist philosopher wrote :

- The Alternative (1843)
- Fear and Trembling (1843)
- The Concept of Anxiety (1844)
- Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments (1846)
- The Sickness unto Death (1849)
- Either/or

Truth as Subjectivity:

In Kierkegaard's view, truth is found through subjectivity, through our individual, unique apprehension of things. Kierkegaard says all truths, which

constitute the foundation of man's life are subjective truth and not objective truth. In science, we have objective truth, in this case proof is required, where we are concerned with objective notion. We do not find truth through a detached "objectivity" but through a deep engagement with the world. Kierkegaard also accepts this truth also but the truth that matters in life is subjective. Here he means that the truth is man's relation to God. 'Nothing is truth for me unless it becomes alive in me' says Kierkegaard. Subjective truth does not require any proof. It is possible only where objective truth is not possible. Objective truth can be taught in classes but subjective truth cannot be taught by classes.

As per Kierkegaard, science and mathematics are not the basic tenets of our life. They help in some manner but we cannot regulate our life and achieve the goal on the basis of these objective truths. The values and ethics of life are important which are selected by personal interest of individual. Subjectivity cannot be taught in the class or article. It can only be realised.

Subjectivity is related to faith and to reason. This relation is similar to the relation of friendship. Friendship requires commitment and it is not objective relation. Friendship is merely in subjective relation. If we will try to know the truth objectively, then dualism comes out and in that condition, we become bound to treat either one of them as a material object. That's why it is said here that "we can't know God objectively".

Three main characteristics of subjective truth include that it is paradoxical, concrete, and not universal. Kierkegaard's 'paradox' is a precursor of the notion of the 'absurd' in later existential thought.

Kierkegaard's philosophy is intensely personal. He believes the significant problems of life are not solved by some kind of 'absolute standpoint', but only realized through an act of will or choice. Human existence cannot be reduced to objective reflection. Kierkegaard says, one becomes more of an individual through conscious choices, and one becomes less of an individual through following the crowd.

According to Kierkegaard, self-development requires acknowledgment of both one's realities and one's limits. The real problem of life is to discover what is

one's true talent, secret gift, authentic vocation? How can we express this talent, give it form, dedicate it to something beyond oneself?

Kierkegaard and the 3 Stages/Spheres of Life:

The Dialectic of the stages (the stages on life's way, the levels of existence, or points of view) is the process whereby the spirit is actualized in the form of individuality. The transition from one stage to another is accomplished by an act of will, a choice , or a leap of faith. Kierkegaard identified 3 possible stages that a person can move through in their lifetime: **the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the religious stage.**

This is Kierkegaard's most influential doctrine, the single contribution with which he is praised by the entire histories of philosophy.

Soren Kierkegaard through the movement of these spheres, from one sphere to another, leads the individual into existence, so that one discovers oneself and by the act of choice, commences to exist.

The Aesthetic Sphere

The main motivation in this stage is pleasure. We *could* think of this stage as basically a form of psychological hedonism (i.e., if it feels good, it is good). In this stage, people are after pleasure, specifically the pleasure of experiencing beauty . The objective of each day — and life in general seems to be to collect as much experience of beauty and pleasure as possible.

In the first part of his work, Either/Or Kierkegaard shows us a variety of lives and types, beginning from the lowest which is the sensory, the aesthetic individual or aesthete is essentially a driven individual, even if he or she thinks that he or she is pursuing a life purpose. The aesthete is easily fascinated. In this pursuit of the sensuous and the sensual which at the end is a chasing after the enjoyment, the aesthete is unable really to communicate because he or she is solely concerned with him or herself.

since the life of the aesthete realizes no complete satisfaction it ends up in despair. Soren Kierkegaard explains that an individual has within himself something, which will not be satisfied by a sensory life. This something is

eternal. It is characteristic of the aesthete to belabour one side of human life, the corporal, the finite, the temporal, yet the other side is nonetheless there. This side constantly makes itself felt by an anxiety. The term which best describes this call of the spirit in the sensory world, Kierkegaard calls dread (angst). Dread is therefore an indication that the individual has the eternal within himself. But the individual who has felt the dread within and yet obstinately persists in an existence in the sensory sphere will end in despair. On this notions 'dread' and 'despair', Kierkegaard wrote two of his inspired books, namely, the concept of dread and the sickness unto death.

Aesthetic stage is a despairing means of avoiding commitment and responsibility. It fails to acknowledge one's social debt and communal existence. And it is self-deceiving, in so far as, it substitutes fantasies for actual states of affairs. The Aesthete, is a slave to himself, and frivolities direct his imagination with pleasure as his guide and rule.

The Ethical Sphere

Ethical or Second stage arises as one accepts ethical principles and the consequent obligations by means of reason and so achieves a sense of authenticity, duty, and commitment. In the Ethical Stage, a person has risen above aesthetically focused mode of operation, and has begun to follow the rules and laws of society. Inclinations give way to obligations. We feel responsibilities toward others — both particular others and others in general. Our relationships in this stage are no longer understood as transitory — whereas in college or our late adolescence, they were. There are more complex expectations, desires, and commitments in place. We also tend to understand *who we are* in terms of those commitments. The ethical life diverts one from self – exploration since it requires an individual to follow a set of socially accepted norms and regulations. According to Kierkegaard , self – exploration is necessary for faith , the key requirement for a properly religious life. In many ways, coming into the ethical stage is an act of throwing ourselves down in subservience — but in a positive and constructive way. Whereas we were once merely individuals, out for our own gain and enrichment, we have now recognized principles worth submitting to. Now we operate based on something other than our fleeting desires and appetites; we try to do the right thing and the rational thing. That is the Ethical Stage — you realize yourself as

intimately tied to others and society, and enrich those ties. It is where many of us exist as adults. But it is not the end of the stages of existence.

The Religious Sphere

Religious or Third Stage results from a leap or commitment of faith , a risk taken , one not resolvable through reason or sensation. For Kierkegaard, the highest stage of life that humans can hope to be is what he calls the “Religious” Stage. Now, Kierkegaard was a Christian — that’s no secret. But the “religious” stage does not essentially involve any particular deity or belief system. It’s not about that. Rather, it’s about progressing past the previous two stages in life ,and onto something *profound* and *pulsating*.

The move from the Aesthetic Stage to the Ethical Stage is about moving away from particular things (possessions, experiences, people) and toward general things (principles, obligations, order & progress). But after some time, that can begin to feel routine. It can feel as if there is no higher purpose in it, other than to continue on doing the right thing — fulfilling obligations.

This final stage involves something more: a leap of faith. For Kierkegaard, this meant taking the leap of faith in a deity. But the characteristics of the leap can be generalized to other things. The leap of faith involves embracing a belief in something that you may not be able to prove to others. It involves the kind of faith or confidence that comes from an internal passion and excitement. But it is the kind of belief that *moves* you because it is utterly individual and unique. Kierkegaard describes the feeling as “*simultaneously to be out on 70,000 fathoms(a unit of length equal to six feet) of water and yet be joyful.*” It’s a kind of awesome fear and excitement, all wrapped up into one. We read about this leap all of the time — in the form of those who have taken it more publicly. Visionaries and thought leaders who press toward the unknown future with a seemingly unmatched clarity. But not those in it for the financial gain or the glory — those who are in their chosen pursuit for its own sake. In other words, no passion and purpose heartfelt on an individual level, the reason it’s not

about the individual, but rather the art, science, or mission being pursued. In short, it is about giving ourselves over to something higher than just us or just our role in society.

The concept of dread or despair precedes the act of will or a leap of choice from one stage of existence to another which Kierkegaard describes as a “sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy”.

In the aesthetic life , one is ruled by passion . In the ethical life , one is ruled by societal regulations. In the religious life, one is ruled by total faith in God. Kierkegaard claims that the only way to make life worthwhile is to embrace faith in God, and that faith necessarily involves embracing the absurd. One has faith in God , but one can not believe in God. We believe in things that we can prove , but we can only have faith in things that are beyond our understanding .God is beyond logic , beyond proof , and beyond reason . There is no rational evidence for God, but this is exactly what allows people to have faith in Him.

Thank You