

A Critical Presentation of the Three Kierkegaardian Spheres of Human Existence



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Abstract: It is an apparent danger in the existence of the modern man that abstraction is substituted for reality. The truth of the uniqueness of each man and the various situations of life where one cannot but make a personal choice and decision, compel man the need to authenticate his being. It is then pertinent at this time, when there is not only a loss of personal identity but more still a total flaw of existence in our modern society, to pinpoint what authentic life should be. Hence, a Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard has done a masterly work of authenticating one's existence, becoming an individual instead of being swallowed up in the appraisal of untrue crowd. Precisely, the researcher will apply in this work the philosophical method of critical reflection of Kierkegaardian three spheres of human existence to arrive at the best manner of approach to examine one's life as to live an authentic existence.

Keywords: Critical, Human, Existence, Authenticity, Subjectivity.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Authenticity is a philosophical idea that implies the genuine, original and true state of human existence. The concept emerged from the reality that human beings often live or exist in an inauthentic manner and, hence, the genuine sense of self and its relationship with others (God and other people Inclusive) are lost. The notion of authenticity is sometimes seen as connected to individualism (Internet). The true individuality is what Kierkegaard called "selfhood". Authentic existence, therefore, implies a life that is punctuated with freedom, joy, meaning, value and happiness. The existentialist philosophers can be attributed to be the originators of this authenticity. According to them "the concept of authenticity, social relationships, cultural values, and norms construct and inauthentic self; the recovery of the authentic self requires a radical re-examination of cultural contexts, habitual lifestyle, and ways of thinking"(Internet). Religious traditions are, nonetheless, replete with the idea of authenticity. Through her teachings and trainings the church leaders try to make the individual to discover himself so as to live authentically (Internet). Kierkegaard, therefore, emphatically suggest that each of us is to "become what one is".

In accordance with Kierkegaard, "becoming what one is" and avoiding despair and emptiness is not necessarily a matter of solitary introspection. It is instead a matter of passionate commitment to a relation to something outside of oneself that imbues one's life with meaning. This ultimate engagement was Kierkegaard's defining relation to God.

THE THREE KIERKEGAARDIAN SPHERES OF LIFE

For one to live an authentic life, there are stages one has to pass through. These stages for Kierkegaard are: the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the religious stage. In these three 'stages' Kierkegaard's theory in a sense, can be seen as a developmental theory of human existence. Every single person for Kierkegaard, encounters the choice of choosing between three kinds of fundamental commitment: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Kierkegaard believes that as one progress through each of the stages, one gradually and systematically moves in the direction of fully developed self, a target that can only be accomplished in the religious stage.

"Since the development through the stages of existence has a spiritual character, it is not automatic, like physical growth, but requires a conscious choice by the individual"(Watts; 2007).

Thus, there is no logical reason why one might not stay in despair and avoid the choice of having to make a leap to a new and more demanding way of life"(Lawhead; 2002). This means that, the situation of despair and guilt arouses in man an awareness that some modes of human existence are more authentic than others. This makes him to move to the next stage. Lawhead puts it this way, "The inadequacy of one stage of existence makes itself felt in the experience of despair, and this drives us on to the next stage"(Law head; 2002).

THE AESTHETIC SPHERE OF LIFE

Kierkegaard distinguished two forms of aesthetic life, namely: the immediate and the reflective aesthetic lives. According to him every level of aestheticism is defined by immediacy. Immediacy implies an individual's lack of serious reflection upon the nature of their way of living. People in this category cannot be trusted because they can disappoint you anytime. They are not stable in their way of living. They do not think about the future because they live at the moment and grasp every opportunity of enjoyment.

A person whose relation to existence is defined by immediacy is seldom deeply committed to anything in life, for when they lose interest in something or see a more attractive alternative, they simply change direction. Consequently their life lacks continuity, stability and genuine focus. Instead, existence is viewed in terms of possibilities that can be contemplated or briefly 'tasted' rather than in terms of long-term projects or ideals that are to be fulfilled (Watts; 2007).

A person in this stage does not put his lifestyle, given-attributes and behaviour to critical reflection. Rather he chases after whatever he takes to be good without contemplation or calling into question, its goodness. The life of this type of human is determined by his instinctive desire and the norms of his society. He is not necessarily interested in finding out whether his idea of good is to his genuine advantage or whether the norms of his society are of any value to him.

The aesthete in reflective form of aesthetic life is absorbed in ceaseless abstract thoughts. Both the aesthete in the immediacy and the aesthete in the reflective form of aesthetic life share a common feature. This common characteristic according to Kierkegaard consists in the absence of personal decision, which results from self's inability to exercise its free will (Purissima; 2007). Everything that is boring is bad for him. For this type of person, "Boredom is the root of all evil" (Kierkegaard; 1971).

The aesthete drifts from pleasure to pleasure. However, this pleasure does not last. "A life driven by the pursuit of pleasure, even if these pleasures are of the highest intellectual and cultural types, is a life whose only center is a collection of fragmentary, spasmodic moments" (Lawhead; 2002). The fundamental characteristic of this stage of existence is absence of decision.

THE ETHICAL SPHERE OF LIFE

In this stage, an individual begins to have a true direction in life. He, therefore, becomes conscious of and personally responsible for good and evil. Unlike in the aesthetic stage where the aesthete is only committed to himself, the one in the ethical sphere of life is enabled to form commitment to oneself and to others.

Even though the ethical person is trying to become a self, by making choices, the goal of attaining an authentic living has not been achieved. This is on the account of the aesthetic person being guided by universal moral principles and participating within the community of rational, moral agents, but am not fully self-aware individual. Kierkegaard describes a man who is living within the ethical stage in this way: "Outwardly he is completely 'a real man.' He is a university man, husband and father, an uncommonly competent civil functionary even, a respectable father, very gentle to his wife and carefulness itself with respect to his children..." (Kierkegaard; 1968).

Despite the fact that an ethical person has gone far beyond the aesthetic stage, something is still missing. "His identity is summed up by the series of universals that clothe him. He is nothing but a collection of social roles: husband, father, civil servant. The problem is that the preceding description could fit any number of people" (Lawhead; 2002). Since authentic existence for Kierkegaard lies in the subjective principles and not in following universal moral principle, the question now is: Where is the unique, authentic self behind all these description?

The person at this stage has not attained authentic living which is seen in religious stage. However, even though such a person, such as Judge Wilhem, may be a sincere church goer, such a religious approach is still at the level of Kant's *Religion within the limits of Reason Alone*, where the religious outlook is derived from a rational understanding of the moral law (Lawhead; 2002).

At this point, one considers moral evil to be a product either of ignorance or of weakness of the will. However, one comes to the realization that one is not capable of fulfilling the moral law, which one finds oneself violating deliberately. This realization of one's inadequacy to keep the moral law, produces the sense of guilt and sin. Either one continues in the fruitless effort of trying to fulfill the moral law, or one respond to one's new consciousness of the guilt (Stumpf; 2003). Thus the only way out here is through the leap to the next stage of existence.

THE RELIGIOUS SPHERE OF LIFE

Kierkegaard held that only God is in the right. Hence, to approach God necessarily demands that one develops an introspective (interiorised) faith. This is possible only in the religious stage. It is in this stage that one realized one's personhood (that is discovers it means to be a self). Kierkegaard emphasized the expediency of self-examination in the religious stage. He is, therefore, interested on how to be "a Christian in Christendom". By this, he implies how live a truly (authentic) religious life amidst the multitude of people who are falsely religious in their manner of life.

There is always a conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical nature of existence. Kierkegaard opines that the only solution to this is one taking a personal approach to religion. Passion is the rule of life in the aesthetic stage while societal regulations or

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norms is what rules life in the ethical realm. However, in the religious stage, total faith in God (divine providence) is what rules life. Hence, for Kierkegaard, the only way to make life meaningful is to have faith in God. This act of embracing faith in God necessarily implies also embracing the absurd (Spark Notes Editors; 2006).

It is only when a finite individual person stands before the infinite Majesty (God) that he comes in terms with the true sense of his authentic self. Thus Kierkegaard opines:

“But this self acquires a new quality or qualification in the fact that it is the self directly in the sight of God... And what an infinite reality this self acquires by being before God”(Kierkegaard; 1968).

In this regard, therefore, Kierkegaard adds that "the more conception of God, the more self; the more self, the more conception of God "(Kierkegaard; 1968). Thus, the individual tries to confront his guilt. At the religious stage, the individual becomes aware that to become his authentic self, he must commit himself to God. God cannot be pursued in an "objective manner". This Kierkegaard says, "Is in all eternity impossible because God is subject, and therefore exists only for subjectivity in inwardness"(Stumpf; 2003).

TRUTH AS SUBJECTIVITY

For Søren Kierkegaard, "Truth is subjectivity". He, therefore, contrasts objective and subjective truth. Under the heading "Subjective truth," Kierkegaard defines truth as: "an objective uncertainty held in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness is truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual" (Kierkegaard; 1962).

By "truth is subjective ", Kierkegaard never implied that what we think or believe is meaningless. He rather implied that really important truths are necessarily personal. Meanwhile, only these truths are "true for me, to find an idea for which I can live and die"(Gaarder; 1994). For him, therefore, there is no prefabricated truth "out there" for people who make choices (Stumpf; 2003). Our daily choices, from one minute to the next, can create different outcomes to our existence. Mundane decisions permeate our reality and "on such inescapable daily choices hang the quality and shape of individual lives"(Douglas; 2013).

Kierkegaard doggedly sought the individual truths within an objective system; lamenting that "what good would it do me to be able to explain the meaning of Christianity if it had no deeper significance for me and for my life" (Kierkegaard; 1941). Ultimately, Kierkegaard argues that while objective knowledge is useful in describing facts or evidence, it does not impart capital-Truth. This kind of Truth cannot be reached through objective observation, reason or description. It is a subjective "quality of [the] inner condition" (Kierkegaard; 1941) and determined by individual action, experience and personal meaning. Subjective Truth is predicated on personal relevance – truth must above all guide, and be applicable to, an individual's choices and his or her daily life.

There is a distinction between "knowing the truth" and "Being in the truth". In Kierkegaard's analysis, a person could intellectually embrace a very elevated moral theory, but in actual practice be a scoundrel. On the other vein, a person might espouse a degenerated moral theory and still be more morally sensitive in practice than his theory allow. Hence:

If one who lives in the midst of Christendom goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge, and prays, but prays in a false spirit: and one who lives in an idolatrous community prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol: where is there most truth? The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol; the other prays false to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol (Kierkegaard; 1941).

The first person knows the truth, for he has the correct objective knowledge about God. However, he is not related to this knowledge authentically. The second person has the correct subjective relation to the true God, even though his ideas about this God are false. According to Kierkegaard, only the second person can be said to be in the truth (Lawhead; 2002).

SUBJECTIVITY AS AUTHENTICITY

Subjectivity has been a recurring theme in the works of Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's subjectivism and individualism, his longing for full living and action, led him to oppose all speculative philosophy, all abstract thinking, except thinking which remains closely bound to personal life(Wilde; 1962). His goal was subjective "existential" thinking. All existence is in time, in becoming. To exist means to be a concrete individual being. Existential knowledge, as opposed to empirical, mathematical, purely historical knowledge, is therefore directed towards the individual in the temporal sense, in his becoming, and is derived from the core of his being. Existential thinking can, therefore, never lead to a system and, according to Kierkegaard; speculative philosophy errs not only in its belief in a system but also in its striving to attain a "higher unity. Hence, for Kierkegaard, it is not the *what*, it is not the dogma, that constitute truth; it is my attitude towards the dogma. He went further to say that "be subjective, and you will be within truth." Authentic existence for contemporary existentialists, therefore, is the gradual and systematic process of realizing what it means to be a self through personal choice.

CONCLUSION

Despite the criticisms that might have been leveled against Kierkegaard's line of thought, we must not overlook the fact that Kierkegaard stands for the 'down-trodden individual' wallowing in unrecognizing, suppressed under the heavy yoke of the system or crowd or public. As an individual person only, can one be able to position oneself subjectively, primitively, ethically, religiously as well as existentially. Hence, as individuals can we live subjectively, primitively, existentially, ethically, religiously, and in a sense all these terms point to the one personal reality. Freedom of choice as a political slogan is the ideology of precisely that social order which Kierkegaard saw as obliterating the true primitive depths of genuine individuality. In Kierkegaard's view, becoming a religious individual is a matter of inwardness, of conscience, a step 'which even the prisoner, who is not free to move, even the man in chains, whose foot is not free can still take' (Kierkegaard; 1993). Following Soren Kierkegaard's philosophy, we receive the counsel that the only way out is for us as unique beings to go through another process of spiritual reorientation to enliven our consciences. To achieve authenticity, the individual has to pass through certain levels of existence and he has to choose to be himself not this man or the other. Man needs to swim against the current in order to authenticate his being. For Heidegger then: "It is a matter of faith and commitment, and a continuous process of choice in the presence of varieties of *either/or*" (Stumpf; 2003). The choice which Kierkegaard advises us to make is the choice of faith which is the highest expression of subjective truth. It is therefore through absolute faith in God that one achieves authentic existence.

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